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Misreading and Re-Reading

Interpretation in Comparative Religion

One would think that, once we have learned to read, reading is easy. However, the amazing and somewhat disappointing fact is that even the most simple message can be misread. To paraphrase Murphy's law: whenever there is the possibility of misunderstanding, misreading is more likely than correct reading (e.g. in terms of the author's intention). Allow me to act the cicerone to some common misreadings regarding Buddhism. First, however, let me relate an introductory episode by way of illustration.

The barbed wire

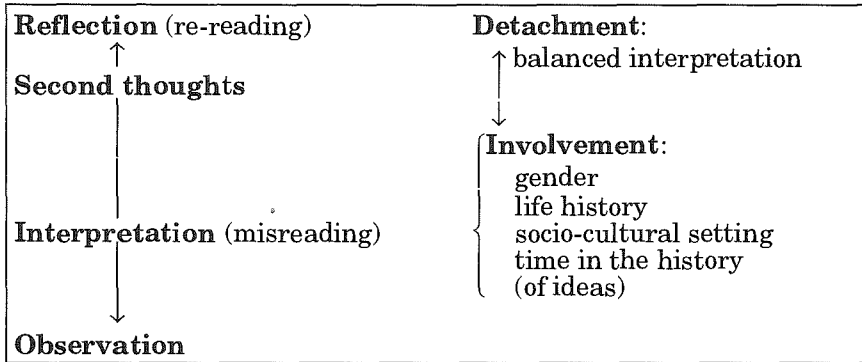
Last winter, while on holiday on the island of Lanzarote, I witnessed an intermezzo at our neighboring apartment. The husband of the elderly couple loudly complained that he needed to move to the second floor, because the barbed wire fence around his balcony on the first floor reminded him of his prison camp during the war. It affected his sleep and turned his holiday into a nightmare. The sight of the wire triggered his terrifying war memories, and he just could not spend another day in that apartment.

A few days after the episode, as we were sitting on our balcony which had a similar fence, I asked my wife how she saw it. She said spontaneously that it reminded her of the fence they had at her father's farm to prevent the cows from leaving the field. To me, again, the fence brought to mind our neighbor, who used to add some more wire every autumn to prevent a young 'gang' from stealing his apples, a common habit of any youngster in Pori in the early sixties.

It was quite clear that the barbed wire fence around our balcony in Lanzarote was there to protect us from opportunist burglars. The lesson to be learned from this episode is, however: the way we 'read' observations — barbed wire, for example — is dictated by our expe-

riences of life in the first place, and only secondly by our ability to conceive the intended function. The more subtle the matter, the harder it is to end up with the correct reading, in other words with an unbiased conception of the intention of the originator. The theoretical implication of this illustrative episode is condensed in Figure 1.

Fig. 1 Observation re-read



The *first* or immediate interpretation of an observation often is affected by aspects of involvement such as gender, life history, socio-cultural setting, and time in the history (of ideas). On *second thought* the first interpretation proves to be a misreading which, through re-reading and careful reflection — with suspended judgment —, is corrected resulting in a more balanced interpretation. Allow me to elucidate this assertion by analyzing some interpretations of Buddhism.

Interpretations of Buddhism

The Venetian merchant, adventurer and outstanding traveler, Marco Polo (1254–1324), was the first true European observer of Far East cultures and religious practices. In his *Il milione*, known in English as the *Travels of Marco Polo*, said to be dictated to Rustichello, a specialist in chivalry and its lore, Marco Polo gives the following description of the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka since 1972); it was written while he was locked up in one of the local prisons in Genoa after having been taken prisoner by the Genoese during a battle in the Mediterranean:

‘Furthermore you must know that in the Island of Seilan [Ceylon] there is an exceeding high mountain; it rises right up so

steep and precipitous that no one could ascend it, were it not that they have taken and fixed to it several great and massive iron chains, so disposed that by help of these men are able to mount to the top. And I tell you they say that on this mountain is the sepulcher of Adam our first parent; at least that is what the Saracens¹ say. But the Idolaters say that it is the sepulcher of SAGAMONI BORCAN [Śākyamuni Buddha], before whose time there were no idols. They hold him to have been the best of men, a great saint in fact, according to their fashion, and the first in whose name idols were made' (Polo 1903: 316–317).

According to Marco Polo, the Sinhalese Buddhists were 'idolaters', in other words worshippers of idols. This interpretation of the Sinhalese custom of placing offerings such as flowers, incense and lights before the Buddha image is quite understandable, because it is one of the most conspicuous feature of Sinhalese Buddhism even today. However, in conceiving of Buddhists as 'idolaters', Polo was uncritically using the concept of the then prevailing *ethnocentric* Christian discourse, by which the worshippers of other religions used idols, images or representations of God or the divine as objects of worship, a false God, as it were. Christians, on the other hand, worshipped the only true God. Marco Polo was simply reading back or projecting (cf. Eco's *intentio lectoris*) his own internalized ideas onto what he saw from an outsider's point of view at the same time as he was interpreting and relating his observations to his Genoese readers.

Today, with the advantage of hindsight, we may conclude that Marco Polo was fairly accurate in his observations, but he never asked how the Sinhalese conceived of Buddha as they venerated his image, and therefore he never acquired intra-cultural grassroots knowledge of what Buddha stood for in the Sinhalese-Buddhist socio-cultural setting. The observations were accurate, but the interpretation was the result of misreading due to a lack of contextual knowledge.

Allow me to proceed some centuries forward in history, and to take a close look at how the shipwrecked English sailor Robert Knox (1641–1720) interpreted the same sights as Polo observed. Although he lived as a captive among the Sinhalese from 1659 to 1679, in other words nineteen years, he still conceived of Buddha as a God:

¹ During the Middle Ages the term Saracens was used to denote Arabians in particular, and later on all Muslims in general.

'The Religion of the Country is Idolatry.... There is another great God, whom they call Buddou [Buddha], unto whom the Salvation of Souls belongs. Him they believe once to have come upon the Earth. And when he was here, that he did usually sit under a large shady Tree, called Bogahah. Which Trees ever since are accounted Holy, and under which with great Solemnities they do to this day celebrate the Ceremonies of his Worship. He departed from the Earth from the top of the highest Mountain on the Island, called Pico Adam: where there is an Impression like a foot, which, they say, is his, as hath been mentioned before' (Knox 1911: 114–115).

Again, with advantage of hindsight, we realize that Knox also misinterpreted his observations as he perceived the Sinhalese to be 'idolaters', and the Buddha to be a 'great God' and a 'Savior of Souls':

The idea that the Sinhalese and other Buddhists are worshippers of Buddha is still very persistent today, and it seems almost impossible to correct this preconception or rather prejudice. This is despite the fact that both buddhologists and anthropologists have shown irrefutably that the Sinhalese venerate Buddha as a man who attained enlightenment and release from the round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*), and that, according to the Buddha's teaching, man has no soul (*anātman*).

It must, however, be admitted that it is somewhat confusing that, although Buddhists — the laity in particular — venerate the Buddha, they also often worship the Hindu gods. However, the fact that the Buddhists themselves make a distinction between venerating and worshipping is a case in point. As we shall see, there is only one correct interpretation here, too, although it has taken westerners more than seven centuries to arrive at the right answer.

Another equally persistent preconception or prejudice, which still prevails in many an encyclopedia and textbook, is that Buddhism is an atheistic religion.² As we search for the roots of this interpretation, we are lead back to the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860). His (critical) discernment, however, was decisively flawed by his personal aversion to theology and his well-known hatred of university philosophers of a theological persuasion. He particularly objected to the theistic philosophy of 'reason' of his arch-enemy Hegel (Dauer 1969: 33–34).

² When, following these lines of thought, we state that Christianity is a non-nirvanic religion, we immediately realize how inadequate a characterization and categorization this is.

This antagonism resulted in an eclectic reading of Buddha's teachings rather than a balanced reading of Buddhism as a religion, which would have entailed not only reading the doctrine, but also reading about everyday life and practices. Schopenhauer focused his attention on the intellectual aspects of Buddhism, and especially on the rationality and conformity of the Buddhist doctrine with reference to his own inner experiences of everyday life. One of the reasons why he found Buddhism so appealing was the tragic untimely death of his father:³

'When I was seventeen, without any proper schooling, I was affected by the misery and wretchedness of life, as was the Buddha, when in his youth he caught sight of sickness, old age, pain and death' (Schopenhauer 1990: 119).⁴

Apart from this confession, where Schopenhauer stresses a spiritual affinity with Gautama Buddha's shocking realization of life as 'suffering',⁵ he also quite explicitly announces his pleasure in the conformity between the Buddhist doctrine and his own lines of thought:

'It almost seems that, as the oldest languages are the most perfect, so too are the oldest religions. If I wished to take the results of my philosophy as the standard truth, I should have to concede to Buddhism pre-eminence over the others. In any case, it must be a pleasure to me to see *my doctrine in such close agreement* with a religion that the majority of men on earth hold as their own, for this numbers far more followers than any other. And this agreement must be yet the more pleasing to me, inasmuch as in my philosophizing I have certainly not been under its influence. For up till 1818, when my work appeared, there were to be found in Europe only a very few accounts of Buddhism, and those extremely incomplete and inadequate, confined almost entirely to a few essays in the earlier volumes of the Asiatic Researches, and principally concerned with the Buddhism of the Burmese' (Schopenhauer 1966: 169). (My italics)

³ On the death of Schopenhauer's father, see Zimmern 1932: 25–27.

⁴ 'In meinem 17ten Jahre, ohne alle gelehrte Schulbildung, wurde ich vom Jammer des Lebens so ergriffen, wie Buddha in seiner Jugend, als er Krankheit, Alter, Schmerz und Tod erblickte'. Schopenhauer 1974b: 96; cf. Dauer 1969: 11–12.

⁵ For the feeling of spiritual affinity, see also Lipps's concept *Einfühlung*. Lipps 1903; Lipps 1905; Anschütz 1915.

Having realized the close agreement between the Buddhist doctrine and his own idea of the 'will-to-live', Schopenhauer points out that 'one cannot grasp the absolute by ordinary methods of cognition, but must first discover it in [ones] own inner experience' (cf. Dauer 1969: 13). These lines of thought clearly show how Schopenhauer, in constructing his philosophy, confirmed the correctness of his thinking by referring to Indian philosophy. It is not surprising that, in this context, rather than theorizing, he invokes the concept according to which Buddhism is atheistic as a justification of his own atheism:

'This [i.e. that there is no God, Creator] is attested by the religion that has the greatest number of followers on earth, Buddhism, which is very ancient and now numbers three hundred and seventy million followers. It is a highly moral and even ascetic religion and supports the most numerous body of clergy; yet it does not accept such an idea at all [i.e. the idea of a self-evident theism, existence of God]; on the contrary, it expressly rejects this out of hand and is thus according to our notions *ex professo* atheistic' (Schopenhauer 1974a: 115–116, §13).

If the discourses of both Marco Polo and Robert Knox can rightly be characterized as *ethnocentric*, Arthur Schopenhauer's discourse may more appropriately be denoted *eclectic*, in other words peculiar to him in particular. We therefore need to ask: to what extent do scholars unintentionally project their conceptual shadow on the religious phenomenon studied?

Allow me to advance still another century, when anthropologists (of religion) discovered Ceylon (Sri Lanka since 1972) and conducted intensive fieldwork among the Buddhists there. It came as somewhat of a shock to them that the Sinhalese did not conform to their idea of Buddhism gleaned from literature.⁶ The fact that, apart from venerating the Buddha by offerings of flowers, incense and lights before his image, the Sinhalese also worshipped the Hindu gods, contradicted the notion of Buddhism as an atheistic religion. Consequently, since the early 1960s, Sinhalese Buddhism has been characterized in numerous anthropological articles and monographs as 'syncretistic' (Leach 1962: 84 ff).

In *Precept and Practice*, Richard F. Gombrich devotes one chapter to the question whether or not Sinhalese Buddhism is syncretistic. First he states that 'supernatural beings were as much a part of the Buddha's universe as they are of a Buddhist villager's universe to-

⁶ On the beginning of Buddhist scholarship, see Sedlar 1982: 39.

day' and that 'the presence of "Hindu" or "animist" supernaturals in the Buddhist's universe is not a novel or syncretistic feature, but has always been the case'. Then he concludes: 'So long as Buddhists continue to treat gods as kind of supermen, able to grant favours to suppliants, but still ultimately of limited life and powers and subject to moral law, their beliefs are not syncretistic' (Gombrich 1971: 48-49).

Gananath Obeyesekere's analysis of the Rambadeniya pantheon, depicted in Figure 2, confirms Gombrich's interpretation.

Fig. 2 The five-level structure of the Rambadeniya pantheon

	<i>Level</i>	<i>Name of deity</i>	<i>Attributes</i>
	[1.	B U D D H A] Pure good
		[SAKRA, protector of the universal Buddhist <i>sāsana</i>]	
Pan-Sinhalese deities	2.	Guardian deities: Saman Vishnu Kataragama Nāta Pattini	Rational punitiveness "just good"
Local deities	3.	District deities	
	4.	Demons	Irrational punitiveness
	5.	Spirits	pure evil

At the apex of the simplified depiction of the pantheon is the Buddha. He occupies a presidential position vis-à-vis the other deities, and he is venerated in every ritual performed in the Rambadeniya village. Buddha is not, however, conceived of as a deity, in other words as a being who intercedes on behalf of humans and brings fertility, prosperity, well-being, or woe to people who propitiate him.

Buddha is addressed commemoratively rather than propitiatingly or in a petitionary manner. He does not, however, possess human status either, because by virtue of having attained enlightenment and release from the round of rebirths (*samsāra*), he has transcended his humanity. Consequently, his characteristics are his

compassion, benevolence, and nonpunitiveness: he is goodness incarnate! Buddha's presidential position in the pantheon is emphasized by the fact that in every Buddhist ritual he is always venerated before the worshipping of other deities.

The Sinhalese address liturgical stanzas commemoratively to images and other symbols of the Buddha 'presence'. Buddha is also given dietary offerings, because he is conceived of in some sense as 'living'. A popular stanza, for example, runs: 'Pardon me, Venerable World Sage, Blessed One, the "demeritorious" deeds I have done with body, word, thought, or by carelessness'.

One of the crucial questions in this connection is therefore: in what sense is there a Buddha 'presence' in the rituals? Obeyesekere states that, although cognitively the Sinhalese conceive of the Buddha as nonliving, psychologically they perceive him as living. This, he argues, is due to the fact that, like other humans, the Sinhalese worship 'conventional' deities — gods and demons. Attitudes towards conventional gods are therefore generalized to or *reflected* upon the Buddha. The reconciliation of these seemingly irreconcilable positions is, according to Obeyesekere, brought about through the symbolism of the Buddha relics, with the underlying notion that, although the Buddha is not living, his presence is manifested in the relics (Sinh. *dhātu*).

This interpretation is completely consonant with, or reflective of, other aspects of Sinhalese religion, where the ingredients used in magic, altars and images become activated (*jīvan*) through the 'essence' (*dishti*) of the deity, who in ritual is invited to cast his eye (*bālma*) on these objects. In accordance with these lines of thought, the Sinhalese say that the Buddha is 'present in his relics' (*Buduḥā-muduruvo dhātuvala jivamānava innava*). Therefore they address the relics as 'Venerable Relic' (*Dhātun Vahanse*) (Obeyesekere 1966: 5–8).

Every Buddhist temple has a relic casket and a relic chamber (*dāgāba*), where Buddha and the enlightened person's (*arhat*) relics are enshrined. The relics have the connotation of 'life force' or 'vital principle'. The notion of the Buddha personality incarnate in his relics (*dhātu*), refers to his immanent presence only. Therefore, the Sinhalese do not seek assistance in everyday matters from the Buddha personality incarnated in his relics (Obeyesekere 1966: 8).

Slightly below the Buddha in the pantheon is Sakra, the protector of the universal Buddhist monastic tradition (*sāsana*), who is merely referred to in Rambadeniya in myths; he is never propitiated or worshipped, because he has delegated his authority to Saman, the protector and guardian of the Buddha-sāsana in Sri Lanka.

Saman is the first among equals on the second level of the pantheon, together with four other deities (of equal status): Vishnu, Skandha (Kataragama), Nāta, and Pattini. These are all conceived of as defenders of the faith, and hence as guardian deities with the special task of protecting the secular kingdom. As gods in a conventional sense, they are both punitive and benevolent. Their punitiveness is, however, a rational punitiveness, in other words they are just gods punishing only for transgressions.

Level three in the pantheon consists of district deities, who have more or less the same attributes as the guardian deities. The Sinhalese conceive of these gods as provident father figures in relation to whom the petitioner is a 'newborn baby' or a 'child' (*lē bilinda, ladaruva*).

Level four consists of demons and other inferior deities, and level five of ghosts and the malevolent spirits of dead ancestors (*prēta*). The supernatural beings on these levels are conceived of as completely evil and 'irrationally punitive', in other words causing harm without just cause or reason.

According to Obeyesekeres' analysis, the simplified Rambadeniya pantheon thus represents a morality structure, with pure goodness and benevolence at the apex and pure evil at the base. Morality here refers to karma, and the status of the pantheon deities is the result of karma. Buddha represents the highest goal of Buddhist aspiration: enlightenment and nirvāṇa. The gods are much below this ideal. They are beings who, by virtue of their good deeds, have achieved their position in the pantheon, but who still have a long way to go to attain release from the round of rebirths (Obeyesekere 1966: 9).

According to Sinhalese-Buddhist thinking, therefore, there are two spheres of reality: supra-mundane and mundane. Buddhist monastic tradition (*Buddha-sāsana*) is considered to function in a 'supra-mundane' (*lokottara*) sphere, while popular — sometimes called non-Buddhist — beliefs are seen in relation to 'mundane' (*laukika*) matters. *Lokottara* refers to the sphere of reality which is viewed as being beyond the round of rebirths (*samsāra*). The Buddhist sāsana is thus regarded as providing an instrument for ascension to the 'supra-mundane' sphere. The final life goal of a Buddhist is to attain enlightenment, which guarantees release from the round of rebirths.

In contrast, *laukika* refers to the sphere of reality which is conceived of as the world, in other words within the round of rebirths. Since the so-called religious needs of humans are, in many ways, connected with the problems of life in this world, the laity naturally

seeks help from the gods in mundane affairs, because *sāsana* does not provide its followers with relief in this sphere (Gombrich 1971: 153–191; Gothóni 1982: 50–51).

In spite of appearances, this does not contradict the teaching of Buddha. Buddha never denied the existence of gods. He conceived of them merely as impermanent beings. This is related in with the recital ritual for averting evil known as *pirit pinkama*, for example, practiced frequently in every Theravāda Buddhist country, where the gods are conceived of as functioning in an intermediate sphere, in between the two spheres of reality (Gothóni 1982: 50).

Such grassroots-level observations have encouraged some scholars to use the concept of ‘configuration’ instead of ‘syncretism’ to denote the two (parallel) spheres of reality. This characterization of Sinhalese Buddhism also corresponds to the Sinhalese distinction between the two spheres of reality called *lokottara* and *laukika*.

Today, therefore, we should speak of two configurations rather than of syncretism. The Sinhalese are fully aware of the difference between these two parallel belief systems, and they never mix them. They worship gods, but they are fully aware that the gods cannot further their efforts in attaining release from the round of rebirths. The gods can only help them in mundane matters. Accordingly, it is essential for us to point out that the Sinhalese *venerate* the Buddha (as the Enlightened One who has extinguished desire and attained release from the perpetual round of rebirths), but *worship* the gods who assist humans in mundane matters (Bechert 1978: 218–221; Schalk 1976: 79–81, 92).

Summa summarum

Polo and Knox, who did not know the Sinhalese language, were thus not able while out in the field to ask the Sinhalese people about their religious practices. Therefore they merely described what they saw in the manner of travellers’ tales of that time. Consequently, both of them were destined to interpret (i.e. misread) Sinhalese Buddhism totally from under the shadow of ethnocentric Christian discourse (Pye 1994: 54–55).

In contrast, Schopenhauer learned about Buddhism only from books. He was therefore dependent on the then prevailing discourse of focusing only on the doctrinal or philosophical aspect of Buddhism. Gautama Buddha’s life and doctrine also touched him personally. In his reading, he was therefore rather uncritically eclectic, seeing only what he wanted to see. He used Buddhism as an argument for the correctness of his own philosophy: ‘it must be a pleas-

ure to me to see my doctrine in such close agreement with a religion that the majority of men on earth hold as their own'.

Religion should no longer only be equated with a doctrine or philosophy which, although important, is but one aspect or dimension of the phenomenon religion. Apart from presenting the intellectual or rational aspects of Buddhism, we should aim at a balanced view by also focusing on the mythical or narrative axioms of the Buddhist doctrines, as well as on the practical and ritual, the experiential and emotional, the ethical and legal, the social and institutional, and the material and artistic dimensions of the religious phenomenon known as Buddhism. This will help us to arrive at a balanced, unbiased and holistic conception of the subject matter (Smart 1995: 16–21).

We must be careful not to impose the ethnocentric conceptions of our time, or to fall into the trap of reductionism, or to project our own idiosyncratic or personal beliefs onto the subject of our research. This requires careful re-reading of previous interpretations while judgment is suspended, as well as commuting between intra-cultural and inter-cultural terms long enough to be able to translate the aspects of the foreign religion into concepts and terms understandable to us. We may thus succeed without violating the distinctive character of the religion concerned for the benefit of universalistic categories.

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