

BUDDHIST WAYS OF KNOWING**KYOKO TADAOKA***'I might not be right about that'*

"A former king of the town of Savatthi, he related, ordered all his blind subjects to be assembled and divided into groups. Each group was then taken to an elephant and introduced to a different part of the animal—the head, trunk, legs, tail, and so forth. Afterwards, the king asked each group to describe the nature of the beast. Those who had made contact with the head described an elephant as a water-pot; those familiar with the ears likened the animal to a winnowing-basket; those who had touched a leg said an elephant was like a post, and those who had felt a tusk insisted an elephant was shaped like a peg. The groups then fell to arguing amongst themselves each insisting its definition was correct and all the others were wrong." (Keown, p1)

Buddhism is a religion of faith and reason. The spiritual pillars of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths, see that suffering is an intrinsic experience of all living beings (the Truth of Suffering), and the very cause of this suffering is ignorance (the Truth of Arising). The Buddha taught extensively that one brings about the cessation of this cycle of suffering (the Truth of Cessation) through pursuing the path of virtue and knowledge (the Truth of the Path). (Keown, p 46-56) Since the key to liberation is the condition of 'awareness', refining the lenses of our perception and treading the path in accordance with our own truth is integral to religious activities.

The story of the blind men and the elephant retold above offers us a helpful image for the theme of Buddhist Debate, a method that ancient Buddhist scholars have established in order to examine 'the elephant' of the nature of reality. This style of dialectic debate is the primal monastic pedagogy engaged in Tibetan Buddhism to cultivate the minds of monks and nuns. As we face the challenges of "contemporary socio-ecological conditions of un-sustainability, complexity and uncertainty" (Sterling) while an emergent worldview arises from the new sciences, I've asked what the Gelug-pa tradition of Buddhist Debate can teach us on the path of sustainability and peace.

In the modern academic setting, the main activities of learning are note-taking, reading course materials, essay writing and attending group discussions where space for all voices is often limited. Learners develop their understanding and ways of thinking via the 'written work' of an existing body of knowledge. This is where the Tibetan tradition differs; within Tibetan scholarship there are three "intellectual technologies" (Dreyfus, p.11) that are utilized in the process of learning: memorization, commentary, and dialectical debate. Monks and nuns memorize the root texts that function as the springs of the well of knowledge, and commentaries that form the reservoir of interpretation of the root texts. After their hours of memorizing root texts and some commentaries, the method of Buddhist Debate provides an opportunity for monks and nuns to examine the knowledge through dialogue.

Buddhist Debate, an ancient form of "intellectual gymnastics" (Dreyfus, p.195), is an intrinsic part of the Tibetan learning process and monastic education. The main goals of this style of debate are "to defeat misconceptions, to establish the correct view, and to clear away objections to that view." (Perdue) The pedagogy of debate underscores three aspects of Buddhist practice: to listen to the Buddhist teaching (hearing), to use conceptuality to find its meaning (thinking), and finally to meditate on it (meditation). Among the four lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelug-pa tradition is well known for the centrality of dialectical debate within its education process, and particularly in its emphasis on the second aspect of the practices, thinking. This process has been created and practiced with an understanding that the relationship between conceptuality and our direct perception can be reconcilable; therefore, both can serve to fulfil ultimate potential. (Klein)

Procedure and Rules

Dreyfus used the term “spirited clashes” (Dreyfus, p.195), to describe the vibrant atmosphere of the Buddhist Debate, where striking hand gestures and displays of strong emotion catch the eye of the observer. There are two parties involved in this style of animated conversation: a Challenger who stands and put forth arguments, and a Defender who sits and responds to those arguments. During the debate, it is the responsibility of the Defender to submit and defend the truth that he or she has stated, while the Challenger finds points of contention by logically following the Defender’s statement and challenging the validity of its proposition. There are two ways to do this: through syllogism or through consequences. In a debate, a statement includes three terms: a subject, a predicate to be proven, and a reason (or a sign). When both subject and predicate are combined, it is called thesis. Syllogism is a form of argument, which consists of this thesis and a reason; the thesis is the focus of its examination; and the proof is in the reason. For example:

C: It follows that the subject, the colour of a white religious conch (subject), is red (predicate) because of being a colour (reason).

This is the structure in which the debate unfolds through the exchange of questions and answers. The topic is proposed by the Challenger in such a way as to draw out the Defender’s thesis. The Defender has four ways to reply:

- a. I accept
- b. The reason is not established
- c. There is no pervasion [i.e., connection]
- d. Why?

The Defender can accept the posited statement by saying ‘I accept’ (i.e. I accept that the colour of a white religious conch is red,) or ‘The reason is not established’ when the reason is not compatible with the subject (The reason, that the colour of a white religious conch is a colour, is not established). The Defender can say ‘There is no pervasion’ when the reason does not include the predicate, i.e. is not in alignment (Whatever is a colour is not necessarily red.) Sometimes a topic is stated without a reason, leading to the fourth reply, ‘why?’ (Why is the colour of a white religious conch red?). After the Defender has made his or her own stance, the Challenger questions the assertion by using posited logic to draw out its consequence. This is where the Defender can find him or herself in a contradictory, unforeseen, and even absurd stance - here it is as if the Challenger ‘kneads’ the logical mind of the Defender by crafting questions that can reveal the fullness or weakness of his or her proposition. Further refutation continues as the dialectic emerges and the delicate examination develops participants’ understanding.

Reflections

“One of the beautiful things about debate is that at the very deep level, through the process of debate, it’s going to able demonstrate powerfully the limits of language and concepts. That’s where the experience will take off [...] it will take us all the way to the limit of language.” (Jinpa and Perdue)

To understand this process more clearly we note that there are two types of valid cognition in Buddhist epistemology: direct perception and inference: direct perception is the source of our knowledge (which cannot be reduced to perception), and inference is that which has stemmed from it. Inference is the arena in which debate is held and logic is tested, and it is the nature of reasoning that inference is dependent upon.

Therefore the responsibility of the debaters is rooted in their ability to listen and differentiate right reasoning from wrong. Dreyfus gives us a clear explanation:

“At the heart of this method is the assumption that all pronouncements about the world must rest on the attested forms of knowledge, perception and inference. A claim can be validated by experience. If it is not, then it must be supported by inference, which must rest on some argument. When Buddhist epistemologists claim that all things are impermanent, they cannot simply invoke the Buddha’s religious authority. Since such a claim is not given in experience, it must be supported by reasoning. The discussion then proceeds by assessing the correctness of the argument, following the rules of Indian logic. Such methods put a heavy emphasis on rationality—the assessment of evidence in accordance with the laws of logic.” (Dreyfus, p.237) Rather than ‘colouring’ the direction of reason, the emphasis here is on reason ‘in support of’ the experience. The method respects the experience and does not seek to make it ‘knowable,’ but rather to use reason as an instrumental tool to guide the observer into the ‘unknowable’. This is where the difference lies between Critical Pedagogy and Buddhist Debate. Whilst the former is based on the assumption that everything can be

known (thereby dismissing the unknown) the critical spirit of Buddhist Debate is to guide learners to see the unknown.

Conclusion

"The true work of the mind is to reconnect us with that which would otherwise be out of reach, to reweave the great community of our lives." (Palmer) From the history of modern science we have learned that the extreme use of logic and reason can lead us to a place of disconnection, while the trajectory of blind faith has led to separation from 'the other' and the obscuration of the interrelatedness of our lives. We see that our need for validation and certainty in the midst of the unknown influences our relationship with reason and faith, and yet knowing cannot be about validating the particular experience of learners. In essence knowing is learning to 'live through' life, i.e. to inquire into the place of the unknown. Without recognizing this nature of knowing, the discourse between reason and faith, science and spirituality, education and spirituality will not take us to a deeper exploration of life. As a living mode of inquiry Buddhist Debate is not designed for internalization but rather as a nurturing tool for our imagination, creativity, critical inquiry, open-mindedness and the development of trust in the process of unfolding.

Every individual has different experiences of being in this world. Wherever we are, we have to live through the best practices and worst influences of industrialization, militarization, colonization, globalization and secularization. Living in the community of truth possesses tremendous challenges, and yet it is this community upon which our lives depend. The 'beauty and the beast' of the life of the world gives us strength but also stretches our hearts apart; maintaining the sense of love and compassion for all the lives on this Earth becomes the art of living. We require a pedagogy that celebrates all beings, and the method of Buddhist Debate, which can enable us to cultivate an open-mind with critical thinking, has a tremendous gift to offer in our making of a sustainable and peaceful future.

References

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