

# Dynamic Encounters between Buddhism and the West

## Introduction

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This issue explores the manifold *encounters* between “Buddhism” and “Western culture” broadly conceived. It aims to problematize the assumption that an “encounter” is the meeting point in a third space between two monolithic, largely isolated, stable entities. Indeed, as the range of articles in this issue demonstrates, *encounters* between “Buddhism” and “the West” have historically been and often actively continue to be dynamic, mutually co-constituting, and inter-dependent. This issue represents one of the first attempts to both analyze such historical encounters, in an effort to highlight their dynamic transculturality, as well as actively engage with new possible dialogues forged through encounters across disciplines, cultures, and time periods. From the perspectives of various disciplines, such as German studies, Japanese studies, music, history of philosophy and comparative philosophy, this issue illustrates the multi-faceted and evolving domains commonly denoted by the umbrella terms “Buddh-ism” and “Western culture.”

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conference as a result of a double-blind peer-review process. We are very grateful to the various referees around the globe whose insightful feedback was crucial for bringing the articles to a high standard, thus making the realization of this issue possible.

The issue is divided into two main parts: **Part I** is titled *Historical Encounters*, and **Part II** *Comparative Encounters*. This choice of thematic delineation was made with the motivation of highlighting two distinct, yet complementary approaches towards Buddhist-Western dialogue. The former approach traces historical encounters across cultural boundaries, generally categorizable as “Buddhist” and “Western”. These essays can be read as sharing a common recognition of the dynamic nature of historical cross-cultural encounters, which are open to continuous re-interpretation and re-reading. As will become apparent, historical encounters between Buddhism and the West have themselves been subject to the dynamic back and forth negotiation that occurs when trying to understand “the Other”. Specifically, **Part I** is subdivided into two main sections: **Section 1) Buddhism and Christianity**, which concerns some encounters between Buddhism and Christianity in the Middle Ages and in 19th-century Japan, at the time of the Meiji Restoration; and then **Section 2) 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century Encounters**, which deals with both Western receptions of Buddhism, intellectually and musically, as well as the Japanese Buddhist (specifically the Kyoto school’s) reception of certain Western philosophical ideas. On the other hand, **Part II** titled *Comparative Encounters* foregrounds an approach to East-West dialogue that is more philosophical, conceptual, and often with an eye on the contemporary world. Analogous to the first part, **Part II** is also divided into two main sections: **Section 3) Japanese Buddhism and Western Philosophy**, which examines certain resonances between Japanese Buddhist-inspired philosophy and present day Western philosophical narratives in an effort to dynamically engage cross-culturally with issues around ethics, ontology, and technology that affect humans. Then **Section 4) Philosophy as a Way of Life** is the final section of this issue, which also engages comparatively with Buddhist and Western philosophical systems in an effort to highlight the importance of re-imagining what “philosophy” means in the first place through the specific articulation of its role not just in conceptual, theoretical, and abstract thought, but as a way of living as well. In what follows, we will provide brief summaries of each essay so that the reader might get a general idea for the layout of this issue as well as a more concrete understanding of the kinds of topics explored herein.

**Section 1) Buddhism and Christianity** within **Part I Historical Encounters** begins with Albrecht Classen’s essay *Early Encounters with Buddhism: Some Medieval European Travelogue Authors Offer First Insights into a Foreign Religion. Explorations of an Uncharted Territory*. This article explores the encounters between Medieval Christendom and Buddhism, by taking into account some of the main travelogues of the period such as Marco Polo’s *Travels*, the anonymous

*Niederrheinische Orientbericht*, Odorico da Pordenone's *Relatio de Mirabilibus Orientalium Tatarorum*, and Mandeville's *Travels*. On the one hand, Polo's *Travels* convey two main teachings of Buddhism such as karma and rebirth. On the other hand, contrary to Polo, the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* underlines that rebirth does not involve just humans but animals too. Buddhism's peculiar relationship with animals is emphasised by Odorico da Pordenone and Mandeville as well. Through a historical lens, Classen's paper highlights the effort made by Christian writers to understand and explain to themselves their encounters with the Other – an effort that could be read as itself an exemplification of the dynamic negotiation inherent in any cross-cultural encounter.

Moving from the Middle Ages to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Japan, **Section 1)** also features Tomoe I. M. Steineck's paper *Declaring Buddhism Dead in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The Meiji Oligarchy and Protestant Mission in Japan*, which focuses on the German Liberal Protestant mission in Japan between the 1880s and early 1890s, highlighting its contributions to the project of the Meiji Oligarchy aimed at eradicating Buddhism from the country. Steineck's essay foregrounds the malleability of Christian-Buddhist worldviews across particular social, political and economic contexts, which in Meiji Japan exemplify the dynamic encounter between Protestant-Buddhist narratives that largely led to the latter's marginalization for political and economic reasons.

**Section 2) 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century Encounters** begins with Iain Sinclair's essay titled *Between Awakening and Enlightenment: The First Modern Asian Buddhist and the First Buddhist Englishman*. Here Sinclair exposes the historical collaboration between Paṇḍita Amṛtānanda, a Newar Buddhist native of the Kathmandu Valley, and Brian Houghton Hodgson, the East India Company's envoy in Kathmandu, to describe the last form of Buddhism surviving on the Indian subcontinent to Western audiences. Resonating with the theme of the dynamic negotiation of mutual understanding through historical encounters, we find a general effort on both sides to bring Buddhist worldviews into the rational discourse of Enlightenment philosophy – an effort that exemplifies the dynamically evolving understandings of what it means to be “Buddhist” or “Western”.

Carrying forward the theme of the dynamism in Buddhist-Western historical encounters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but this time in the domain of music, we turn to Julian Butterfield's article *Sublime Disappearances: Feeling Buddhism in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Western Music*. In this essay, Butterfield aims to show that the reception of Buddhism in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also happened through the medium of feeling. The two main protagonists of this undertaking were the composers Wagner and Buck. They both endeavoured to accommodate Buddhism to Western audiences' expectations by resorting, in their own way, to the aesthetic discourses of the sublime, which was dominant at their time.

Lastly, the final paper of this section that also concludes **Part I** is Niklas Söderman's *Absolute Nothingness and World History: Universalizing Asian Logic as*

a *World-Historical Mission*. Söderman aims to show that the Kyoto school's founder, Nishida Kitarō's work, might be valuably read as expressing Buddhist insight through a framework of Western philosophy in an effort to reach universality. Through a historical exploration of 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, Söderman invites us to consider the often unforeseen dynamic effects of historical encounters, such as how Nishida's efforts, despite his own attempt towards universality in dialogue with the West, were received within wider Japanese intellectual discourse as an exemplary of Japanese particularity that was on a par with or beyond what was seen as "Western".

Next, we leave behind the historical lens of Part I and move to **Part II** entitled **Comparative Encounters**. Here we begin to shift our lens to attempts of bringing various features of Buddhism into dialogue with some Western philosophical milieus. Specifically, **Section 3) Japanese Buddhism and Western Philosophy** attempts to bring features of these traditions into dialogue in an effort to shed light on certain philosophical issues that are crystallized through such intercultural approaches. Specifically, we find comparative encounters between Zen master Dōgen and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as Timothy Morton's object-oriented ontology (OOO) and Zen master Sen no Rikyū, and Heidegger's philosophy of technology with Japanese Buddhism. This comparative theme is carried forward in **Section 4) Philosophy as a Way of Life**, which likewise utilizes an intercultural lens in an effort to show how the idea of philosophy as a way of life could be grounded in the dynamic dialogue between the Pyrrhonian tradition of ancient Greece and the Madhyamaka Buddhist tradition of classical India, as well as the transcendentalism of Edmund Husserl and early Buddhist meditative taxonomies.

**Section 3) Japanese Buddhism and Western Philosophy** opens with Graham Parkes' essay *Befriending Things on a Field of Energies (with Dōgen and Nietzsche)*. First, Parkes briefly reconstructs the idea of the world soul or *anima mundi* in the Western and the Oriental traditions. If in Western philosophy this idea ran from the Pre-Socratics through the Stoics, Epicureans, Plato, the Neoplatonists, Spinoza to Nietzsche and Bergson, in the East it was particularly developed in China by various schools of thought such as Daoism, Neo-Confucianism, Tiantai and Zen Buddhism. Second, Parkes analyses the similarities between Zen master Dōgen and Nietzsche, highlighting how their worldview in terms of fields of energy ultimately allows for an ethics that extends to material objects.

Recognizing the importance of material objects is also a central theme of Jason Morgan's article entitled *How Sen no Rikyū's Zen-Inspired Ideas of Human Placedness and Interpersonal Respect Enable a Human-Present World-Harmonizing (Wa) with Object-Oriented Ontology*. Drawing on the work of Timothy Morton, which extends this recognition of the significance of the non-human world from ethics to ontology, Morgan brings Morton's Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) into

dialogue with the thought of Zen master Sen no Rikyū in an effort to supplement the former's vision of how the human person can subsist in a deanthropocentrized ontological frame. Morgan argues that Sen no Rikyū's philosophy carries resources with which we might better explain how the human person exists qua a human person even in an OOO world.

This attempt to question Western assumptions of a sharp conceptual delineation between the human and non-human is taken up by Tiago Mesquita Carvalho in his *The Question Concerning Technology. A Japanese Reply*. Carvalho brings Japanese Buddhist understandings surrounding the interdependence of the human and non-human into dialogue with some Heideggerian ideas on technology, in order to shed light on issues surrounding the rapid pace of technological progress. Through such a cross-cultural examination, Carvalho examines the possibilities for a more nuanced, globally informed understanding of the place of human beings and nature in the context of the contemporary struggle to safely navigate the quickly growing technological world.

Finally, **Section 4) Philosophy as a Way of Life** begins with Christopher Paone's article *Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonian Approaches to the Skeptical Way of Life*. Paone, after showing the similarities between Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka Buddhism, suggests that we could possibly solve ethical problems related to Pyrrhonism through an intercultural dialogue with Madhyamaka. On the one hand, both Pyrrhonism and Madhyamaka develop a skeptical practice to get rid of our attachments to ontological notions like ultimate reality, with the aim of achieving an inner tranquillity. On the other hand, while for Pyrrhonism there is "no intrinsic link between the skeptic's philanthropic care and skeptical practice", Madhyamaka does relate skeptical practice to compassionate behaviour. Hence, we obtain an enhanced understanding of Pyrrhonism, by actively placing it into a dynamic encounter with Madhyamaka Buddhism.

Lastly, Jason K. Day's *Two Paths: A Critique of Husserl's View of the Buddha*, is the final essay of this issue. Day seeks to demonstrate that *pace* Husserl's reading, the Buddha presents a way of studying consciousness that is a way of life. Specifically, he argues that at the core of Husserl's mischaracterization of the Buddha's phenomenological analysis of being is the distinction between pure theory and pure praxis, which on Day's re-reading of the early Buddhist *Majjhima Nikāya* can be dissolved. By dissolving this Husserlian dualism, Day goes on to demonstrate that "the only criterion for a universal science of being not met by the Buddha is to have a purely theoretical interest in consciousness" and rather than seeing this as a shortcoming, Day suggests we might instead question whether a purely *theoretical* interest is really a necessary criterion for a universal science of being. Like Paone's essay before him, Day too demonstrates the possibility of re-working and re-reading philosophical-religious concepts across cultural and temporal boundaries.

In conclusion, the present issue represents interdisciplinary scholarly approaches to the multitude of ways Buddhism and the West have historically encountered each other and continue to be brought into dialogue today. What is revealed is a multi-layered, complex, ever-evolving understanding of these cluster concepts from the past into the present. Moreover, the dynamic, interdependent, and multi-faceted nature of the encounters themselves suggests the difficulty in categorically drawing sharp boundaries between cultures – a thematic outcome that seems particularly pertinent in our contemporary world, which is in a state of constant negotiation between localization and globalization – a state that, in one way or another, it has always been in. Ultimately, whether we use Buddhist-Western encounters to look back at the past, to explain the present, or to attempt to shed light on the future, the contributions of this issue all demonstrate the indispensable intellectual resources that interculturality and interdisciplinarity carry with them.