

## Scholarship as Path

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Buddhism has a reputation in the West for being anti-intellectual and prone to conceptual pranks. Where has this reputation come from? It is true that Buddha of the sūtras was anti-philosophical, appealing instead to experience and the development of insight. In a famous sūtra from the Pāli *Majjhima-nikaya*, the venerable Malunkyaputta approaches Buddha with a series of questions, such as whether the world is eternal or not, whether the soul and body are identical or different, or whether an arhat does or does not exist after death. Buddha's reply is direct: the practice of Buddhism does not depend on questions such as these. Whether or not the world is eternal there still remains suffering. He will not answer these questions because they do not tend to edification, or progress on the path. Buddha asks Malunkyaputta to direct his own attention to the dharma and not to metaphysical speculations.

Does this mean that intellectual investigation has no place in Buddhism? No, quite definitely not. While Buddhism has discouraged metaphysical speculation in favor of practical experience through meditation, it has always honored scholarship and the development of intellectual precision, and many schools have incorporated debate or a form of "dharma combat" into their paths. Intellect is not a problem in and of itself; when intellect substitutes for experience, or becomes pretentious and egocentric, it is maligned. It is natural to use one's intellect, and to engage speculative questions. But in Buddhism, intellect is used in the context of the development of penetrating insight, or *prajñā*. This kind of discriminating awareness involves the intellectual and intuitive in tandem moving to clearer understanding of our experience, and combining skillful means and compassion to bring others to an understanding as well.

What does this critical attitude toward intellect contribute to the practice of scholarship? In this case we are not discussing scholarship in a particular field necessarily, though at Naropa University it is the religious studies program that actively examines the way one practices scholarly pursuits. These questions, however, could be asked of scholarship in any field. The Buddhist tradition has suggested ways in which one might study and share what one has learned with others without the competitive edge, defense of a particular position, or "ivory tower" approach common to many academic communities. In short, Buddhism

has suggested that learning might become a path in itself that encourages inquisitiveness, openness, gentle precision, and a practical flavor.

A helpful guideline to how one actually might engage in study in this way may be derived from an investigation of prajñā. Prajñā is considered the *summum bonum* of Buddhist practice, the development of discrimination so complete and clear that one sees things as they are (*yathābhutam*). This penetrating investigation is cultivated through meditation practice and yields a knowledge that is not knowledge of any-thing at all. The classic metaphor of prajñā is the double-bladed sword that precisely investigates experiences as well as the experiencer.

There are three phases to the development of prajñā that are relevant for our discussion. The first is called “hearing” or “listening” (*śrutamayī* in Sanskrit or *thopa* in Tibetan), that suggests how we read a basic source or teaching with a receptive mind. In the second we ponder or “contemplate” what we have heard or read (*cintamayī* or *sampa*). The third is “meditation” that cultivates or absorbs the source (*bhāvanamayī* or *gompa*). These three give a model for study and scholarship as a practice that promotes precision within a context of egolessness.

1. The first stage of study is discipline, which means actually paying attention to that which you are reading. If you are reading a discourse (*sūtra*) or commentary in translation, or any source for that matter, discipline means that you can read the words on the page without immediately jumping to conclusions as to what the text says. If you are reading the work of a Buddhist scholar or meditation master, you have developed the discipline to consider his or her viewpoint without immediately pigeon-holing it.

In early monastic centers, newly ordained monks or nuns were apprenticed for several years to a teacher who was considered a master (*ācārya*). During this period, called *nissaya*, the student memorized sūtras, monastic rules (*vinaya*), and a systematized summary of the dharma arranged in numerical lists (*abhidharma*). These studies were meant to clarify points of meditation practice, community life and application of the teachings. Each monastic specialized in one body of these teachings, becoming a reciter (*bhānaka*) who could perfectly repeat every word that was learned. This precise discipline was crucial in the period before the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. E. when there was no practice of writing, and memorization lineage was the only record.

But the practice of memorizing a text has more than practical value. Long after scribes had replaced bhānakas, students of Buddhism in India, China and Tibet memorized texts because of the essential development of discipline, in

knowing what actually was taught. Knowledge of the teachings themselves was important, as Buddha told Māra, so that students could “tell others of it, preach it, make it known, establish it, open it, minutely explain it, and make it clear – until they, when others start vain doctrine, shall be able by their truth to vanquish and refute it, and so to spread the wonder-working truth abroad.” (*Mahāparinibbānasutta* III.7.) Teaching the dharma requires precise training in what the dharma is, so that the student may actually have something besides his own subjective version to present.

How is such discipline cultivated? There is the famous story in the Zen tradition about the intellectual who approached a Zen master, wishing to study dharma. While they were having tea, the visitor was shocked as the master filled his cup past overflowing, spilling tea in his lap. As the visitor exclaimed his surprise, the master responded with the terse comment, “To study Zen, you must come with an empty cup.”

To come with an empty cup means that the ordinary gadgets we use in intellectual investigation must be relinquished. We must examine our presuppositions, realize our clinging to a position or point of view, and acknowledge our tendencies to defend whatever opinions we may hold. We must learn to listen and to open to others, for this discipline means the willingness to be open and vulnerable.

This discipline manifests in the study of Buddhism at Naropa University in the study of languages, particularly Sanskrit and Tibetan. In the study of these new languages, we must develop a new mind, in which discipline and openness are key, and where we are constantly beginners. This manifests also in the reading of texts in translation, where the words on the page are fresh and vibrant. What is actually said, and what is the context for a particular text? What is the structure of its presentation? What are the specific meanings of important terms, and are their translations appropriate and expressive of the original?

2. The second stage of study is development of critical insight, reflecting on what one has heard or read. This critical insight keeps us from stupidly incorporating all we have studied without examination. The Buddha encouraged his students to listen carefully to his words, and then to examine them in terms of personal experience. It was not sufficient that he had instructed them; if any teaching did not directly apply to personal experience, it was not to be followed.

Critical insight involves contemplating or pondering carefully the text or article that one has read, to find its particular meaning and application. The

critical quality is important, because it focuses, discriminates and questions the subject. Insight is important because of the intuitive dimension of relating to personal experience.

The academic community in the West has learned to be critical in what Buddhism would consider an aggressive way. Actually, the critical insight aspect of *prajñā* is closely associated with a tendency toward hatred (*dveśa*). *Dveśa* refers to aversion or anger, a tendency toward rigidity, defensiveness and annoyance. The person dominated by *dveśa* picks at our trivial faults, discounts genuine virtues, and experiences frequent envy or malice. However, critical insight at its best parallels the traits of hatred. The *Visuddhimagga* states “as on the unwholesome plane hatred does not cling, not stick to its object, so *prajñā* on the wholesome plane. As hatred seeks for faults, even though they do not exist, so *prajñā* seeks faults that do exist. As hatred leads to the rejection of beings, so *prajna* to all conditioned things.” (III.76.)

The development of critical insight that does not fall into aggression or malice is marked by gentle precision. The gentleness comes from the ability to see clearly and not experience a threat from what one sees. Gentleness is only possible if one has developed the basic openness of discipline, which means that there is no position or philosophy to defend and no presupposition to guard. There is the possibility of genuine inquisitiveness, which examines what is there to be examined. Because of the gentleness and openness of this phase of study, true precision is possible. Specifically, if we each have an idea of Buddhism (or whatever we study) that we are trying to protect, there are places and sources we will naturally overlook. This sacrifices precision and builds in a natural threat that dulls inquisitiveness. Critical insight allows us the possibility of leaving no stone unturned while not fearing the loss of anything.

The challenge in the study of Buddhism is to develop critical insight with reference to the question of what Buddhism itself is. It might be easy to become dogmatic about Buddhism when we are exposed to a community of serious students of a particular lineage. However, precisely because many members of the Naropa University community practice meditation, each individual is charged with the responsibility of using critical powers to ask whether Buddhism is becoming dogma--that is, are Buddhist teachings passively accepted as true. The practice element of the tradition exposes any over-conceptualization of the dharma. We find in our study of the history, languages, texts and contexts of the Buddhist tradition, that we must constantly open ourselves to new perspectives on the tradition and how we would define it.

3. The third phase of study is the application of what one has learned. Through this process we fully cultivate and integrate our personal understanding. Without this element, study continues as a gathering of fruit for storage in a warehouse, rather than feasting on the fruit, so that we might live more fully.

Application has two aspects that can be seen as completing the process of disciplined attentiveness and critical insight. The first is seeing beyond the literal interpretation of the words or information to the meaning itself. Now that the student has carefully read or listened, and reflected upon what is said, the question of meaning can be asked. This phase is reflected in the story of Nāropa, who, as master gatekeeper-examiner of Nālanda University, was the most learned and analytic scholar of his day. As he was studying one day, a shadow fell over him, and before him appeared a terrifyingly ugly hag. She asked him if he understood what he studied, the words or the sense? He answered, yes, the words, and the woman responded with joyous laughter. When he hastily added, also the sense, she wept and trembled. When asked about her strange behavior, the hag answered that at first she was delighted at his frankness and lack of deceit, and then she felt sad because of his lie. Because of his vision, Nāropa was struck with the need to understand the sense, and under severe protest from his colleagues, he resigned his prestigious post and set out in search of a guru (Herbert Guenther, *Life and Teachings of Naropa*, pp. 24-28).

Scholarship as merely the accumulation of information is worthless in the long run. Only if this work carries over to intuitive understanding of the broader aspects of personal experience is scholarship of value.

The second aspect of application and cultivation involves the development of the *bodhisattva* vision of scholarship. When one has learned the sense of what one has studied, the purpose of study becomes intimately tied with sharing what one has learned with others. Actually, at this point in study, sharing with others becomes paramount, in the form of teaching, writing articles, discussion. The purpose of such sharing is not to further one's own career or to verify the brilliance of one's own insight. Instead, the desire to further understand the meaning of the study completely intermingles with the desire to teach others. In Buddhism, study and teaching are inseparable, and the finest scholars of the tradition were considered true bodhisattvas.

Nāgārjuna, one of the most famous masters in India and founder of the Mādhyamika school, used his impeccable intellect to show the limits of the philosophies of this day, in order to relieve others of their clinging to positions

that painfully bound them to saṃsāra. He is known as the quintessential bodhisattva for painstakingly sharing his insights with others.

This open edge of scholarship, of sharing fully one's own mind with others, gives new vision and vitality to intellectual enterprise. It is this phase that signals the transition from student to scholar. The first two levels are done to further our own understanding; the third takes this private work into the public realm. Here, the scholar owes allegiance to discipline and critical insight, but because personal vision is more complete, the slavish quality is gone and true intellectual creativity becomes possible.

And it is here also that the lofty quality leaves intellectual pursuit, because it is obvious what the limitations of intellect alone are. There is no conflict between the intellectual and the practical. We study, we wash the dishes, we pay the bills. We are no longer "absent-minded professors." We are able to relate the intellect to all ordinary aspects of life, so that it may be our work or our play, but it does not eclipse our humanity.

In the *Ten Oxherding Pictures* attributed to Kakuan Shien, the last picture is entitled "entering the marketplace with helping hands." The joyful bodhisattva walks with his pack on his back through the village street:

*Barechested, barefooted, he comes into the marketplace.*

*Muddied and dus-tcovered, how broadly he grins!*

*Without recourse to mystic powers, withered trees he swiftly brings to bloom.*

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