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Representing Tibetan Buddhism in books on spirituality: A discourse-historical approach

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Abstract

This article looks into how Tibetan Buddhism is framed in terms of East-West dichotomy in six popular books on Buddhism and spirituality. Discourse Historical Approach is employed to uncover the rhetorical representation of Tibetan Buddhism to the readers. A critical post-colonial perspective offers an insight into various power dynamics, arising from these representations, structured according to Yoshikawa's model of intercultural communication between East and West. The various power outcomes of rhetorical styles range from Ethnocentric to Dialogical, with their ethical consequences and problematics discussed.

Keywords

Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhism and the West, discourse historical approach, double-swing model, ethnocentrism

Introduction

This study deals with how Tibetan Buddhism is represented and discussed in popular literature on Buddhism and spirituality. In non-Buddhist regions of the world, books on spirituality serve as a common means to learn about the religion and therefore have a power in defining and shaping its image. Tibetan Buddhism, which has evolved as a cultural framework for Tibetans and other ethnic groups over many centuries with little outside contact, is attracting new converts among conflicting narratives (Konik 2009). The recent scholarly debates around Buddhism in the West stir up sometimes contradictory questions and concerns around representation, ownership, and cultural appropriation (Borup 2020). These criticisms often focus on essentialized cultural categories, instead of actual dynamics of representation, which includes apart from appropriation, also “various degrees of appreciation” (Borup 2020, 248). Looking into the discursive strategies used in the

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authors' representations of Tibetan Buddhism may help evaluate the trajectories of how Tibetan Buddhism is perceived and understood by those practicing or interested in Buddhism.

For this analysis, I used several recently (re-)published books on Buddhism and spirituality, written by Westerners for other Westerners, discussing Tibetan Buddhism. The study employs Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Reisigl and Wodak 2009; von Stuckrad 2013; Wodak 2015) to identify the common discursive strategies for representing Tibetan Buddhism. Following Wodak's (2015) DHA, the analysis in this study presents an interdisciplinary glance at the issue, informed by a critical post-colonial paradigm, my own dissertation research on Tibetan Buddhism (Sharapan and Härkönen 2017; Sharapan 2018), and inductive application of the Double-swing model of intercultural communication between the East and the West, a theoretical insight from Intercultural Communication developed by Yoshikawa (1987). Discourse historical approach is aimed at disclosing self-contradictory and manipulative linguistic strategies, fortifying a problematic idea or status-quo, in this case, rhetorical employment of categories of East and West, its tacit ideologies and implications. The Double-swing model provides a framework to evaluate the precariousness of such implications.

Tibetan Buddhism as the oriental other

Tibetan Buddhism's way to the twenty-first century global public was preceded by the modernization and spread of Theravada and Zen Buddhism earlier in the colonial and post-colonial era. This resulted in a construction of Buddhist modernism, characterized by a shift in authority from religious bodies to individual practitioners, a shift from the transcendental or soteriological to the psychological and societal realms, as well as from traditional doctrinal meanings to interpretations induced by rationalism or romanticism (Bechert 1966; Cox 2013; McMahan 2008). For Tibetan Buddhism the journey into modernity was much more sporadic and abrupt (McMahan 2008). When the Maoist invasion forced it into the outside world, Tibetan Buddhism was a relic of a feudal lifestyle, much unlike the modernized Theravada and Zen (Goldstein 1989; Sharapan and Swann 2019). In view of Buddhist modernist discourses, many Tibetan Buddhist lamas and their followers promoted the religion as "not a religion, but a philosophy," "compatible with science," or even "a science of the mind" (Lopez Jr. 2008; McMahan 2008). It carried clerical hierarchy, pre-modern attitudes and narratives of magic, and at the same time, a well-honed contemplative apparatus, philosophical rigor and emphasis on boundless compassion (Paine 2004). This way, Tibetan Buddhism included elements, which newcomers could see as highly alluring or highly outrageous.

This article takes a post-colonial perspective over one aspect of this encounter, Western authors' representation of Tibetan Buddhism. Said's (1978) accusation of the Western academic misinterpretation of the East, either deliberately or sincerely working in favor of the political colonization of Middle Eastern and Asian countries, revealed the bias behind the descriptions of the Orient. Following that argument, scholars have demonstrated the consequential outcomes of presenting Indian culture and religion through supposedly objective academic eyes (King 2013; Spivak 1999). Taking our own cultural framework for granted we are bound to see the cultural Other as homogeneous, strange, and inferior. In this process the categories of "us" and "them" are constructed discursively, not only through portraying the Orient, but also through drawing the boundaries of the Occident (Jouhki and Pennanen 2016), where the two are juxtaposed as essentially different homogenous entities.

When I bring up notions of East and West, I mean not only the discursive categories, as they are constructed in a particular stretch of discourse, but also the history of narratives of socialization and acquired identities. One aspect of DHA, according to Wodak (2015, 3), is "socio-diagnostic

critique” in which the analyst “makes use of her or his background and contextual knowledge and embeds the communicative or interactional structures of a discursive event in a wider frame of social and political relations, processes and circumstances.” This way I focus on the discursive manifestation of the East-West divide in the books, seeing it as subjective and intersubjective, articulated through self-identification and socialization. While the divide can be rhetorical and purposeful, it is not automatically problematic or inaccurate, and here the theoretical framework steps in.

Yoshikawa’s (1987) model of intercultural communication between the East and the West offers an interesting insight into the unfolding relationship between the two. Unlike (or additionally to) the post-colonial paradigm, the model highlights not only the relationships of domination, but also of submission, exchange, and of dialogue. In his essay, Yoshikawa (1987) illustrates each type of relationships with a diagram, where circle A stands for the West and B for the East. Yoshikawa (1987, 319-320) reflected the four ways, according to which he believed intercultural communication might develop, in the four modes of intercultural encounter: (a) ethnocentric, with circle A is distanced from a smaller-sized circle B; (b) control, where a smaller B is placed underneath A; (c) dialectic with three outcomes between equally sized A and B: (1) A and B affecting each other and creating C; (2) A fusing into B; (3) B merging into A; and (d) dialogical, symbolized with a Möbius strip, where A and B are interconnected and equal. Yoshikawa (1987) considers the Dialogical Mode to be ideal, and it has received a certain popularity (Jensen 2003). It was inspired by Zen philosophy and Martin Buber’s I-Thou concept. Yoshikawa did not aspire for objective validity and his model has not been tested empirically, providing rather an intuitive guideline, which can be seen as a drawback. Here I try to apply the model to a broad context of how the Eastern religion may be presented for spiritually searching readers, using the model as a structure to illustrate possible outcomes of the encounter between A and B, while a critical discourse analysis of specific examples of representation provides some empirical substantiation for the model. A discursive view of religion means attending to the (re-)shaping and legitimizing the religious meanings (von Stuckrad 2013), and popular books represent an arena for this negotiation. Therefore, my question is: *how is Tibetan Buddhism discursively represented by the popular authors, based on Yoshikawa’s model?*

Method

To find popular books on spirituality where Tibetan Buddhism is represented, I browsed through various recently (re-)published works on Amazon and Goodreads. In my search, I was guided by my experience working with such literature for my dissertation and personal familiarity with this genre. My main criteria in choosing the books were: (a) written by Westerners; (b) aimed at a general audience, not academic community; (c) presenting Tibetan Buddhism to readers with a possible interest in it, where Buddhism was discussed and compared with modern Western culture, as authors perceived it; (d) published within the last ten years. Unlike some other discourse analytic methods, DHA welcomes a broader *intertextual* and *interdiscursive* perspective: “...we follow the principle of triangulation, which implies taking a whole range of empirical observations, theories and methods as well as background information into account.” (Reisigl and Wodak 2009, 89) In my browsing, I looked at about a dozen options, focusing on the discursive strategies used by different authors and tried to identify patterns of power balance, as they relate to the model. Some other candidates were Sam Harris’ *Waking Up* (2014), and Robert Thurman’s *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (1996) (had a reprint been available). When more than one book fit a mode, I chose the one with most prominent rhetoric and impact, reflected in ratings. I eventually managed to find an example for each mode. I ended up with six works: Stephen Batchelor’s *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2011), Owen Flanagan’s *Bodhisattva’s Brain* (2011), Ken Wilber’s *Religion of Tomorrow* (2017), Lama Jampa

Thaye's *Essentials of Tibetan Buddhism* (2017), Richard Davidson's *The Emotional Life of Your Brain* (2012), and Alan Wallace's *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic* (2012). Only Thaye focused on Tibetan Buddhism specifically; others described it as part of their narrative. I applied discourse analysis to the introductory chapters and those dealing with Buddhism in the West, where the authors' positions were most evident. The rest of the books' contents were considered as background.

Using DHA (Wodak 2015) meant analyzing the rhetorical means employed by the authors in drawing boundaries related to East and West, with a certain pattern. Wodak (2015) identifies the most common rhetorical tools, namely *nomination* (labelling), *predication* (attribution), *argumentation* (use of *topoi*, i.e., rhetorical devices), *perspectivization* (positioning the writer in relation to the message), *intensification/mitigation*. I marked the *topoi* and other tools in the texts, correlating emerging patterns with the modes, making use of my knowledge of the authors, their views and positions, as well as the historical circumstances of Tibetan Buddhism's spread in the West. I found illustrations of each mode and submode outlined by Yoshikawa's (1987), although I admit that the modes are simplifications and do not reflect the complexity of each author's work. Also, there could be more outcomes to how the power balance could unfold in this context, as well as other examples of each mode, and the boundaries between each mode can sometimes be blurred. However, this model serves primarily as a way to structure various power balance outcomes.

Findings

Ethnocentric mode

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist is a popular autobiographical best-seller by a modern Western intellectual and translator Stephen Batchelor, who has coined the term "secular Buddhism," which, simply put, is his adaptation of Buddhist psychology and ethics to a materialistic view of consciousness. I chose this book to represent the Ethnocentric Mode, which "implies that A perceives B only in A's own frame of reference and that B is a mere shadow of A" (Yoshikawa 1987, 320). A sees its framework as absolute, distances itself from B and negates its value.

According to the *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (Batchelor 2011), as a young English man without working, education or family commitments, Batchelor decided to travel off his savings through Europe and Asia until he ended up learning about Buddhism in Dharamsala, India, and being ordained as a monk. He continued studying with Geshe Ngawang Dargye in Dharamsala and then with Geshe Rabten in Switzerland, and then decided to move to a Zen monastery in Korea, hoping to find a more palatable presentation of Buddhism. After his teacher died, he left the monastery, married a former nun, and continued as a translator, an independent practitioner, and an unaffiliated scholar. In a discourse analytic fashion, Batchelor's memories in his autobiography of a "Buddhist atheist" are seen as purposeful, rhetorically strategic *remembering*, rather than neutral accounts (Edwards 1997). He presents himself as a shy, modest, sincere, honest—a spiritual seeker with a baggage of personal complicated histories who is very relatable to the reader. He also claims an insider position to the religion and some authority in judging it. His narrative oozes with Orientalist logic and *topoi*. However, I will only briefly go over the main points of the analysis and start with discussing the opening story of Chapter 1 in more detail.

Once during a speech by the Dalai Lama at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives a heavy rain fell down and stopped almost immediately, while a Tibetan yogi Yeshe Dorje was performing a ritual to make the *nagas*¹ cease the bad weather hindering the speech. Batchelor (2011, 4) remembers "hearing myself say" to other western listeners that "the rain could still be heard all around,

but not above the library”, as he confesses a “sin” of lying both to himself and to his peers in agreeing to the view that the lama had changed the weather in the valley, sharing: “Never before had I encountered the truth I was willing to lie for” (7). Through the language of depriving himself of agency, and assuring the reader of his clear record, Batchelor positions himself as an innocent person, who was induced to lie by the religion. This calls in the moral dimension of compromising the truth in favor of belief, and a topos of danger: Batchelor accuses Tibetan Buddhism of breeding (self-)deception, which he was tempted by (this is an example of predication). Extending the threat onto his peers intensifies the effect, who in response to his remark about the lama’s supernatural ability “nodded and smiled in awed agreement” (4), where “awed agreement” is his recalled interpretation of their response confirming assumed “passionately shared convictions” (5). His peers are mentioned again later, attributed an “unwavering faith in the traditional Buddhist view of the world” (7) in the final paragraph of the chapter, preceded by his description of the ignorance of Tibetan lamas in natural sciences, and their view of the world as four continents centered around Mount Sumeru. He hedges down his disdain by making a claim, recurring throughout his narrative, of his trying, but failing to accept the Oriental Other.

Following the Orientalist logic, the Other is depicted as homogeneous, revealing a logical fallacy of false attribution:

Perhaps it was nothing more than a brief mountain shower on the nearby hillside. None of us would have dared to admit this possibility. That would have brought us perilously close to questioning the lama’s prowess and, by implication, the whole elaborate belief system of Tibetan Buddhism. (5)

Conflating weather-changing practices and “the whole elaborate belief system of Tibetan Buddhism” is only possible if one sees all Tibetans with their history, culture, and religion as one, inseparable Oriental entity, one can either wholly identify with or wholly reject. He draws a conclusion that without the belief system of Tibetan Buddhism, “what had happened would not have been that remarkable” (4). False attribution would be to consider weather managing practices as the measure of validity of Tibetan Buddhism as a system. Further on, the accusation extends to the whole of the Other by marking other teachers (Geshe Ngawang Dargye and the Dalai Lama) complicit. He remembers how the Geshe was asked about practices involved in controlling the weather and expressed disapproval, because “it hurts the *devas*” (6). Batchelor wonders in the form of a question (mitigation): “Why would the Dalai Lama—the embodiment of compassion—tolerate the performance of the ritual if it injured *devas*” (6) [original italics]. Since the Other is artificially homogenized, its natural internal complexity is taken for self-contradiction, i.e., *irrationality*. This irrational Other, following the Orientalist logic, also becomes the antagonist, morally inferior, proven dangerous on the example of inducing an honest person to lie.

In the first pages of the preface, he starts with proclaiming a conflict between “a traditional Asian religion and the intuitions of secular modernity” (ix), then follows to disqualify the “Asian tradition’s” take on Buddhism, and finally makes a strategic claim about Buddhism’s adaptability and malleability. On top of these foundations, he constructs his project to “trace the origins of Buddhism” through reading the Pali Canon, travelling to “those places, where the Buddha lived and taught” (x), stating that all this “enabled” him “to reconstruct an account of the Buddha’s life” (x). About himself, he claims to “lead a life that embodies Buddhist values within the context of secularism and modernity” (xi). He does draw boundaries of “secular modernity” throughout the book, but it is not based on the institutions, but on “intuitions” (ix). A belief that one person can reconstruct how the Buddha lived and what he had meant in his teachings, in disregard of both traditional interpretation and the academic thought in the field of Buddhist Studies, strikes a discord

with the humble picture he gives of himself. However, this belief enables Batchelor to maintain a Buddhist label and claim ownership of Buddhism despite rejecting its foundational premises. It also allows him to employ the Buddha as a bullhorn for his own subjective beliefs by pulling his image of Buddhism away from its traditional and historical understanding towards his own sentiments about “secular modernity.” He sees these sentiments as absolute, rather than conditioned, and based on them rejects the value of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition on a fundamental level. This subjectivism is felt throughout the book, for example, Batchelor’s memories of mystical experiences and a mystical dream (12, 30-31). The reasoning Batchelor provides in support of his materialistic view (36-38) reveals that his conviction on the matter as complex as the nature of consciousness also rests on his personal *intuitions*.

Control mode

The next mode implies that “B is perceived and manipulated as a thing or an object for A’s purpose” (Yoshikawa 1987, 320). The diagram shows a relationship of domination and consumption, and it differs from the Ethnocentric Mode by involving some level of recognition, but with a manipulative agenda. It is exemplified by Owen Flanagan’s *The Bodhisattva’s Brain: Buddhism Naturalized*. As a self-ascribed cosmopolitan philosopher Flanagan draws inspiration from various wisdom traditions of the world but does so through his devoutly ethnocentric and materialistic lens. He wonders:

Could it be that if you subtract the hocus pocus about rebirth and karma, and bodhisattvas flying on lotus leaves, and Buddha worlds, and nonphysical states of mind, and deities (although not a creator god), and heaven and hell realms, and oracles, and lamas who are reincarnations of lamas, there is no Buddhism left? (4)

In the book he constructs a “naturalistic Buddhism,” believing that it “is possible because it once was, or is now, actual,” “as opposed to some twisted sister of the real thing” (4). He also asserts that “because Buddhist epistemology is empiricist, it has ... the tools internal to itself to naturalize,” so, he comforts, “Buddhism naturalized can be achieved without a hostile takeover” (6). Although Flanagan talks about “Buddhism,” rather than Tibetan Buddhism, he bases his impression on and tacitly represents Tibetan Buddhism. First, the name of the book reveals an orientation to a Mahayana strand, then, his rationale for writing the book is a follow-up on his encounter with the Dalai Lama, and finally, more than a half of the books he refers to on Buddhism, focus on Vajrayana.

Despite similarities to Batchelor’s treatment of Tibetan Buddhism, Flanagan does not consider himself a Buddhist, but undertakes to find out what benefit “finite material human animals” can derive from Tibetan Buddhism. Under this manipulative agenda, the Control Mode frames the Other in a subordinate position, where A decides how B should be altered, and whether a “hostile takeover” is necessary.

The analysis of the preface and introduction of *The Bodhisattva’s Brain* reveals the author’s ascribed position: a detached, but authoritative observer. Flanagan starts what he calls his “opinionated interpretation” and “a credible primer” (xiii), aimed at naturalists and philosophers, interested in Buddhism “only or mostly as a form of mental hygiene and/or moral self-improvement and self-indulgence” (xiii), the two goals he considers in line with Buddhism and even with each other. Additionally, to the “hocus pocus” in Buddhism, he is also critical about claims that meditation makes “Buddhists the happiest people in the world” (6), as well as a view that (neuro-) science alone can help humanity achieve flourishing (i.e., *scientism*). Such perspectivization allows Flanagan to procure a position of impartiality and expertise in the eyes of the reader. He is so vocal

about his impartiality, that he detaches himself astronomically: “I set myself this role—a sort of epistemologist-participant observer from the planets of analytic philosophy and twenty-first-century cognitive science” (x).

Based on this asserted authority, Flanagan continues to build his main argument, on which the rest of the book depends: his naturalized Buddhism is actual. The foundation for the interpretation he constructs is a rhetoric device and a topos, nomination—specifically, providing his own definitions of key terms. First, he gives very liberal definitions of ethnocentrism and anachronism, making it sound like any person in their sanity would fall under the description of an ethnocentric and anachronist, and invites a reader to “allow it” (1), as if it were a treat, not a problematic view. He evokes a dichotomy between natural and supernatural, reducing the latter to a list of pejorative concepts he does not believe in, from rebirth to “village demons” (2). Conflating key postulates of Buddhist philosophy, such as rebirth, with mock terms for folk beliefs and *thangka* painting (“bodhisattvas flying on lotus leaves,” (3), is another topos employed to mark the part of the Oriental Other he wants to eliminate.

This way, Flanagan’s Other is two-faced. He describes part of it as “philosophically extremely sophisticated, even credible,” “contains a metaphysic, an epistemology, and an ethics—a way of conceiving the human predicament, human nature, and human flourishing—that is deep and not simply superstitious nonsense” (xi). The other part he defines as exactly such nonsense. He describes this other part using topoi of miniscule, and common sense, beyond argumentation. Additional emphasis is attained by alluding to issues between science and fundamentalist Christianity: referring to people as “human animals” or claiming that his naturalized Buddhism will not contradict Darwinian theory. Instead of defending his materialist position, Flanagan gives an impression, that, like evolution of species, materialism is backed by empirical evidence. The connection between Buddhism’s credible elements, such as ethics, and its metaphysical claims, such as rebirth and karma, remains off stage.

Rhetorically created dichotomies and abundance of evaluative labelling, shown above, profess an intellectual superiority of the author and his target audience and are disguised as analytical categories in argumentation, directing the Occidental reader to accept the authority of Owen Flanagan over Buddhism ahead of the authority of Buddhists themselves.

Dialectic mode

In the dialectic form of relationship, the difference is acknowledged and respected, but contradiction is still sharp. Therefore, two different worldviews can give rise to either a hybrid version of the two ($A + B = C$), or an enriched version of themselves ($A + B = A$ or $A + B = B$). Yoshikawa (1987, 320) describes the first case as “the ideal form of dialectic unity,” where the different entities create a new formation, “which is unique and transcends the differences of both A and B which are lost in C.”

To illustrate the true Dialectic Mode ($A+B = C$), I chose a recent book by Ken Wilber on integral theory, *Religion of Tomorrow. A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions* (2017). Wilber started as a transpersonal psychologist/philosopher, has written many popular books on spirituality, practiced meditation with many teachers, including Tibetan Buddhist ones, and likes to draw on Buddhism in his works. He is inspired by the Buddhist path to enlightenment, and although he does take the idea seriously, he is also concerned that only focusing on soteriology ignores the baggage of knowledge we possess as a civilization on psychological, social, and technological human development, which mainly originated in the West. Therefore, he talks about Waking up and Growing up, as two parallel paths. In *Religion*, Wilber’s idea is that “great adepts and ancient sages” of all major world religions had the common goal “to radically free men and women from suffering itself

and introduce themselves to their own True Nature” (3), but the teachings of these traditions, he says, are divided into exoteric and esoteric ones. Unlike the much-needed esoteric teachings, the exoteric ones, Wilber argues, “as humanity continues to mature, it increasingly finds these teachings embarrassing and silly” (13). However, he uses “exoteric” not with respect to the *sutric* teaching, following the traditional distinction, but to the mythological thinking, and extrapolates it on all world religions. This looseness of terminology is specific to his writings (Meyerhoff 2010). His suggestions make up his staged model, which should fill the spiritual gap of the West, bringing up the best in (Eastern) religious traditions. Although Wilber recurrently refers to other religions, his interest clearly lies with (Tibetan) Buddhism, which the book deals with “as a concrete instance” (1). Wilber positions himself as an authority (another example of perspectivization), who has “practiced virtually all of the world’s great religions to varying degrees” (7), and an innovator in religion and philosophy. In this way, the meanings of Tibetan Buddhism become universalized onto all world religions and worldviews, inviting readers, whose spiritual socialization happened outside of Buddhism. In my analysis this device was called “selling strategy,” and it is rhetorically fulfilled through universalizing religious notions: “This Great Liberation was also known by various names—Enlightenment, Awakening, moksha, kensho, satori, metamorphosis, emancipation, salvation” (3).

The hybrid that Wilber constructs largely relies on what he identifies as “esoteric” Tibetan Buddhism and achievements of the West. His black and white contrasting of the two sides of the Other, like in Flanagan’s book, creates an impression of the two sides as being objectively independent both, of each other and of the author as the cake-slicer. This highly charged contrasting is among many “selling strategies,” because it allows for moving aside potentially less marketable elements.

The Occidental Self is portrayed as resting upon monolithic “modern and postmodern facts” (6), but experiencing a *lack*, being in danger of losing its spiritual traditions: “Western culture has lost its own sources of Waking Up” (12). Wilber employs statistics to show how religion in the West is rapidly disappearing, and would go extinct from misunderstanding, but for his work (6). He sells his “Fourth Turn” of Buddhism by claiming its urgency for Buddhism’s survival:

Whether Buddhism actually takes a “Fourth Turn” or not, of course, depends upon Buddhism itself. But as the years stretch on, and it increasingly becomes longer and longer than a thousand years since new truths have been added in a new turning, the more likely it becomes that Buddhism itself will be seen as increasingly obsolete, out of date, out of touch, outmoded (7).

In this way, uniting the two needs—the one of the West in the vanishing spiritual opportunities and the one of Buddhism in its continuation—Wilber proposes his Integral Theory, a C he constructed from merging A and B, as a unique and certain solution. The uniqueness is enhanced through a language of “unfolding” such as in “hidden maps” (9), and the certainty through objective language, such as comparing the stages to a grammar of a language (8). He concludes his pitch with a call: “Please, join me in taking steps that hopefully will help prevent perhaps the greatest catastrophe in the humankind’s history, won’t you?” (16). These tools serve a purpose of advancing Wilber’s novel spiritual model as a uniquely universal and comprehensive solution for the ills of the West and an anti-aging remedy for Buddhism.

“In the first pseudo-dialectical outcome, A fuses into B and loses its own identity to become part of B. This type of unity may occur as a result of A’s blind or selfless devotion or loyalty to B” (Yoshikawa 1987, 320). A substitutes its framework with that of B. A good illustration is the *Essentials of Tibetan Buddhism* by a converted Englishman, Lama Jampa Thaye. The first indicator

of this dialectical outcome is, of course, the very name of the author. Unlike the previous examples, the author is actually a loyal practitioner and a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, with decades of experience in the tradition, a PhD in Tibetology, and the status of a Western lineage holder in Sakya and Kargyu traditions. His book starts with a foreword by his root lama Karma Thinley, handwritten in Tibetan, calling Jampa Thaye “the Lord of Scholars”(i) and hoping that “all who study, reflect and meditate upon [the book], will come to enjoy unchanging happiness.”² His introduction, “written from the inside of the tradition, but aimed at modern Western audience” (3), makes a case for Tibetan Buddhism “as a science of mind and a basis for new civilization, built on wisdom and compassion” (3). He admits the crisis of religion in modern times: “Many spiritual traditions appear to have lost their effectiveness. Yet the Buddha’s teaching, especially in its Tibetan tradition can speak to all of us, whether we are rich or poor, old or young, male or female” (3). He warns that Tibetan Buddhism is a Western term for what in Tibet is called *dharma*, which he simply translates as “the truth” (4).

Jampa Thaye’s favoritism is evident from the very beginning of the book and is problematic because the author does not explicitly position himself in relation to the topic. Since unlike other examples, his book is an actual introduction to Tibetan Buddhism; its narrative has an authoritative and factual style. A Tibetan Rinpoche acknowledging Jampa Thaye who explained “how we are to practice the three vehicles” (1) solidifies the author’s subjective judgements as fair. Thaye grounds his account of the history and the spread of Tibetan Buddhism, including its coming to the West, almost solely on the emic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism (opposed to the “Lesser Vehicle”³ (9) and the Chinese competitor (Chan) (16)), specifically his own lineages (opposed especially to Gelug), with an additional emphasis on lay tantric practice (opposed to monastic orthodoxy). Thaye’s description of the Buddha’s life, and the spread of Buddhism would be understandable for a religious figure with no education in religious studies, and knowledge of epistemological frameworks of methodological atheism/agnosticism. His account is sizzling with spirits, guardians, water dragons, magic powers and blessings as key actors and factors. An example of an emic religious account appearing unapologetically as a factual historical one, is the biography of the “second Buddha” (4, 13), Padmasabhava. It starts with “his magical appearance as an eight-year-old boy on a lotus flower in the middle of Lake Dhanakosha” (13), through his extensive training in the Three Vehicles of “Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana” (14), his arrival in Tibet, where the “native Tibetan deities rose up to him” and were “overcome by his magical power,” “becoming the guardians of Buddhism in Tibet.” It culminates in Trison Detsen’s⁴ “robes bursting into flames at a glance of Padmasambhava” (14), due to the former’s reluctance to perform prostrations before the master. He connects the legends to the present by framing the tradition among some Tibetan Buddhists of celebrating the Day of Padmasambhava as follows:

He told them in particular that on the sacred tenth day of each month he would come riding on the rays of the sun from the Palace of Lotus Light to bless his faithful disciples. Such was Padmasambhava’s promise—a promise that has remained unbroken to the present day. (16)

However, Thaye mentions the mystical reflections of Tibetan Buddhism in the culture of the Western spiritualist movement with strong disdain, using words like “mystical hokum,” “theosophical jiggery-pokkery,” “fetid imagination,” “lurid accounts,” and attributing to them “a legacy of misunderstanding” (89-90). The author sides with the Oriental Other and distances himself from the Occident. The latter is discussed scarcely in his book, but the text communicates the sense of the West losing its spiritual component and being in the need of *the truth*. Even the chapter on Tibetan Buddhism in the West represents a description of the Tibetan Buddhist sects (Gelug, Kagyu, Sakya

and Nyingma). Thaye describes the “successful” cases of Tibetan Buddhism establishing itself in the West, including the notorious ones of Chögyam Trungpa and Osel Mukpo, as well as Sogyal Rinpoche, but avoids mentioning the scandals around these teachers (e.g., Bell 2002). This is an example of how his ethical framework is shifted towards the Orient.

By giving emic religious accounts of the origins of Mahayana and Vajrayana, Thaye positions the significantly later types of texts as teachings of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. His description of other Buddhist traditions, such as Theravada and Chan/Zen, reflects emic perceptions of Tibetan Buddhists. The former is only referred to as Hinayana (or Lesser Vehicle), and defined in opposition to Mahayana, which he superciliously posits to be aimed at those “whose understanding of the teachings was more penetrating,” “extraordinarily profound and vast” (8-9). He presents Mahayana through the emic religious account of the debate that, as the story goes, happened in Tibet between the followers of Indian and Chinese strands of Mahayana. Thaye writes: “The Chinese masters taught that enlightenment was immediately accessible merely through the cessation of conceptual thought” (16), creating an unfair picture of Chinese Buddhists. Throughout chapters 1 and 5, Thaye seems to make a statement for lay tantric Buddhism of Sakya and Kagyu lineages as *the truth*.

Yoshikawa (1987, 320) describes the second Pseudo/Dialectic Mode as follows: “A coerces B to become a part of A.” It was not easy to find an example of full “coercion,” because B would be unidentifiable. I looked into different authors, significantly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and eventually chose a book by Richard Davidson (with Sharon Begley) *The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How to Change the Way You Think, Feel, and Live* (2012), because it provided some discussion of the religion. However, a more accurate description of this mode in line with the diagram would be the transformation of A through contact with B. Davidson is a neuroscientist and a best-selling author, who became famous through his research into neurological mechanisms of emotions as well as the brains of experienced meditators. His book exemplifies B becoming a part of A, because he engaged the Tibetan Buddhist meditative insights to accelerate the understanding of the human brain compromising neither A, nor B.

The Occident of Davidson’s narrative is clearly aligned with (neuro-)science, while his Orient is the Tibetan Buddhist establishment, he encountered as part of his personal and scientific exploration. In the Introduction to his book, Davidson presents his dimensions of Emotional Style marking his territory, the neuroscience of emotions, by vindicating his pioneering research over various Occidental and Oriental obstacles. On the Occidental side, he remembers his interest in the role of the prefrontal cortex in emotions in the 1980s being “a good way to end a scientific career, not begin one” (xvi), and ridicules psychology “churning out classification schemes with gusto lately,” which he finds “light on scientific validity” (xii). He is also ironic about his pioneering research on meditation, recalling the public interest in the complementarities between science and “ancient Eastern philosophies” and how “most academic scientists dismissed it as trash,” so he remained “a closet meditator” (xvii).

The Orient is constructed only sporadically throughout the book, but in the same gently ironic fashion. For example, Davidson describes the vicissitudes he and his co-researchers had to go through to recruit participants for the study on long-term meditators, even despite the Dalai Lama’s interest and call for such research, starting from merely geographic and climate obstacles, to cultural and religious factors complicating his exploration. He describes his work with research participants where Rinpoche 1 claimed his meditation to be “mediocre at best (something he attributed to a gallbladder problem)” (188-189), leaving the scientists without any data. Rinpoche 2 blamed their colleagues for having killed his friend by drawing his blood (he died three months after taking part in another research project, involving a blood test). Describing these vicissitudes Davidson refrains from judgement, preferring explanations like “humility is a core value of Tibetan Buddhism.”

The new category Davidson draws in his book is an A, enhanced by B. His Emotional Styles dimension is not only rooted in hard sciences, but also in the insights from his work with Tibetan Buddhist meditators and teachers, on personal and scientific levels. In his discourse, he achieves a smooth melting of B into his area of A by universalizing many elements he clearly borrowed from the meditators, saying: “we have developed a preschool and elementary school curriculum designed to cultivate kindness and mindfulness” (x). A glance at his model invites suspicion that some of the universal traits are inspired by Tibetan Buddhism, for example: “Attention: how sharp and clear your focus is” (xii). Davidson brings up factors and people, who served as bridges in his pioneer work, such as his co-adventurers, friends, and research subjects, like Dr. Alan Wallace, Dr. Cliff Saron, Dr. Matthieu Ricard, as well as Sopham Rinpoche, “a fifty-four-year-old monk from Bhutan who agreed to fly to the United States just for this [his research]” (212). He does that by placing the research colleagues in both A and B: “he [Matthieu Ricard] understands the need for a control group and how to do a linear regression but is also an adept meditator” (191).

Davidson’s style of perspectivization in the Introduction is to describe his journey as a bold researcher going against the mainstream in psychology towards natural-scientific publicly significant research, as well as through the cultural bumps of Tibetan Buddhism towards a scientifically validated view of intensive meditation. In other parts, he describes these bumps, but also the elements crucial for his own scientific journey. The difference of Davidson’s attitude from Ethnocentric and Control modes is not trying to alter B. In his writing, A consumes its elements, without affecting B’s integrity or inflicting judgement upon it.

Dialogical mode

The last mode of the theory, the Dialogical Mode will be illustrated by Alan Wallace’s *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic: A Manifesto for the Mind Sciences and Contemplative Practice* (2012). Yoshikawa rooted his understanding of the Dialogical Mode in Zen Buddhist philosophy and in the principle of nonduality, as well as Buber’s philosophy of I-Thou. In this mode A and B are seen as separate, but interdependent; “differences and similarities are recognized and respected,” and there is a “common sphere of “between” in which East and West can creatively and dynamically encounter and communicate” (Yoshikawa 1987, 321-329).

Alan Wallace is a Dzogchen teacher and a Western intellectual. As a young man, he was ordained as a Buddhist monk by the Dalai Lama and embarked on a six-month meditation retreat under his guidance. Since then he spent another several years in retreat, laid down monastic vows, obtained a BA in physics, and a PhD in religious studies. In his *Meditations* he speaks on the convergence between scientific and contemplative inquiry, creating a basis for his life-long commitment to the scientific study of the mind through introspection. His employment of the categories of East and West is creative. In the Prologue and the first chapter, Wallace dismantles them, juggles them around in his rhetoric, and creates new ones.

Wallace starts his Prologue calling himself a Buddhist skeptic, referring the word to its Greek root, meaning “seeker” or “inquirer.” Even the name of the book contains a playful juggling between categories: the word “meditations” is used as synonymous to “ponderings,” evoking a possible allusion to Marcus Aurelius or Descartes. From the first pages, Wallace secures himself an impartial position of an “inquirer” by showing skepticism not only of scientism, but also of fallacies of the study and practice of Buddhism in both traditional context and in the West (perspectivization, positioning himself in relation to the text). He is emphatic about “dismal outcomes” of “the commodification and marketing of Buddhism in the modern world,” by going over the common pitfalls he sees in different traditions, and highlights the importance of “a delicate balance between

adaptation to new contexts and preservation of core theories and practices” (ix). Weaving his argument, he illustrates claims about Buddhism with examples from Western science, and vice versa. From his avowed “inquirer” position, Wallace breaks the dichotomy of two homogeneous entities, drawing attention to dichotomies *within* both sides, rhetorically juxtaposing the Western religious and ideological dogmatism with scientific paradigm shifts (A), or rationalism and scholasticism with educated empirical observation in the Tibetan Buddhist religion (B). In view of these dichotomies, he constantly bridges A and B as suffering from the same fallacies: “Presumptions of knowledge are the bane of both scientific and contemplative investigation” (x). On the structural level of the text, the whole chapter 2, Buddhism and Science, is separated into headings *Confrontation* and *Collaboration*, to signal the potential for both.

Wallace’s rhetoric is purposeful. In this work, he argues against what he perceives to be a dominant ideology of the Western scientific worldview, metaphysical naturalism, particularly, the domineering materialistic view of consciousness. Although his inspiration for this project stems from his Buddhist practice, he uses metaphors and examples of Western scientific thought to bring forward his points. For example, he describes the introduction of Galileo’s “empirical” inquiry via telescope to the Copernican “mathematical” model to overcome the geocentric model of the universe: “His empiricism soon triumphed over the rationalism of his predecessors” (3). In his rhetoric, Wallace actively resorts to emphatic and provocative metaphors. For example, here:

Some contemporary philosophers of mind, such as Searle and Flanagan, have sought to reconcile a vestige of free will and human dignity with the depersonalizing and demoralizing implications of materialism. Their deductive reasonings are displays of human ingenuity on a par with medieval theologians’ attempts to reconcile their beliefs in predestination with their unquestioning belief in a merciful and omnipotent God. (10-11)

Comparing the ways of prominent philosophers to those of their antagonists, he employs nomination and predication, and giving these ways ironically neutral names, like “deductive reasonings” is mitigation. The alternative he proposes is dialogue and cooperation: “if scientists wish to understand the nature of choice and volition, they must depend upon rigorous observation of mental processes of choice and volition along with the study of their neural and behavioral correlates” (11). He uses the topos of danger to enhance the need for his input: “...the illusion of knowledge that the mind is physical has delayed the revolutionary development of the mind sciences and may have delayed progress in other branches of science as well” (14).

The presentation illustrates the Dialogical Mode, because Wallace calls for an investigation “through cultures” (Yoshikawa 1987, 329), without a dilution of either the Western scientific rational thought or the Buddhist empirical exploration. Although, like other authors, Wallace has a pursuit, which his language is employed to promote, his quest is in line with Yoshikawa’s understanding of a dialogical intercultural communicator being “an active and creative agent” (328). His investigation is rooted in the idea of fluidity of phenomena, rejecting a fixed essentialist understanding of both the Orient and the Occident. Wallace’s rhetoric still cannot avoid using essentialized categories, like “science” or “Buddhism,” but unlike the previous authors this book highlights them and breaks them apart.

Concluding remarks

If we consider the key feature of Orientalism to be a reliance on the taken-for-granted dichotomy of East and West as essentially opposing categories (King 2005), a perfectly Orientalism-free discourse

might be hard to achieve. The examples for the first two modes demonstrate the mechanism of domination highlighted by Lopez (1994, quoted in Mullen 1998): the need to recover and save the parts of Tibetan Buddhism valuable to the perceived Occidental Self, exaggerating the role of the Self in this endeavor, claiming and justifying its authority over the Oriental Other. The analysis shows how the Dialectic Mode in its hybridity or mutual enrichment of A and B still retains the limits of orientalist thinking. Particularly, the Romanticist submission to the idealized Orient, described in the first pseudo-dialectic outcome, rests on the same Orientalist premises (King 2005), as well as opens potentials for ethical abuse and stratagems of Tibetan diasporic clergy (Sharapan and Härkönen 2017; Sharapan and Swann 2019). While the Dialogical Mode carries no obvious exploitative agenda, Wallace still purposefully engages “East” and “West.”

In his essay, King (2005, 287) poses a question: “How might we try to understand the diverse ways of living that represent our common global heritage?” I believe the abolition of East-West categories would be neither possible, nor favorable, simply making the explicit categorizing tacit. However, critical awareness of constructed nature of these categories, their complexity and contingency, as well as inherent power potentials can lead to a detangling of their consequences. Wallace’s approach of breaking down the categories is one response to Orientalism, but most important is a genuine curiosity and respect towards a perceived “Other.”

My analysis, despite following a tentative theoretic structure and leaving space for a more rigorous investigation in the future, disclosed some key variations in how Tibetan Buddhism can be presented in spiritual literature. With this identifying and unpacking of rhetorical constructions of power dynamics, I provided a more balanced “understanding of the diverse ways of living” (287).

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Notes

1. Water dragons in Tibetan Buddhist mythology.
2. nirvana.
3. Hinayana, a common derogatory for non-Mahayana Buddhist schools, often a label for Theravada.
4. Tibetan king.

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