

## **Zen history**

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**Abstract:** Given that historians have a voracious interest in studying the distinctiveness of cultures across the world and across time, why do they have so little interest in learning or borrowing from the temporal and historical cultures of those places? This essay offers a practical case study of Buddhism, looking both at the richness and radical difference of Buddhist temporalities, as well as asking how these ideas might be used by modern writers to make histories. Its special focus is on the Theravada and Māhāyana traditions, and, most especially, Zen. Through studies of Zen time texts, I conclude that an appreciation of Buddhist 'history' on its own terms might entail an abandonment of almost all the central premises of empirical history. This might become one starting point for the globalisation of History.

**Keywords:** Time, Buddhism, Zen, Historiography, Māhāyana, Philosophy of history

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### **Preface**

This paper sets out what we could mean by Buddhist ideas of time and history: both how such ideas are constituted in historical texts and how they might generate new identities for history. It considers Buddhist ideas in themselves and the manner in which such notions impact on the western historical project. It introduces the radical potential of Buddhist temporalities and offers suggestions as to new lines of thought which are opened up by an engagement with such traditions.

An alternate title for the paper would be ‘On lack’, for the first of Buddhism’s surprises is that where we might become anxious about the distinct temporal lacunae in the western tradition – philosophy’s sense of lack in knowing time, history’s evasion of

temporality and its fears regarding this lack of epistemological grounding, and the lack of historical and cultural understanding as to our place in making time – Buddhism celebrates lack. Lacking is a step on a path to understanding, for a recognition of incompleteness, unroundedness and uncertainty marks the beginning of the dismantling of the props of thought which lead us to think the world is as it is, manageable and describable, and not as it can be.

My argument is set out in four parts: first, a critical consideration of what the western historiographical tradition lacks; second, an introduction to the study of Buddhism; third, and centrally, an explanation of the radical possibilities of the Theravada and Māhāyana traditions; and fourth, a consideration of the manner in which Buddhist temporalities have been deployed in two forms of historical text. While this paper may fail in its analysis and its description, I hope that its premise in identifying the remarkable absence of Buddhism from historiographical discussion serves as justification alone.

### **Historiographical background: what we lack**

There is a double lack in the fields of historiography and the philosophy of history, and indeed of the wider discipline of history itself: first, the absence of a rich culture of temporal discussion (as compared with anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, physics and sociology) and, second, a lack of interest in the methods and temporalities of other cultures, especially with regard to our potential to learn from those cultures. The first of these forms of lack is all the more striking in that history is a time word and we

would expect that discussions of its epistemology could begin in no place other than the study of time. One of the central conceits of this evasion of time is the assumption that time simply *is*, that it is natural and therefore unquestionable, yet it is quite clear that a body of work now exists outside the discipline or on the margins of history which dismantles the assurance of the view that the historian can afford to leave time unquestioned (see Corfield, 2007).

The writing of Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth stands, in this regard, as an exemplary case for both foregrounding and denaturalizing time. In *Realism, Consensus and the English Novel: Time, Space and Narrative* (1983), Deeds Ermarth set out the distinctiveness of ‘historical time’ (which we might equally call western or empirical time) and the manner in which it both drew on and contributed to western modernity (1992: 26):

The medium of historical time is a construct and itself a representation of the first magnitude. This “history” may be one of the most specifically modern achievements. Without the production of history, [...] without the production of neutral time analogous to the neutral space evident in realist painting, we would be without that temporal medium that makes possible an activity unknown in classical times: the mutually informative measurement between widely separated events that underlies modern empirical science, modern cartography, and exploration [...] It is demonstrable that “history” belongs to the same descriptive conventions that made possible the painting and architecture of the Renaissance and the empirical science of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

History is therefore utterly dependent upon a new means of picturing time which emerges in western Europe at a distinct moment. It conceives of itself as neutral and progressive because it is self-evidently different to earlier conceptions of time, and because it is part of a complex of ideas about space and time which enabled huge advances in productivity: in making histories as much as in making paintings or machines. As a human creation, this idea of historical time is just as subject to critique and innovation as any other invention.

In her second book (1992) – *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* – Deeds Ermarth moved forwards to look at the manner in which time has changed in the post-Newtonian world and at the failure of the academic discipline of history – understandably wedded to its own account of time – to adapt to this new picture of time. For Deeds Ermarth, this new temporality lies at the very heart of the modern and postmodern world, for, like Ricœur, she believes that orientations towards time constitute central differences in systems of thought; in spirits of ages. Post-Einsteinian relativist thought and modernist and postmodern conjecture should therefore be of especial importance to history, for they offer a new understanding of time which historians could adopt in the manner in which such temporal innovations have been made and taken up by painters and poets.

Just as the painters of the Renaissance pointed the way to a new temporal world in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it is the new temporalities seen in modernist culture which point to new ways of life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Deeds Ermarth puts it (1992: 31-32):

Like the redefinition of space in painting since cubism, the redefinition of time that has occurred in postmodern narrative literally takes us from a medium that has been vital to Western empiricist culture and with it various important constructs, including that all-important changeling, the individual subject.

The forms of change she is talking about here are then fundamental: of form, time and selfhood. There is no reason to suppose that history would be immune from such change, not least because of its dependence on Renaissance-era constructions of time, self and narrative. Comparisons with Buddhist temporalities are especially apt here for there are evident connections between the waning of a certain grounding of the self in modern western culture and Buddhists' long-held valorisation of the idea of the dissolving of selfhood.

The development of the idea of the historian's duty to pluralize and question her sense of time comes not just from writers like Deeds Ermarth but also from allied brands of postcolonial thought and the development of truly comparative forms of world history. The notion that history and its time may lie untroubled is subjected to a critique of its impoverished scope by writers as varied as Peter Burke (2002) and Robert Young.

Young expertly tracked the colonial function of empirical history in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), in which he considered how one might de-occidentalize the academy and the historical enterprise. This would, he argued, be a difficult task for, in sometimes hidden ways, disciplines like history are still living in a nineteenth-century world, which serves as a means for the reproduction of the same premises which informed the historical judgements of writers such as Hegel and Marx.

History must, according to Young, find ‘new logics’ as a means of interrogating the subtler links which exist today between western ideas of temporality and selfhood and forms of neo-colonialism. Young looked to writers like Fanon and Aimé Césaire as figures whose central interest in the psychology and character of western colonialism might produce a broader dividend for students of the past (1990: 118), asking:

But how to write a new history? When, as Césaire observed, the only history is white?

The critique of the structures of colonialism might seem a marginal activity in relation to the mainstream political issues of literary and cultural theory, catering only for minorities or for those with a specialist interest in colonial history. But although it is concerned with the geographical peripheries of metropolitan European culture, its long-term strategy is to effect a radical restructuring of European thought and, particularly, historiography.

It is of critical strategic importance to my own argument and the debates to which I hope to contribute that Young’s object of study, and that which he aspires to change, is western thought (most especially historiography), and that the means to such change is forms of de-occidentalisation which evidently emerge outside the west. In a sense, such a project aims to apply the central doubts of anthropology in the latter half of the twentieth century – where anthropology came to see that its classic texts served as much as insights into the culture of the west as they did to other places – to the academy more generally, and to history in particular.

If we take Young’s medicine, following its very basic shift in perspective and belief in the other’s capacity to know things that we do not, our sense of what counts as history might begin to change. Once we see the non-west as an influence rather than

simply an object of study, history will begin to move in the manner in which subaltern studies have showed literary scholars the potential for method and theory to emerge from the periphery into the west.

The claims of Young, Deeds Ermarth and Burke come together in Donald J. Wilcox's brilliant study *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Relative Time*. Wilcox takes the value of non-western temporalities, and the potential of cross-cultural borrowing, very seriously. Yet as well as this broadening of spatial possibility, he also identifies the potentiality of earlier, pre-modern forms of 'western history' (1987: 13):

These non-Western narratives by their very nature are hard to incorporate into our own experience. The sense of absolute time seems a distinctive western contribution, colouring our view of the world and shaping our sense of self and society. Absolute time is undeniably a Western contrivance, but most [earlier] Western history is not recorded in absolute time.

Wilcox contends that both premodern and non-western modes of temporality (1987: 12) 'have identified a sense of time much closer to that which underlies the Einsteinian universe than the one Westerners currently use in everyday life', and in a sense he sees his project as a means of outflanking 'absolute time' from three directions: from the perspective of Einsteinian relativized time, from non-western modes of temporality, and from the pre-modern west (1987: 271).

Like Deeds Ermarth, Wilcox goes on to call for a modernist turn in historiography, but his grounds for so doing are different to those of Deeds Ermarth and

Young, for the escape from natural, absolute time can come as much from the others of our past as from others elsewhere in our present world. As he says, (1987: 263), ‘To present individuals in ways that seem convincing to their readers, historians will increasingly have to shape personality in terms more like those of Proust and Calvino – and, coincidentally, of Suetonius and Bede – than those of Dickens and Eliot.’ What I especially like about Wilcox’s ideas here is his recognition that the radical complexity of modernist representation is mirrored in methods and styles which we find in the pre-modern world. In other words, as well as advocating a move towards modernism, Wilcox is able to deflate the progressivist story in the very same move, just as readers of Einstein’s work on time have often observed that while his ideas reject the Newtonian picture of the world, they bear resemblances to Buddhist and Hindu conceptions of time.

The key to Wilcox’s thought, as I have suggested, is that his remedy for ‘working historians’ is that they need not necessarily think that they need to find metaphysical correction in those writers who most perturb them (contemporary modernists and postmodernists), for the answers they need are also made available in Bede and Suetonius. And, as we shall see, they are made available in other religious traditions, most radically of all in Buddhisms.

## **Buddhisms**

There are a number of reasons as to why we should approach Buddhism both carefully and hopefully. There is great hope for the student of time for all branches of Buddhism are centred on time and unlike western traditions, the subject of time is expressed clearly

and its epistemological importance is always recognised. Care needs to be taken, though, with the umbrella term ‘Buddhism’, for there are good reasons as to why many theologians prefer to speak of ‘Buddhisms’ in the plural. All faith cultures are fragmented, but there are especial dangers to claiming false unities across Buddhisms for key splits in Buddhist cultures emerged over temporal questions. This said, from a western view, there is a common anti-empirical view of time, or a movement towards that goal, which strikes us as distinct in the Buddhist tradition, and one of the overarching goals of this paper is the description of how that is mooted in early Buddhism and then more fully realised in later schools of the Māhāyana.

Buddhism itself is broadly split into three schools or movements: the Theravada (Buddhism as we know it from the life of Gotama, the figure we call *the Buddha*), the Māhāyana reform movement, and the Vajryana. Additionally, as in other religions, there is a Buddhism of practice and a Buddhism found in texts; there is a Buddhism associated with monastic communities (the *sangha*) and one based on thought outside religious communities. In Buddhist texts themselves there are distinct traditions of systematising, fixing and numbering, and of more conceptual speculation as to the nature of things. Like many theorists I am more interested in Buddhism’s speculation than in its systems. We also need to be careful with regard to the question of simplification, for certain speculations in Buddhism do rely on a dense set of traditions and ideas whose importance can be wrongly diminished in the bald desire to chase our object of study (bringing to mind Dubuisson’s study (2003) of the means by which western scholars seek to impose the idea of religion upon non-western cultures which they ought to see resist many of the precepts which we associate with religion).

These caveats aside, it is possible to distinguish between two forms of traditional Buddhist history. The first type consists of the stories, myths and accounts of important figures in the development of branches of Buddhism which together make up the background for the practice of Buddhism, most especially in monasteries. These histories are unexceptional for they tend to perform simple cultural and educational functions, often meshing with similar folk traditions in the many local cultures into which Buddhism travelled. In many cases their form and epistemological grounding bears little relation to the broader, and more radical, Buddhist cosmology. The second form of Buddhist history does draw on the Buddhist world-picture in a more coherent fashion, and can be found in texts such as the *Anāgata-Vamsa*, the History of Future Events, which rupture empirical understandings of time.

### **The Theravada: towards a rejection of empirical time**

The Theravada tradition bases itself on the teachings of Gotama and the ‘basket’ of texts which make up the Pali Canon, the earliest surviving collection of Buddhist teachings. It establishes Buddhism as being founded upon three ‘jewels’: the Buddha, the monastic community (the sangha) and sacred texts (the dhamma or dharma).

Scales and varieties of time are clearly set out in Theravadan texts. Gotama, for example, asserts (Keown 1996: 31) that he could remember back ‘as far as ninety- one eons’, with an ‘eon being roughly equal to the lifespan of a galaxy.’ The extent of Gotama’s great memory across time was, however, described as being insignificant next to the lives of gods, planets and other parts of the universe, for (Keown 1996: 36) such

figures measured time in billions of years, which could only be understood in a relative fashion by humans. There is a connection here between the great lengths of time in the world of the gods and the cyclical character of their time-experience. That their time is experienced in this fashion is not to deny the possibility of time seeming linear to others operating in mere fragments of the time of gods, but it allows those who live in linear time to break free from the idea that that must be the only form of temporal arrangement in the universe.

Gotama showed us what this work looked like whilst in a meditative trance in which he saw his buddhahood within the line of buddhas (Warren 1922: 11):

And strenuous effort made I there,  
The while I sat, or stood, or walked;  
And ere seven days had passed away,  
I had obtained the Powers High.

When I had thus success obtained  
And made me master of the Law,  
A Conqueror, Lord of all the World,  
Was born, by name Dīpamkara

What time he was conceived, was born,  
What time he Buddhaship attained,  
When first he preached – the Signs appeared.  
I saw them not, deep sunk in trance.

Time is made central to Buddhism here. Whilst lost in trance, Gotama was able to read the drama of time, but not in an omniscient fashion for even with the great powers of buddhahood he was only able to find meaning rather than precision. This, curiously, was because he was both in the time of Dīpamkara and the time of his trance, for in the connected-selfhoods of Buddhist cyclical time, Gotama and Dīpamkara were both one and not one. The great vision of time which this affords is by no means a goal within Buddhism for it is a part of *Samsara*, the endless cycle of suffering through which we all live, and whereas other faiths operate with a sense of the future conditional which is oriented towards an impending personal fulfilment, Buddhism seeks to finally end the sense of personhood, consciousness and the individual experience of time. Nirvana, as we shall see, is a time rather than a place, but it is better still described as an un-time.

In the Buddhist imaginary therefore (Keown 1996: 36) ‘a human lifetime, for example, seems like a day to the gods at the lower levels’. This relativism was not a notion of convenience but an idea which allowed the temporal system of Buddhism to cohere in a manner which was consistent yet undogmatic and flexible. A religion such as Christianity needed to create a new language of poetic temporality in order to distinguish its textual offer from earlier faiths, but relativism has provided Buddhism with a core belief of a kind which served as well in the time before Christ as it does in the scientific world of the present. It is a relativism founded upon the premise that the universe is not centred around the lives of discrete individuals, and that any given moment of perspective on time lies relative to other sets of temporalities around them. It is wrong therefore to see Theravadan Buddhism as a culture which relied on an empirical picture of time,

though it is true that much more radical forms of relativism would emerge in the Māhāyana.

In fact within the Theravadan tradition we find a rejection of ‘natural’ views of time in texts such as the Sri Lankan *Visuddhi Magga* (c.430 C.E.) where the method called the ‘fivefold questioning’ of time is enumerated (Warren 1922: 243). This consists of interrogating the key aspects of time and existence in, respectively, the past, the future and, as seen here, the present:

“Am I?

“Am I not?

“What am I?

“How am I?

“Whence came this existing being?

“Whither is it to go?”

There may be something reassuring to the western sensibility about these questions and the manner in which they cohere with foundational modes of interrogation in other religions and cultures, but the setting out of these questions is not undertaken to establish them as the bases of Buddhist culture, but merely to abandon them. All such questions are discarded for they represent the roots of a false picturing of the world; in which ultimate truths could be ascertained through the extension of an understanding of the self to the comprehension of the world.

Of the three ‘jewels’ which lie at the heart of Theravadan Buddhism (the Buddha, the sangha and dharma), it is the last of these which is the hardest to define for the

dharma includes works of theology and philosophy, man's works in his daily life (which ought to accord with Buddhist norms and scriptures), and the constituent units of reality. The power of these connected ideas of the dharma comes across in the work of the thirteenth-century Japanese monk, Enni (Bielefeldt 1998: 204):

Suppose there is a dark cave, into which the light of the sun and the moon does not reach, yet when we take a lamp into it, the darkness of long years is naturally illuminated. [...] The dharmas of the mind are like this: when beings lost in the dark of ignorance and afflictions encounter the light of wisdom, they are naturally purified without changing body or mind.

We are naturally people living in 'the darkness of long years' but as bearers of dharma we also carry within ourselves the potentiality of 'the light of wisdom' which Buddhism offers. The dharma then is founded on an idea of time for the darkness of the cave and the mind are both a form of stasis and becoming. As Williams says (2000: 114), 'the 'doctrine that all exist' is specifically the doctrine that if a dharma is a future, a present, or a past dharma it nevertheless still exists.'

Yet, why, one might ask oneself, should a dharma centred on enlightenment play such an important role in Buddhist thought given our knowledge that enlightenment in the sense of the illumination of the dark cave of life is merely an extension of man's suffering? How would the dharma lead us to nirvana? The Theravadan answer to this question is explained in the *Abhidhamma*, the canon of foundational texts which set out the philosophical basis of Buddhism. The 'dharma theory' (*dhammavada*) of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* distinguishes between two forms of dharmas (Bodhi 1993):

The unconditioned dhamma, which is solely Nirvana, and the conditioned dhammas, which are the momentary mental and material phenomena that constitute the process of experience. The familiar world of substantial objects and enduring persons is, according to the dhamma theory, a conceptual construct fashioned by the mind out of the raw data provided by the dhammas. The entities of our everyday frame of reference possess merely a consensual reality derivative upon the foundational stratum of the dhammas.

The lighting of the darkness of the cave opens, therefore, a perspective on one of the realities which we as humans have the potential to understand. Yet there is a second, unconditioned, reality which can only be reached in nirvana; a concept which merits further description in the context of the Buddhist triad of karma, samsara and nirvana.

If samsara is the cycle of life and death it is important to see that it does not lead to an eschatological end in the Christian manner. The fullness of the Christian end, with the promise of lives of joy or pain for those who are judged, contrasts with the emptiness of the Buddhist end-point, where the fullness of a life lived many times over is replaced with no-thing. As Gotama put it (Kapleau 1972: 7):

Where obsessive desire is absent, there is neither coming nor going, and where coming and going have ended there is no death, no birth; where death and birth do not exist there is neither this life nor an afterlife, nor any in between – it is, disciples, the end of suffering.

We should not therefore think of nirvana as either another place (Snelling 1992: 55) or as nothingness. Its character is simply not something which we can instinctively perceive, though we can gain greater understanding through the use of meditation and other tools which open us to the connections between the Buddhist worldview and the coherence of its ideas about time.

Gotama also described the manner in which those who would find nirvana might begin to comprehend it in their lives (Coomára Swámy 1874: 103):

That priest conducts himself well whose ideas of things as past or future have ceased, who is endowed with sacred knowledge, and who having overcome (the three times) is not subject to any future state.

Nirvana is, then, even in the Theravadan tradition, very much an overcoming of the sense of time and, in particular, that sense of time which we derive from the natural world which encourages us to believe that there are three temporal modes which govern our existence. Looking at such claims we can understand how it is quite possible to see Buddhist thought of the most radical sort originating with Gotama, and not simply reflecting developments in later Buddhist cultures.

### **The Māhāyana and history: time and untime**

The Māhāyana, or 'Great Vehicle', school of Buddhism radically reinterpreted Buddhism from the third century C.E. as the religion spread farther into East Asia. It was in part a social movement, driven by constituencies which felt that Buddhism had become

diminished and derailed from its original public purpose in its monastic centres. It also offered radically different interpretations of core Buddhist beliefs, such as the status of buddhas (which would be extended still further in the Vajrayana movement). As Keown (1996: 64) says:

The major Māhāyana *sūtras*, such as the *Lotus Sūtra* (200 C.E.) embark on a drastic revisioning of early Buddhist history. They claim, in essence, that although the historical Buddha had appeared to live and die like an ordinary man, he had, in reality, been enlightened from time immemorial.

In Gotama's time he was only able to teach people the basics of the Buddhist creed, since that was all they were ready for at that moment, but now a time had come when more complex teachings could emerge.

Returning to the title of this paper, it is important at this point to reiterate the idea that lack is central to the Māhāyana's view of the move to the experience of enlightenment. Where western history is concerned with the derivation of meaning, sense, progress, knowledge and the attempt to assure truth, facticity and certainty, the Māhāyana time text (it is difficult to call these things histories, though I think that they are) is concerned with the fleeing from sense, meaning, truth, facticity and any notion of progress which structures such goals.

The Māhāyana movement fostered a series of branches of Buddhism which adapted the faith's foundational teachings further, amongst which the Chinese school of Ch'an (later called Zen when it was exported to Japan) is one of the most conceptually

interesting. Before moving on to look at Zen let us briefly consider the equally influential Mādhyamika, best represented in the work of Nāgārjuna.

If we compare Nāgārjūna's 'Examination of Time' with that of Gotama cited above, we can see the way in which the Mādhyamakas delighted in unpicking the logic of existing philosophical systems in order to reveal new epistemological realities which needed to be confronted (Garfield 1995: 50-51):

If the present and the future  
Depend on the past,  
Then the present and the future  
Would have existed in the past.

[...]

If they are dependent upon the past,  
Neither of the two would be established.  
Therefore neither the present  
Nor the future would exist.

[...]

A nonstatic time is not grasped.  
Nothing one could grasp as  
Stationary time exists.  
If time is not grasped, how is it known?

If time depends on an entity,  
Then without an entity how could time exist?  
There is no existent entity.  
So how can time exist?

All earlier forms of Buddhism – especially as they related the concerns of texts to faithful practice – had been dependent upon some ideas of causation, for the so-called wheels of the faith needed to turn, yet the radical shift proposed by Nāgārjūna – in opposition to both Gotama and to empiricism – was that an examination of causation leads us to deny the existence of time. As Keenan writes (Griffiths 1989: 3) ‘In Māhāyāna Buddhist thinking all things arise in interdependence and there is nothing that exists apart from its causes and conditions.’ Time dissolves not only as a metaphysical or conceptual category but also as a form of shorthand which distinguishes between past, present and future. As Nāgārjūna implies, the idea of time is inherently appealing to us but so long as we cannot establish that the present and the future exist as dependent entities within the past, then we are unable to rely on such a mode of thought as a means of structuring our apprehension of the world.

As Conze (1993: 50) reveals, this approach to time drew on the broader Mādhyamika approach, for:

The Mādhyamika philosophy is primarily a logical doctrine which aims at an all-embracing scepticism by showing that all statements are equally untenable. This applies also to statements about the Absolute. They are all bound to be false and the Buddha’s

“thundering silence” alone can do justice to it. Soteriologically, everything must be dropped and given up, until absolute Emptiness alone remains, and then salvation is gained.

Zen further extends the concept of personal buddhahood to contend that all meaning can be located in the moment, and most particularly in the practice of *zazen* rituals in the present (although there are important strands of Zen which reject a devotion to ritual). Such devotions effectively offer the possibility of access to a temporal continuum between unconditioned/earthly and conditioned/nirvana existence. As the *Kenbutsu* says (Watts 1990: 179), ‘The so-called past is the top of the heart; the present is the top of the fist; and the future is the back of the brain.’ Thus we find an extension of the original ideas of the karmic cycle to its end point where all time is potentially contained in all beings.

The Japanese monk Dogen’s *Shobogenzo* (Watts 1990: 142-43) offers us a vivid picture of Zen’s broadening of Buddhism’s relativisation of time:

When firewood becomes ashes, it never returns to being firewood. But we should not take the view that what is latterly ashes was formerly firewood. What we should understand is that, according to the doctrine of Buddhism, firewood stays at the position of firewood... There are former and later stages, but these stages are clearly cut. It is the same with life and death. Thus we say in Buddhism that the Un-born is also the Un-dying. Life is a position of time. Death is a position of time. They are like winter and spring, and in Buddhism we do not consider that winter *becomes* spring, or that spring *becomes* summer.

Here the earlier Theravadan logic of causality is wholly abandoned. The karmic triad is also discarded for the movement of karma through bodies until its eventual redemption in nirvana is sacrificed in favour of an emphasis upon stasis and the achievement of enlightenment through meditation in the present. Where both systems coincide, however is in their overt insistence that Buddhism depends upon a meditation on, and orientation towards, time. As Dogen so pithily remarks, 'Life is a position of time'.

The need for history disappears in such a system. For Zen, (Snelling 1992: 442) even 'the historicity of the early patriarchs is irrelevant, since the authenticity of the enlightenment experience, which can be easily tested by an enlightened master, is the matter of primary concern.' In the manner in which earlier Buddhists described a fleeing of corporeality and consciousness in the transition from being to non-being in nirvana, the Zen Buddhist seeks to introduce this flight from apperception into the life of the now. As Enni puts it (Bielefeldt 1998: 205), 'when we are truly on the way of no-mind, there are no three realms [of existence] or six paths [of rebirth], no pure lands or defiled lands, no buddhas, no beings, not a single mind'. In other words, the foundational precepts of Theravadan Buddhism disappear in this interpretation.

In an early history of Zen – *The Secret Message of Bodhidharma or the Content of Zen Experience* – the author (Suzuki 1970b: 227) comments that a leading figure's 'landing on the southern shore of China is recorded as taking place in the first year of P'u-t'ung (A.D. 520)', but he then observes that 'the question has nothing to do with these things. Zen is above space-time relations, and naturally even above historical facts.' Even if empirical history could be said to be realisable, it has no real point in such a

worldview. This recalls Dogen's remark (Suzuki 1970b: 19) that Buddhism 'is a doctrine that from the beginningless beginning has never been easily learned', with its temporal implication that the search for origins and fixity in time is to move away from the very ethos of Zen Buddhism.

Zen rejects the idea that spiritual discovery must be a form of progressive journey. Instead it debates within itself the question as to whether enlightenment might better be arrived at through a concentration on Zen ritual and the study of the conceptual world of Buddhism, or whether it is more likely to be achieved through the practice of daily life and the loss of a sense of selfhood that comes through a life of action. Both approaches rely upon the idea that the enlightenment process is engendered by a move away from existence as consciousness to a realisation that within our unconscious being lies the truth of the de-individuated self; that, as Suzuki says (Suzuki 1970a: 107) 'The Unconscious does not seem to lie too deeply in our homely consciousness.'

A Zen history would, then, be an interesting thing. Other histories seek knowledge, understanding, analysis, perspective, detail and narrative, in attempting to explain the uniqueness of both things and times. A Zen history might try to do the reverse of each of these things. It would oppose the idea of movement in time and it would abandon the mania for description and thought which it perceived in empirical history. Its literary purpose would also be rather different to those histories which we know, for it could not be an entertainment, nor a contribution to our collective stock of knowledge (for that is of irreality). Instead it would serve as a form of incantation that would mesh with a driven spirit to take a believer away from things to no-thing.

## **David Loy: the celebration of lack**

Having claimed that Buddhist ideas about time have had almost no impact on western historical or historiographical canons, we should acknowledge the exceptional work of David Loy. Loy's project has been the demonstration, in theory and in practice, of the potential for Buddhist ideas to become methods outside the Buddhist world and, most especially, in the west. His early work, such as the essay on 'The Māhāyana Deconstruction of Time', has much to recommend it, but here I want to concentrate on his *Buddhist History of the West: Studies in Lack* (2002), which attempts to show what a Buddhist history would look like in form, subject and import, while taking an exemplary topic from our canon: the history of the modern west.

Loy's history seems initially to be a work of great pessimism, for (2002: 2), 'the history of the West, like all histories, has been plagued by the consequences of greed, ill will, and delusion.' What is more, it is centred on the idea that the history of the west has been characterised by a succession of cultures' attempts to deal with a sense of *lack* which has been felt by individuals and the societies which they constitute. Successive ages (2002: 1) have been defined by the manner in which they attempted to deal with the sense of lack and the cultural forms which they have developed as a means of salving this flaw, which has its deepest home in the forms of selfhood which modern westerners have inhabited.

Yet Loy's ironic claim, which seems obvious when made from a Buddhist perspective, is that westerners should not be worried about the sense of lack embedded in their history and should certainly not devote more energy to trying to solve this supposed

deficiency. In fact the sense of lack at the core of western culture ought to be celebrated for it could act as a spur to a form of enlightenment. Lack, after all, is synonymous with development in Buddhist traditions which attempt to diminish the individual's belief in their existence as autonomous selves and the concept that the social and moral world should be framed around the rights and needs of self-ruling agency. In Loy's view the history of modernity's stress on the increasing complexity and uncertainty of ideas of selfhood in a world of ever greater intricacy, and arguably diminished morality, needs to be seen as an opportunity.

There is also a formal critique of western history at work here, for Loy implicates the empirical technique with the questing, progressive mode which characterises cultures which are driven by a desire for completeness and the resolution of lack (as much in the vain task of the description of the past as in the summation of absolute self-knowledge in the life of the individual). What is more, the empirical mode is useless from a Buddhist perspective since there is no need to look outwards in time or space (as though such things were unconnected from our own ideas of our being), for moral transformation will not be engendered through such investigations. Instead we ought to see that we are spread in space and time, and that all we now need to do is find a path away from our quest for fullness and move further towards lack.

Yet could the western historian reject Buddhist historiography in Loy's terms on the grounds that adopting such modes would essentially constitute a form of proselytisation of a religious position; precisely the kind of role which History, as an Enlightened discipline, had rejected from the very moment of its formation as a discipline in the very late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century? Does the west need to fear

the missionaries of the non-west? The answer is, I think, no, for even if a Buddhist mode of historical thinking and practice were to be accepted as legitimate within the diet of historiographical positions within the western historiographical canon, there is no reason for thinking that it should ever be more than a passionately supported minoritarian position which stood in opposition to the dominant empirical paradigm, in the manner of Conyers Read and Carl Becker's relativism of the 1930s, Toynbee's evangelical, world-historical project or the postmodern stances of Munslow, Jenkins and Southgate.

A related question we might indeed ask of Loy's history at this point is whether it takes us to a point any different to that which we would find in countless western religio-historical texts in the period which he studies. After all, the 'Decline of the West' was identified by Spengler through the study of cultural forms, and had been hoped for or predicted for over many centuries. Eschatologies need decadence to precede purification and Loy does not wholly reveal the scale of difference of his Buddhist enterprise to such works. One reason for this is that his work does not actually use that many Buddhist ideas beyond his grand thematic. A much greater potential existed, I suspect, in terms of method, for Loy to rethink not just the meaning of the history of the modern west, but also the means by which such a history was arrived at. In part this can be explained by the fact that he sees his work as a first step towards introducing Buddhist methodologies into western canons, but I cannot quite understand why the forms of history he studies and uses are not subjected to greater Buddhist critique.

Empirical history is, after all, founded on precisely the kind of fearful sense of lack which he says should be embraced in the west, for historians are well aware that a gap exists between the things which they study and their modes of reconstructive

description and historiography essentially serve as a means of enabling history to accept that gap or lack. Buddhist historiography, in Loy's terms, might, though, ask whether there are not reasons for celebrating the historian's lack. This takes us back to Deeds Ermarth's remarks with regard to the spatio-temporal movement in which history came into being, for if the relativisation of time can come to produce emancipatory possibilities in other spheres of life and culture, why should it not be the case that history's embrace of lack allows it to move onwards?

## **Conclusion**

To return to my introduction, whether they like them or not, Buddhist ideas about time do prove to western historians that very different starting points exist for the enterprise which we call history, and that other historical cultures founded on radically different pictures of time merit the designation history, whether the form and purpose of such temporal cultures bears any relation to the style and aims of the things we call history. Western historians can choose to have no interest in other temporal cultures and intuit that they have nothing to learn from them, but they ought not ignore them.

We have seen that Buddhism can hardly be said to be a natural place for the empirical historian to look for support for her methods and worldview. While divided by a central split between the Theravada and the Māhāyana, all Buddhism is predicated on an openness to discussion of time which is antithetical to the traditions of western historical study. Buddhists need to orient themselves in time and to devote their lives to a consideration of time in a conceptual and a practical sense. If successful this meditation

leads not to revelation, truth and perspective but to a sense of transiency which might move into an understanding of un-time and un-being, which we can only really appreciate if we have grasped the radical epistemology of time present in Buddhism. Traditional western historians of religion saw the rejection of time in Buddhism and other eastern religions as evidence of a form of primitive mysticism, as seen in McTaggart (1908: 23), but I hope that this paper has begun to show how considered and rich such ideas are in Buddhism.

On a superficial level, Buddhist ideas of time and history may be instinctively attractive to anti-empirical historians and historiographers, and a process of the weaving together of ideas and the investigation of different and common roots might take place as it has, to some extent, in scientific fields which interested themselves in antecedent ideas of relativism in Buddhist and other eastern traditions. Yet the issue with this approach is that we are not treating the thing as it is but asking Buddhism to play a role in a narrative of western development to which it is not so neatly suited. It is also quite clear that Buddhism's radical temporal offer takes aim at empiricism for quite different reasons, and in quite different ways, to, say, postmodern historiography, and there is little evidence that that latter camp has had much interest in non-western critique.

When asked how the world began, Gotama responded that time should not be wasted on such questions for it could be devoted to attempting to escape samsara. In some senses, it therefore seems inadequate to speak of Buddhist forms of history, historiography or a Buddhist philosophy of history. To do so is to use words and concepts which are antithetical to the Buddhist tradition, and just as that culture had to coin new language, ideas and paths of thought to describe itself, it would seem more realistic to

close an appreciation of Buddhist temporality with a stress on the centrality of un-time.

So what would this look like?



Fig.1 Shoren-in Temple, Kyoto

If history in all traditions aspires to be a form of understanding which arises from a meditation on time – in which a function of recording is meshed to a desire for meaning – then one of the most obvious places in which to look for Buddhist historical texts or time statements is in Zen gardens.

If we accept the idea that Zen offers clear, and sometimes extended, notions of Buddhist time, then we ought to be especially interested in its gardens, which are perhaps the greatest expression of its culture. It should not seem surprising to us that Zen was particularly attracted, in art as well as gardens, towards non-verbal representations of its

ideas. The notion that a garden can be a history, or even offer a philosophy of history, is also associated with Islamic ideas of time, and I suspect that are useful parallels, in our approach and their content, to be made between the Zen gardens of Kyoto and, for example, the gardens of the Alhambra.

In what sense, then, can we say that this garden is a history? It is a history because it is clearly an exploration of time, which would seem to be a basis for the practice of history. Zen gardens are an invitation to explore the temporality of the Buddhist universe, and in particular the negotiation of the dualities which need to be overcome if we are to understand the Buddhist sensibility. In the garden we see both nature and the representation of nature, for the garden is full of rocks and moss, but they have been artfully placed there to offer a distillation of nature's character. In the garden we view time and a representation of time, for while the act of contemplation is an entry into a particularly privileged form of *zazen* time, we also understand that these are texts about time. Reference is made to the natural cycles of time which we see around us, for these are places which we are expected to see at different times of year, but we also understand that an attempt at transcending such forms of time is to be attempted.

The garden is a place of joy and beauty but it is also a place of duty, for its simplicity is deceptive: just as the Buddhist needs much work over time to come close to nirvana, the Zen garden needs to be cared for in a devoted fashion. While many such gardens also connect to broader narratives, such as natural histories which explain the origins of things in the world, the garden should be seen primarily as a site for contemplation rather than explanation.

Yet these features of the garden, whilst clearly available to those who apprehend it, are in fact mere preliminary stages which need to be negotiated before considering the garden as representing Zen's cosmology and a gift which allows access to that picture of the world. In essence, this dual function of the garden is predicated on the principles of the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, for here there is both conditioned and unconditioned reality placed right there before us (the is and the isn't). The gardens are nirvana-movements; they are abstractions that take us on the path to no-thing for it is as though the universe fragments when we contemplate them. Their abstraction is an expression of their epistemological character as they strive to serve as bridges to a broader understanding of things as our ideas of selfhood dissolve in the manner in which nature begins to break up in the garden. Above all, the Zen garden is an opening towards lack and man's potential to make lack as a means to appreciating the positive centrality of this idea to Buddhist temporality.

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