

Philosophy and the Study of Buddhism: Perspectives and Problems

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A baseline understanding of Buddhist philosophy:

- “All theoretical traditions that devoted themselves to explaining, justifying and defending general teachings ascribed to the or a buddha – often summarized under the rubric of the Four Noble Truths –, as well as further principles that were thought to be implied by these teachings or required in order to make them intelligible”.
 - → malleable notion of “philosophy”, no rigid boundaries to religious or soteriological discourse
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Contextualism and philosophical engagement as two approaches to the study of Buddhist philosophy

- **Contextualism:** to understand Buddhist philosophy in its own (textual, historical, social, intellectual and/or religious) context
 - Focus on intellectual questions: What audience was a particular text aimed at? What kind of knowledge was available to philosophers at the time when they wrote their works and enabled them to make the claims that they made? Which opponents did a philosopher mean to refute? Why did a philosopher approach a topic differently to earlier thinkers? What kind of problem situation motivated the formation of certain philosophical ideas?
 - Focus on socioreligious questions: what aspects of the social environment might have motivated a philosopher to advance the position that they advance? How did the overall socioreligious setting, including dynamics of royal patronage as well as the relationship between monastic scholars and laypersons, shape the history of philosophy?
 - Different varieties, common premises:
 - to ask historical questions and expects answers from a detailed and meticulous study of (different kinds of) context.
 - context is a causal factor that shapes and explains the historical course of philosophy, accounts for the emergence of philosophical movements or gives rise to specific kinds of discourse

- **Philosophical engagement:** to take Indian Buddhist ideas, theories and arguments seriously as philosophy
 - Questions: Are the theories that Buddhist philosophers put forward true? Are their arguments sound? What are their strengths and weaknesses? How do they stand up to criticism – both criticism that was actually put forward historically, as well as criticism that could be formulated from a contemporary philosophical perspective? → Critical and evaluative questions
 - approaches Buddhist philosophy within a broader, also global and contemporary context, e.g. “cross-cultural philosophy” (Garfield), “fusion philosophy” (Siderits) [both critical of comparative philosophy]

- Examples for contextualist studies:
 - Intellectual context in focus:
 - Vincent Eltschinger and Isabelle Ratié, *Self, No-Self, and Salvation*. Vienna 2013: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
 - Birgit Kellner, “Proofs of Idealism in Buddhist Epistemology : Dharmakīrti’s Refutation of External Objects.” Joerg Tuske (ed.), *Indian Epistemology and Metaphysics*. London 2017: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 103–128.
 - Patrick McAllister, *Ratnakīrti’s Proof of Exclusion*. Vienna 2020: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
 - Shinya Moriyama, *Omniscience and Religious Authority*. Vienna/Zurich 2014: LIT Verlag.
 - Sara McClintock, *Omniscience and the Rhetoric of Reason : Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla on Rationality, Argumentation and Religious Authority*. Boston 2010: Wisdom Publications.
 - Socioreligious context in focus:
 - Vincent Eltschinger, *Buddhist Epistemology as Apologetics*. Wien 2014: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
 - Joseph Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context : Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture*. New York 2005: Columbia University Press.
 - The necessity to constantly revise historical data:
 - See e.g. Krasser’s new dating proposal of Dharmakīrti to the mid-6th century (earlier, scholars followed Frauwallner’s tentative dating to 600-660 CE): Helmut Krasser, “Bhāviveka, Dharmakīrti and Kumāriḷa.” François Voegeli, Vincent Eltschinger, Danielle Feller, Maria Piera Candotti, Bogdan Dianescu and Malhar Kulkarni (ed.): *Devadattīyam – Johannes Bronkhorst Felicitation Volume*, Bern, etc. 2012: Peter Lang, 535–594. Critical responses: Eli Franco, “Xuanzang’s Silence and Dharmakīrti’s Dates.” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 56–57 (2015–18) 117–42. and Florin Deleanu, “Dating with Procrustes: Early Pramāṇavāda Chronology Revisited.” *Bulletin of the International Institute for Buddhist Studies* 2 (2019) 11–47.

- Significant new editions based on Sanskrit manuscripts from the Tibetan Autonomous Region since 2005:
 - Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇaviniścaya* [critical editions], chapters 1 and 2 (Steinkellner, STTAR¹ 2), chapter 3 (Hugon/Tomabeche, STTAR 8); *Hetubindu* [critical] (Steinkellner, STTAR 19); *Sambandhaparīkṣā* with Devendrabuddhi's *Vṛtti* [critical] (Steinkellner, STTAR 23)
 - Jinendrabuddhi's *Pramāṇasamuccayaṭīkā*, chapter 1 (Steinkellner, Krasser, Lasic, STTAR 1), chapter 2 (Steinkellner, Krasser, Lasic, STTAR 15), chapter 6 (Ono, Muroya, Watanabe, STTAR forthcoming) [diplomatic and critical]
 - Dharmottara's *Pramāṇaviniścayaṭīkā*, chapter 3 (Hugon, STTAR 21) [diplomatic]
 - Candrakīrti, *Madhamakāvatārabhāṣya*, chapters 1–5 Lasic, Li, MacDonald, STTAR 22) [diplomatic and critical]
 - Sthiramati, *Pañcaskandhakavibhāṣā*, Kramer, STTAR 16 [diplomatic and critical]
 - Vasubandhu, *Pañcaskandhaka*, Li, steinkellner, STTAR 4 [critical]
- On the history and research history of Sanskrit manuscripts in Tibet:
 - Ernst Steinkellner, *A Tale of Leaves. on Sanskrit Manuscripts in Tibet, Their Past and Their Future (2003 Gonda Lecture)*. Amsterdam 2004: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.
 - Ernst Steinkellner, "Sanskrit manuscripts on palm-leaves, paper and birch-bark in the TAR: what now?" Birgit Kellner, Jowita Kramer, Xuezhu Li (ed.), *Sanskrit manuscripts in China III. Proceedings of a panel at the 2016 Beijing International Seminar on Tibetan Studies*, August 1 to 4. Beijing 2020, 9–20.
- Examples for studies in pursuit of philosophical engagement:
 - Dan Arnold, *Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief : Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion*. New York 2005: Columbia University Press.
 - Christian Coseru, *Perceiving Reality : Consciousness, Intentionality, and Cognition in Buddhist Philosophy*. New York 2012: Oxford University Press.
 - Jay Garfield, *Empty Words. Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford/New York 2002: Oxford University Press. → cross-cultural philosophy
 - Jay Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism : Why it Matters to Philosophy*. New York 2015: Oxford University Press.
 - Parimal Patil, *Against a Hindu God*. New York 2012: Columbia University Press.
 - Tom J. F. Tillemans, *Scripture, Logic, Language. Essays on Dharmakīrti and His Tibetan Successors*. Boston 1999: Wisdom Publications.
 - Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons*. Aldershot 2003: Ashgate.
 - Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*. Aldershot 2007: Ashgate. → fusion philosophy

¹ STTAR stands for the series "Sanskrit Texts from the Tibetan Autonomous Region" jointly published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, Vienna, and the China Tibetology Publishing House, Beijing.

- John Taber, “On Engaging Philosophically with Indian Philosophical Texts.” *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 67/1 (2013): 125–163.
 - Jan Westerhoff, *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*. Oxford 2018: Oxford University Press. Review: B. Kellner, *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 74/2 (2020) 445–452.
 - Handbooks:
 - William Edelglass and Jay Garfield (ed.), *Buddhist Philosophy : Essential Readings*. Oxford, etc. 2009: Oxford University Press.
 - Steven M. Emmanuel (ed.), *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*. Chichester, West Sussex 2013: Wiley-Blackwell.
 - Joerg Tuske (ed.), *Indian Epistemology and Metaphysics (Bloomsbury Research Handbooks in Asian Philosophy)*. London 2017: Bloomsbury Publishing.
 - Jonardon Ganeri (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*. New York 2017: Oxford University Press.
 - Purushottama Bilimoria (ed.), *History of Indian Philosophy*. London 2017: Routledge.
 - Alessandro Graheli (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy of Language*. London 2020: Bloomsbury Publishing.
 - William Edelglass, Pierre-Julien Harter, Sara McClintock (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*. London 2022: Routledge.
 - Edited volumes:
 - Mark Siderits, Tom Tillemans and Arindam Chakrabarti (ed.), *Apoha, Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition*. New York 2011: Columbia University Press.
 - Mark Siderits, Ching Keng and John Spackman (ed.), *Buddhist Philosophy of Consciousness*. Leiden/Boston 2020: Brill.
 - Proceedings volumes of the second to fifth International Dharmakīrti Conferences (all Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press). IDHC2: Ernst Steinkellner (ed.): *Studies in the Buddhist Epistemological Tradition : Proceedings of the Second International Dharmakīrti Conference*, Vienna, June 11–16, 1989 (1991). IDHC3: Shōryū Katsura (ed.): *Dharmakīrti’s Thought and Its Impact on Indian and Tibetan Philosophy : Proceedings of the Third International Dharmakīrti Conference, Hiroshima, November 4–6, 1997* (1999). IDHC4: Helmut Krasser, Horst Lasic, Eli Franco and Birgit Kellner (ed.): *Religion and Logic in Buddhist Philosophical Analysis : Proceedings of the Fourth International Dharmakīrti Conference, Vienna, August 23–27, 2005* (2011). IDHC5: Birgit Kellner, Patrick McAllister, Horst Lasic and Sara McClintock (ed.): *Reverberations of Dharmakīrti’s Philosophy : Proceedings of the Fifth International Dharmakīrti Conference, Heidelberg, August 26 to 30, 2014* (2020).
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Enriching philosophical engagement with context-sensitivity: the example of Vasubandhu's "The Proof of Mere-Cognition in Twenty Stanzas" (*Vimśikā Vijñaptimātratāsiddhiḥ*)

- Birgit Kellner and John Taber, "Studies in Yogācāra-Vijñānavāda Idealism I: The Interpretation of Vasubandhu's *Vimśikā*." *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 68/3 (2014): 709–756. New interpretation of the *Vimśikā*: the *Vimśikā* is structured according to an argument from ignorance ("external objects do not exist because none of the three accredited sources of knowledge provides evidence for their existence" → rehabilitation of "idealist" interpretations that had been called into question by e.g. Hall, Hayes, Oetke
- Philosophical engagement in the style of Mark Siderits:
 - to introduce Buddhist positions into contemporary philosophical discourse → to solve contemporary problems
 - method of rational or theoretical reconstruction: to restate a historical philosopher's thesis in terms of contemporary philosophy
 - detaches claims by Buddhist thinkers from the larger theoretical edifice and from other beliefs that they held (including e.g. those in *karma*, *nirvāṇa*, rebirth ...)
 - relegates historical environment to factual conditions, biographical motivations, etc. → separation of genesis and validity (German: *Genesis* and *Geltung*)
- Philosophical engagement as exemplified in Kellner/Taber 2014:
 - to get a better philosophical understanding of a historical thinker's understanding in consideration of relevant textual, intellectual, historical and religious context
 - textual context = other works by Vasubandhu (*Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* IX), intellectual context e.g. specific argument methods to prove non-existence
 - to give a coherent interpretation of the entire text rather than "cherry-picking" what seems philosophically relevant
 - to include "problematic" beliefs in the overall evaluation (e.g. an account of the existence of hell-guardians, appeals to scriptural lore)
 - to take soteriological commitments by Buddhist philosophers expressed in their works seriously as factors that may have affected their philosophical positions

Gary Hatfield, “historically oriented philosophical methodology”:

“By ‘historically oriented philosophical methodology’ I mean **taking past texts seriously on their own terms**, seeking to understand the problems and projects of past philosophy as they were, instead of only seeking a reading that solves a current philosophical problem. Such approaches need not be uncritical or non-evaluative, but **their evaluations and criticisms will, in the first instance, be rendered according to standards implicit or explicit at the time the work was written**. Discerning and employing such standards is itself no small task, requiring considerable philosophical work. Moreover, such approaches need not be without contemporary philosophical pay-off. **But such pay-off occurs precisely because one has achieved an acquaintance with past philosophy on its own terms (as far as is possible).**”

Gary Hatfield, “The History of Philosophy as Philosophy.” In: T. Sorrell and G.A.J. Rogers (ed.), *Analytic Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*. Oxford 2005: Clarendon Press, 83–128, quotation p. 91f., emphasis mine.