

Can Buddhist Thought be Construed as a *Philosophia*, or a Way of Life?

Relating Pierre Hadot to Buddhist Discourses on Self-cultivation

James B. Apple

Before his recent passing, the reknown French classicist Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) argued that modes of thought and theory in Greco-Roman antiquity and early Christianity are not represented by what modern or post-modern scholars understand as philosophy, but rather as *philosophia*, a way of life or art of living. Philosophy as a way of life centers around spiritual exercises that are designed to transform one’s whole being. Pierre Hadot was emeritus professor of classical history at the Collège de France and was highly regarded among scholars of ancient philosophy for his authoritative commentaries on Plotinus and for an outstanding study of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* (*The Inner Citadel*, Harvard, 1998).

In broader intellectual circles, Hadot is better known for his thesis that claims we thoroughly misunderstand ancient philosophy when we consider such thought to be the elaboration of intellectual “systems,” because ancient philosophy’s essence is above all the choice, practice, and justification of a radically transforming way of life. This thesis has been controversial in that it basically amounts to a wholesale indictment of the way contemporary philosophy professors teach ancient philosophy. Likewise, Hadot’s thesis has generated apologetic discussions among Christian theologians (Hankey 2003) who are threatened by Hadot’s indictment of medieval Christian scholasticism for the West’s loss of ‘philosophy as a way of life.’

Outside of these controversies, Hadot’s thesis has gained attention in relation to the work of his eminent colleague, Michel Foucault. As Foucault (2005) acknowledges in his posthumously published 1981–

2 lectures for the Collège de France, translated as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, his work on the ‘care of the self’ along with the discourse analysis of ‘Delphic’ and ‘Socratic’ aspects of self-knowledge and truth, were influenced by Hadot. The relations between Hadot’s formative discourse on ‘philosophy as a way of life’ and Foucault’s ‘care of the self’ merit further study and comparison. In this article I wish to bracket such controversies and comparative aspects and focus on relating Hadot’s analysis to Buddhist thought.¹⁾

According to Hadot, in order to interpret properly the texts of ancient philosophy that have come down to us, we must understand their role in the life of the ancient schools. These texts were mostly written for students who had already chosen to follow the way of life practiced in a particular school; their purpose was not to set arguments, but rather to lead disciples along a path of spiritual²⁾ progress (and sometimes to induce members of a larger public to enter onto that path). Accordingly, the reader must approach ancient philosophical texts not as insufficiently rigorous precursors to the modern systematic treatise, but rather as elaborations of demanding and formative “spiritual exercises.”³⁾ Hadot draws a distinction between “philosophical discourse” and a “philosophical way of life,” and he argues that the former should

1) Flynn (2005: 611), “Michel Foucault surveyed the history of Western philosophy into two rubrics, the Delphic ‘know the self’ (*gnōthi seauton*) and the Socratic ‘care of the self’ (*epimelia heautou*).” Foucault (2005: 16–17) states that “throughout the period we call antiquity, and in quite different modalities, the philosophical question of ‘how to have access to the truth’ and the practice of spirituality (of the necessary transformation in the very being of the subject which will allow access to the truth), these two questions were never separate... (17) ...care of the self designates precisely the set of conditions of spirituality, the set of transformations of the self, that are the necessary conditions for having access to the truth.”

2) I understand ‘spiritual’ in the sense Foucault speaks of ‘spirituality’ as “the subject’s attainment of a certain mode of being and the transformations that the subject must carry on itself to attain this mode of being” (Flynn 2005: 620).

3) Hadot (2002: 6) defines ‘spiritual exercises’ as “practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them.” In the same work, Hadot (2002: 175–176) describes philosophical discourse that outlines practices intended to carry out a radical change in one’s being as a ‘spiritual exercise’.

properly be regarded as one of several means for actualizing the later: “Philosophical discourse, then, originates in a choice of life and an existential option-not vice versa.” The student chooses the school and the way of life it embodies, and the school helps him to uncover the implications and rational foundations of his choice and to conform himself to it more thoroughly (Shiffman 2003: 369–370).

In this paper I intend to apply Hadot’s methodology to a select exemplum of Asian religious and philosophical literature, namely the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās* of the 2nd century Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (Bugault 2002), and explore the utility that this technique of interpretation may have for cross-cultural understanding. Throughout the *history* of the history of religions aspects of Asian thought and culture have presented a dilemma of classification for the academic scholar of religion. Does Asian or Non-Western thought represent religious or philosophical principles? Can alternative modes of inquiry or manners of representation dissolve this apparent dichotomy of opposing forces in modern academic scholarship? Rather than directly confronting these questions, Hadot’s hermeneutics may be one step toward envisioning ancient Asian discourses in a manner that enables our questions, as well as the answers, to be generated from an alternative analytical stance of intelligibility.

As regards our select exemplum, there can be no doubt that the 2nd or 3rd century Indian Buddhist scholar-monk Nāgārjuna is arguably the most influential Mahāyāna Buddhist exegete (Ruegg 1981). Indeed, in both South and East Asian Buddhist traditions Nāgārjuna stands at the forefront as either an influential lineage member or founder of a given tradition. One could paraphrase Nāgārjuna’s importance to Mahāyāna Buddhist thought in terms of how Whitehead referred to Plato, “Just as all Western philosophy may be seen as a footnote to Plato, likewise all Mahāyāna Buddhist thought may be seen as a footnote to Nāgārjuna.” Perhaps it may not be prudent to uphold such an arguable comparison. Some scholars have postulated that Nāgārjuna’s thought did not have an impact in subsequent Indian Buddhist and Hindu thought. Yet, despite recent scholarly claims of Nāgārjuna’s unimportance in subsequent Indian philosophical discourse (Hayes 1994), it should be noted that even seven hundred years after Nāgārjuna’s life,

Indian Buddhist scholars such as Atiśa Dipaṃkāraśrījñāna will prescribe Nāgārjuna's so-called Madhyamaka philosophy as foremost during Buddhism's second period of dissemination into to Tibet (Apple 2010).

In more recent times, numerous scholars in the past fifty years have paid particular attention to Nāgārjuna and have engaged in and consecrated a great amount energy to comparing and contrasting his philosophy in order to arrive at cross-cultural understanding. As Ruegg (1995: 154) has clearly articulated, strands within Nāgārjuna's thought have been compared—if only more or less episodically—with Socratic, Stoic and Epicurean thought; Hume's views on causality, or Kant's transcendentalist idealism; with Schopenhauer or Nietzsche; with American transcendentalism or pragmatism via Rorty, Dewey, or James; with Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis; with modern semiotics of various kinds; and with Derrida's deconstruction. As Richard Hayes has noted, "Not many Indian thinkers have been capable of so many radically styles of interpretation." Hayes then conjectures "what features of Nāgārjuna's presentation make it so difficult to interpret definitively and so easy to interpret in whatever way one wants. [Nāgārjuna's]... a bit like an oracle in whose words one can hear any message that one wants to hear." (Hayes 1992).

However, although comparison in the manner of "Nāgārjuna and X" may be useful in certain contexts, the scope of such comparison has limits. It is quite often the case, as Ruegg (1995: 154–155) has commented, that such comparison "has proved to be of rather restricted heuristic value, and methodologically it often turns out to be more problematical and constraining than illuminating. In the frame of synchronic description this kind of comparison tends to obliterate important structures in thought, while from the diachronic viewpoint it takes little account of genesis and context." As D.S. Ruegg concludes, "For however much a philosophical insight or truth may transcend any particular epoch or place, its expression as philosophy is circumstantially conditioned historically and culturally" (Ruegg 1995: 155).

Cross-cultural comparison—the act of description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and rectification between human cultural productions is indeed problematic when approaching ancient texts located in Asia such as those composed by Nāgārjuna. As Matthew Kapstein (2001: 3) has

recently commented, “Our problem is not to discover, per impossible, how to think Buddhism while eliminating all reference to Western ways of thought; it is rather, to determine an approach, given our field of reflection whereby our encounter with Buddhist traditions may open a clearing in which those traditions begin in some measure to disclose themselves, not just ourselves.” What I understand by an approach that aims to allow Buddhist texts to disclose themselves, is not, what Nietzsche might label, some form of immaculate perception whereby things are courteous enough to reveal themselves. Rather, I am thinking of creative efforts of interpretation and translation that, in negotiating with difference in human cultural productions, provides cognitive advantage for intelligibility through acts of comparison.

Rather than engage in the former type of comparative enterprise, and proceeding in the latter manner suggested by Kapstein, I will briefly examine Nāgārjuna’s thought utilizing recent methodological principles that Pierre Hadot brings to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy.

Hadot, in two texts recently translated into English—*Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (2002), argues that ancient philosophers viewed philosophy as a way of life—an art of life—and not as pure articulation of theories and systems through texts. Hadot’s discussion argues for a more sensitive reading of ancient classical philosophical texts. Arnold I. Davidson (1995: 19) remarks in the preface to Hadot’s *Philosophy as Way of Life* that:

“...many modern historians of ancient philosophy have begun from the assumption that ancient philosophers were attempting, in the same way as modern philosophers, to construct systems, that ancient philosophy was essentially a philosophical discourse consisting of a “certain type of organization of language, comprised of propositions... (Hadot 205). Thus the essential task of the historian of philosophy was thought to consist in “the analysis of the genesis and the structures of the literary works that were written by the philosophers, especially in the study of the rational connection and the internal coherence of these systematic expositions.” Under these interpretive constraints, modern historians of ancient philosophy *could not but deplore the awkward expositions*, defects of composition, and outright incoherences in the ancient authors they

studied.”

I think that this characterization of Euro-North American scholarship’s presumptions in approaching ancient Greek philosophy may also apply to the way we, as Euro-North American scholars, approach ancient Asian thought as exemplified by such scholars as Nāgārjuna. We may presume systematic exposition, formal logic, and propositional statements and then lament when it is lacking. The proverbial, “I didn’t find animal fat in the fruit salad” type critique.

For Pierre Hadot the ancient Greek term *philosophia*, or the practice of philosophy, embodies an “art of living” or way of life in ancient Hellenistic culture. In Hadot’s view, *philosophia* is “a lived, experienced wisdom, and a way of living according to reason” (1995: 130), where wisdom is “a state of complete liberation from the passions, utter lucidity, knowledge of ourselves and of the world” (1995: 103) that provides one with a “vision of things as they are” (1995: 58). Wisdom is the aim of the ancient philosopher, and achieving wisdom is a therapy that heals the philosopher, bringing about a transformation of the person involving liberation from things such as “worries, passions, and desires” (1995:103). The ancient philosopher engages in spiritual exercises that employ reason “designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom,” analogous to (1995:59) “the athlete’s training or to the application of a medical cure.” Indeed, although Hadot’s use of wisdom may not correspond to Buddhist notions of wisdom, exercises of reason conducive to the actualization of transformational insight, or *prajñā*, is how I will characterize Nāgārjuna’s enterprise in a Hadotian sense.

For Hadot (1995: 19), “...one must not only analyze the structure of ...ancient philosophical texts”, but one must also situate them in the “living praxis from which they emanated.” Hadot then advocates

“that in order to understand the works of the philosophers of antiquity we must take account of all the concrete conditions in which they wrote, all the constraints that weighed upon them: the framework of the school, the very nature of *philosophia*, literary genres, rhetorical rules, dogmatic imperatives, and traditional modes of reasoning” (Hadot 1995: 61).

With these principles in mind, I would like to look at Nāgārjuna's thought as a way of life and briefly reflect upon the trajectories that this approach provides, not only for understanding our example of Nāgārjuna, but for Asian thought in general.

Surveying the framework and concrete conditions in which Nāgārjuna wrote, he was most likely a Buddhist monk in what is today south central India, ordained into the monastic life among one of the four main ordination lineages of Mahāsāṃghika, Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda, or Sammitīya during the 2nd or 3rd centuries of the Common Era. He would have been following the monastic code or *vinaya* of whichever monastic group he belonged to and focused upon cultivating the Buddhist eight-fold path in the institutional context of an Indian Buddhist *vihāra*. In this context, the focus of Nāgārjuna's life would have been build around the three trainings (*trisikṣa*) of morality (*śīla*), of concentration or meditative cultivation (*samādhi*), and of discerning insight or wisdom (*prajñā*).

But given such a context, which authentic texts of Nāgārjuna can we view in a Hadotian sense? Of those works which may plausibly be attributed to Nāgārjuna that we could possibly take into account, *The Four Hymns (Catuḥstava)* generally highlight lyric and devotional enthusiasm, the *Jeweled Garland (Ratnāvalī)*, and the *Friendly Epistle (Suhṛlleka)* to King Gautamīputra are texts of prescriptive advice, and the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, "*The Refutation of Objections*" although a highly eristic text and important work, nevertheless is a systematic apologetic exegesis to his thought.

Among Nāgārjuna's works, I think that the best exemplum to take in a Hadotian fashion is his *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās*, or *Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way*. Although this text is considered his most fundamental work and also his most controversial in terms of interpretation, its literary structure and content may be received, in following Hadot, as a spiritual exercise of transformative philosophical meditation.

The Mūlamadhyamakakārikās comprises 447 *kārikā*, stanzas or verses of didactic and mnemonic nature, 449 if the initial dedicatory stanzas are included (Bugault 2002: 11). Each stanza is concise to the extreme, consisting of paradoxical turns of thought which disappear

when one tries to capture it. Such a text in the Buddhist monastic context would be recited and memorized, perhaps taking around forty-five minutes to recite all the verses.

Recited or memorized, the *kārikās* lead the reader through analyzing familiar topics within the Buddhist community, a thorough examination of an object from which the dialectic demonstrates as transparent and through which the conception of the object then disappears. The discussion seems to be exerted, above all, within the interior of the Buddhist community. As many modern scholars of Nāgārjuna have noted, his interlocutors and privileged adversaries include his co-religionists, Ābhidharmikas, partisans of Scholasticism, particularly the Vaibhāṣika-Sarvāstivādin school. While passing and incidentally, modern scholars have also demonstrated that he aims also at Brahmanical logicians, Naiyāyika, who are wrong, in Nāgārjuna eyes, to be realistic and substantialist (Bugault 2002: 11–12). Nāgārjuna sees that these thinkers hypostasize aspects of experience (such as pain, impermanency, action, time, etc.) conceiving these as scholastic entities, i.e. imaginary, to which they become trapped; being then in danger of reconstituting a quasi-ontology, a quasi-metaphysics, all things against which the Buddha had, carefully, warned his disciples, because for a monk such as Nāgārjuna, the Buddha’s teaching is primarily practical and therapeutic (Bugault 1994: 218). It is in this notion of the therapeutic value of the text that Hadot’s approach has utility. Rather than seeing the *kārikās* as a systemic text propounding refutations to the above mentioned adversaries, in a Hadotian sense, the text serves as a meditation, through which the reader or reciter is lead through a series of reasonings refuting hypostatic conceptualizations and pointing toward a vision of reality that brings out the subtle purport of dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*)—thus, the text itself is the cultivation. As Hadot would say, this type of ancient philosophical discourse intends “to form more than to inform” (1995: 64, 119). To see Nāgārjuna in this fashion, is thus to see the *kārikā*’s as an *emendatio intellectus* (Bugault 1994: 220), i.e., a correction of cognitive error, which functions—for Nāgārjuna—like a propaedeutic meditation manual, purgative and ablativ, with a soteriology.

In considering only the *kārikā*’s themselves, the structure of the

work is not obvious. Now, if one considers the *kārikā*'s as a spiritual exercise of *philosophia*, as leading the reader through a dialectical procession of deconstructing imaginary conceptual constructs, the following strategy of the text appears. Temporarily beaten after the examination of a topic, the imagined adversary rebounds the discussion by calling upon a new objection, taken from either of an article of Buddhist dogma, or of an observation of common sense (Bugault 1994: 225–227). From this point of view, the imagined adversary behaves as an infantryman who moves back step by step, by making face, and taking up the battle again each time. There would thus appear to be a regressive logical sequence in this exercise. Whether or not this reading accurately reflects the procedure of debate at the time of Nāgārjuna, the viewpoints of imagined adversaries “compose” the book. In this sense, Nāgārjuna does not compose a system of “propositional judgments with accompanying categorical and hypothetical syllogisms” (Ruegg 1981: 47). It thus appears careful to consider the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* less like one organic literary unit than like a review of familiar topics to the Buddhist community, a dialogue between the play of Nāgārjuna's objections against the objections of his Ābhidharmika interlocutors.

In a Hadotian manner the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* may be understood as a series of mnemonic notes originally intended to guide Nāgārjuna's students in insight meditation (*vipāśyanā*). Here the reader within the exercises of the *kārikā*'s breaks down the sense of Self (*ātman*) through analytical awareness in relation to the five aggregates, seeing the mind and body in mutual dependence, and nothing more. Various groups and classes of phenomena are seen as impermanent, mutually interrelated and lacking essence. The reader becomes oriented toward seeing things as arising and falling in their constant change and impermanence. Thus, the reader comes to deconstruct the apparent stability of things, and to see directly everything as a process, a flow. The images used by Nāgārjuna for this stage are to see all things as ‘like a mirage, a conjuring trick, a dream’ and so forth—images used in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature for the ontological status of everything.

Nāgārjuna's work thus becomes a guide to the stages of insight meditation (*vipāśyanā*) and provides the framework for the analysis that a monk undertaking insight meditation at this level of development with-

in the three aforementioned trainings is expected to undertake. In other words, if we understand the *kārikā*'s as a *spiritual exercise*, Nāgārjuna is prescribing taking the sort of analysis found in Ābhidharmika ontology and extending it through *time*. ...everything is then seen as a fluctuating flow, with no actual *things* at all. Hence, as Williams (2000: 151–152) emphasizes, “the stress for Nāgārjuna on what follows from dependent origination. The centrality of dependent co-arising for Nāgārjuna is the centrality of things as processes in time. The stability of things is appearance only. They collapse into processes.” Thus, in the trajectories of such a reading, Nāgārjuna is not concerned to question the reduction to fundamental elements or *dharmas*, but rather to examine what occurs when one cognizes that all things, including fundamental elements, are dependent co-arising in reality. As Williams (2000: 152) articulates, “Nāgārjuna accepts that everyday things are constructs out of, or conceptual imputations upon, *dharmas*. But if we turn our attention round and ‘project’, as it were, both everyday things and the *dharmas* into which they are analyzed into time we find that things become processes. When things are processes the constituents of things must be processes as well. There can thus finally be no ontological difference at all between the things and the *dharmas* themselves.” Williams then concludes that “It is often thought that Madhyamaka is all about philosophy and has nothing much to do with meditation...” In terms of spiritual exercises, “Madhyamaka philosophy *is* the meditation. In the Buddhist context we are dealing here with insight meditation, not as such quiescence (*samatha*) or concentrative (*dhyāna*) states” (Williams 2000: 263n20).

This Hadotian approach to such texts returns us to the pragmatic and therapeutic context of the Buddha's teaching. The Tibetan translation of the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās* appends the title “*prajñā*” to the text and I think that this is relevant to our task at hand. The three trainings previously mentioned are traditionally correlated with three kinds of wisdom. That is, the discernment or wisdom acquired from hearing (*śrutamāyī-prajñā*), leading to wisdom acquired from reflection (*cintamayī-prajñā*), that culminates in wisdom cultivated in meditation (*bhāvanāmayī-prajñā*). From a Hadotian perspective, wisdom—the analytical discernment of things, may be seen as a meditative cultivation

that is formed through a repetitive dialectical exercise of *reductio ad absurdum* analysis.

Whether or not the structures of reasoning Nāgārjuna utilizes in the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās* are fallacious according to Euro-North American standards as inherited from Aristotle, the trajectories of a Hadotian approach bring us to the realm of Buddhist praxis, and thus to take Nāgārjuna's text not as making theoretical claims but as *acts* of philosophizing. Construed in this manner, the *kārika*'s relativize their own statements by not allowing them to stand as autonomous propositions, and this constant relativizing of statements by means of the Nāgārjuna's deconstructive dialectic does not say what emptiness is but shows how it is. That is, the text becomes "performative" conveying more than just propositional meaning. It has a specific effect on the reader consisting of a skill-in-means attempts to use language to evoke the emptiness of things that is beyond the limits of propositional language.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, according to Hadot's model of *philosophia* as a way of life, one becomes a part of the specific, historical tradition of philosophy as an art of living by allowing oneself to be influenced by that tradition, by identifying with it, and by adopting the project of extending it. The philosophical art of living is primarily distinguished from theoretical philosophy through its pursuit of aesthetic coherence of character rather than systematic coherence in theorizing. In terms of our exemplum of Nāgārjuna, we have the aesthetic coherence of emptiness of things and persons utilized to provoke a cognitive reorientation to dependent co-arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*).

Along these lines, Hadot remarks toward the end of his work *What is Ancient Philosophy?*:

...I have long been hostile to comparative philosophy because I thought it could cause confusion and arbitrary connection. Now, however, ...it seems to me that there really are troubling analogies between the philosophical attitudes of antiquity and those of the Orient. These analogies cannot be explained by historical influences; nevertheless, they do perhaps give us a better understanding of all that can be involved in philo-

sophical attitudes which illuminate one another in this way (2002: 278).

Hadot's approach and thought to ancient Greek *philosophia* as spiritual exercises may be seen as applicable to early Buddhist philosophical works and Asian works in general. In this perspective, 'spiritual exercises' does not refer to merely physical exercises, *philosophia* may also consist of rhetorical and dialectical techniques of persuasion, the mastering of mental concentration and inner dialogues.

The trajectories for the appropriation of Hadot's methodology may be most relevant in understanding Asian religious and philosophical literature composed by Indian Buddhist scholar-monk figures like Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Śāntideva, whose metrical works may be seen as philosophical dialogues consisting of spiritual exercises utilized for the transformation of one's whole being. Likewise, such trajectories would lead to a re-envisioning of the much translated Tibetan philosophical literature known as 'tenets' (Tib. *grub mtha'*), which most Euro-American translators classify as doxography and understand as outlines of systematic philosophical schools. From the Hadotian perspective, these texts might be understood as heuristic training manuals in the cultivation of spiritual insight.

Along these lines, incorporating Hadot's method of reading may lower the amount of "isogesis"—"the reading into" the text that often reveals as much about the interpreter as it does about the text being interpreted (Tuck 1990: 9–10). In this sense, appropriating Hadot's approach in reading ancient Asian religious and philosophical texts may have utility in bringing out historical factors in diachronic analysis while providing the descriptive cultural and structural foundations for synchronic viewpoints to become more viable—opening a clearing in which discourses located in Ancient Asia become more intelligible.

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In recent years, French classicist Pierre Hadot has argued that modes of thought and theory in Greco-Roman antiquity and early Christianity are not represented by what modern or post-modern scholars understand as philosophy, but rather as *philosophia*, a way of life or art of living. Philosophy as a way of life is centered around spiritual exercises that are designed to transform one's whole being. Hadot himself has mentioned the many troubling analogies that may exist between the spiritual exercises of ancient Greco-Roman *philosophia* and so-called 'Oriental religious thought'. This paper applies Pierre Hadot's methodology to several select examples of Buddhist religious and philosophical literature and explores the utility this technique of interpretation may have for cross-cultural understanding. The paper argues that construing Buddhist thought as a way of life, or a form of *philosophia*, has utility as a rhetoric of representation allowing for such discourse, even if containing analytical reasoning or ostensive abstract propositions, to have transformational value. Along these lines, the paper concludes that the benefit of utilizing Hadot's methodology may be most relevant in understanding Buddhist literary works where the context points toward discourse for transformation rather than toward elaboration of abstract and theoretical systems of thought.