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# After appropriation: explorations in intercultural philosophy and religion

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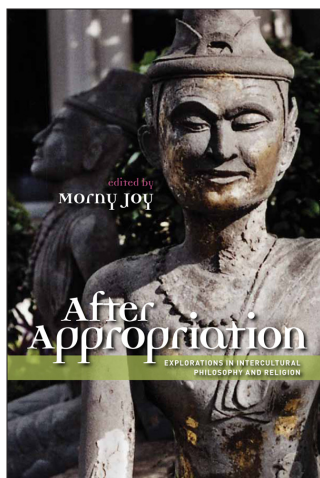
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## AFTER APPROPRIATION: EXPLORATIONS IN INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

edited by Morny Joy

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# The philosopher as stranger: The idea of comparative philosophy

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The title and sub-title of this essay seem to name incongruous themes arbitrarily bolted together – but their unexpected congruence is the theme of the reflections that follow. The idea of the philosopher as “stranger” comes from a comment in Pierre Hadot’s book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*,<sup>1</sup> a book now associated with a philosophical movement that seeks to re-engage with the ancient, practical conception of the philosopher as a seeker after wisdom. This re-engagement, however, is also an expression of dissatisfaction with the contemporary condition of philosophy. The claim I wish to make in this paper is that what we now call “comparative philosophy” is not only an expression of this same dissatisfaction but is also one of the main strands of its development. Comparative philosophy, particularly as it is associated with the work of Henry Corbin, is another *form* of philosophy as a way of life, a particular way of seeking to revitalize the ancient conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom.

## PHILOSOPHERS AND THE “WORLD”

Thus philosophers are strangers, a race apart.... By the time of the Platonic dialogues Socrates was called *atopos*, that is, “un-classifiable.” What makes him *atopos* is precisely the fact that he is a “philo-sopher” in the etymological sense of the word; that is, he is in love with wisdom. For wisdom, says Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, is not a human state, it is a state of perfection of being and knowledge that can only be divine. It is the love of this wisdom, which is foreign to the world, that makes the philosopher a stranger in it.<sup>2</sup>

It is useful and sobering to be thus reminded by Hadot of this ancient image of the philosophers, whose love of wisdom makes them strangers in the world. It reminds us, in the first place, of the subtle resonances of the expression – “the world” – that Hadot here introduces, which is at once a formation of desire and a perspective on reality embodied in a population. It reminds us that “the world” in this sense has *always* moved, as Eliot once wrote, “in appetency, on its metallated ways/ Of time before and time after,” and it also reminds us that this spirit of appetency is what *defines* “the world.” The origins of philosophical estrangement from the world must lie in the exposure to its cynical view of knowledge and opinion as instruments of policy and power. Speaking *truth* to power, *parrhesia*, is one of the virtues of the philosopher, not just because it is dangerous but also because it can hardly be heard.

Hadot’s words are sobering because they imply a high vocation for philosophy that seems now either dauntingly unattainable or foolishly irrelevant, especially in those whose avocation is to teach philosophy in institutions of higher education. Is it possible for an academic philosopher of the early twenty-first century really to be a philosopher under the ancient conception, a member of a race apart, one who has become a stranger because of their love of a “wisdom” defined “as a state of perfection of being and knowledge that can only be ‘divine’”?

The crucial contrast here is with a “human” *imperfection* of being and knowledge. The concept of “the world” might be taken as referring to one form of this imperfection, a condition in which a prior state of being determines what might be appropriated as knowledge, rather than one in

which being progressively alters with the knowledge that is appropriated. But all this language is embedded in the Platonic spiritual tradition whose downfall Nietzsche had announced along with the death of God. Such a sense of “being philosophical,” which we retain in common speech as a way of representing a distinctive and admirable demeanour, particularly of fortitude in the face of adversity, seems otherwise remote from dominant contemporary conceptions of the vocation of philosopher and seems, indeed, closest to religious notions of sainthood.

There are few enough voices now in philosophy that even hint at such a vocation for philosophers as “strangers in the world.” Surprisingly, though, there *is* a hint of a leaner but only an apparently more secular version of this conception found in a short remark in Wittgenstein’s *Zettel*.<sup>3</sup> He observes there that “the philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That’s what makes him a philosopher.”<sup>4</sup> This is at least a conception in which the philosopher is in some way set apart – from those who *are* the citizens of a “community of ideas.” But now, this comment is juxtaposed in *Zettel* to an intriguingly long and quite unexpected quotation from Plato’s early dialogue, *Charmides*, whose topic is how to understand the idea of temperance or temperateness, the Greek virtue of *sophrosune*. What is under discussion in the passage copied out by Wittgenstein is the proposal that *sophrosune* should be defined as “knowledge of knowledge and ignorance.” This is obscured for Anglophone readers by the translation of *sophrosune* as “wisdom,” though the German text has the more accurate *Besonnenheit*, with its sense of the self-possession that belongs to temperateness or temperance. The implication of making this connection between what appears on the surface to be a “purely” practical virtue and that of “knowledge of knowledge and ignorance” is that our states of mind in some fundamental way govern our access to and experience of reality, and do so in a way that is not reducible to the sort of propositional or conceptual knowledge that is independent of the states of mind of the knower. The idea is not that the relevant state of mind can be identified separately from the knowledge to which it gives access. We are speaking, rather, of a *single state* of being and knowledge, in which conduct and demeanour are natural expressions of the state of the knower. This is almost the defining Platonic thought that sets the philosopher apart as a stranger. Their distinctive knowledge is attained through transformations of their inner experience, in the sense that what they come to know and

their interior disposition form a unity, a transformation of their whole being. This makes them *a-topos* and takes them precisely out of “the world,” which is thus defined as the expression of a contrasting mental condition that stands in need of transformation. This is perhaps the point of the contrast between “human” and “divine” in Hadot’s reference to the speech of Diotima in the *Symposium*. But now, why is *sophrosune* or temperance defined as knowledge of knowledge and ignorance? It is time to consider Plato’s greatest metaphor.

One of the most striking aspects of Plato’s image of the cave is that the prisoners are not in a position to see that they are prisoners. We could put it more strongly and say that, were they to be told that they were prisoners, *they would have no reason to believe what is nevertheless true*. The Platonic irony is that we know that the real claim is that our own position is that of the prisoners and that *we have no reason to believe it either*. The truth or reality of our situation is beyond the grasp of our concepts; there is something that transcends or surpasses them. This does not imply that we know nothing – we know a lot about shadows for instance – but only that we are ignorant of the real nature of our situation, or, somewhat differently, are *deluded* in our estimate of it. If we have an estimate of it, as many people do, it features as a kind of baseless assumption that what lies within our fixed horizon exhausts reality. What is striking about the way the metaphor unfolds is that at a certain point the liberated prisoner is brought to a position where he can now *see the mechanisms* that determined the scope of the limited knowledge previously available to him, which he can now see was, by contrast, a restricted knowledge only of shadows. It is just these mechanisms that prevent the prisoners from seeing any reason to believe that they are prisoners, and the ironic implication is that there are analogous mechanisms – of human bondage – that obscure the alleged fact that we are in the same position as the prisoners. The liberated prisoner sees the flames of the bonfire and the traffic on the road whose shadows are cast onto the walls that confront the chained prisoners. One way of understanding this significant moment in the cave, with the liberated prisoner looking back at the scene and at the workings of the mechanisms that limited perception, is that it is an image precisely of the enlargement and liberation that depend upon *sophrosune*. It is also, therefore, a picture of the idea of “knowledge of knowledge and ignorance” since the liberated prisoner at least knows *this*: – he knows both what the chained prisoners

know and what they are ignorant of. In other words, it is the moment when the prisoner has become a stranger to the world of which he was once an inhabitant: he now speaks a foreign language.

These Platonic reflections imply claims about what it is to be a human being at all and about what it is to be a philosopher. The underlying thought is that within us there is a divided and conflicted self, something all too human contending against and resisting something “divine,” a self that at once belongs to and clings to “the world” and at the same time has the possibility of transcending and becoming a stranger in it. The question that remains is whether the ancient conception can be disentangled from what is crudely known as the “two worlds” doctrine of Platonism.

## COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY, COLONIALISM, MULTICULTURALISM

Now so far I have said nothing to indicate that my topic will impinge on the theme of comparative philosophy. However, I said at the beginning that recent interest in the ancient conception grew out of dissatisfaction with a state of the discipline that seemed by contrast sterile and disengaged. I also remarked that the turn to comparative philosophy expressed a similar dissatisfaction. But it also has other grounds, which brings us at once to our contemporary situation, in which the turbulence of geopolitics is complicated by tensions between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, tensions rendered global by the historical processes of colonization, “westernization,” and migration. In our multicultural societies in the West, we find that the spiritual and intellectual division that began to emerge in the eighteenth century exists now as a division within and between both relatively indigenous and relatively recent immigrant communities.

Non-Western countries were exposed not only to the foreign culture of the colonists but also to its tensions and conflicts, and the dismay that many felt in the West as secularization took its course was transferred to the countries that were being “westernized.” It would be naïve to see this dismay as simply moral, since the undermining soft power that accompanies hard economic and military power – a natural expression of “the world” as it moves in appetency – is also a major political reality. Many outside

the West must find it ironic that the expression “the clash of civilizations” was coined in the West. Thus, for example, Roy Mottahedeh<sup>5</sup> discusses the Iranian writer Al-e Ahmad’s sense of the cultural illness that he felt had stricken the towns and cities of Iran. Mottahedeh comments:

For this illness Al-e Ahmad seized on a newly coined word, and he made this word a rallying cry for Iranians from the sixties to the present. The word translated literally, piece by piece, is “West-strickenness,” but even this clumsy translation fails to convey the sense of the Persian original, *gharbzadegi*. “I say that *gharbzadegi* ... is like cholera (or) frost-bite. But no. it’s at least as bad as saw-flies in the wheat fields. Have you ever seen how they infest wheat? From within. There’s a healthy skin in places, but it’s only a skin, just like the shell of a cicada on a tree.”<sup>6</sup>

The Indian philosopher J. L. Mehta, who was a well-known commentator on the work of Heidegger, once referred to the disruptive forces unleashed by the Western “marriage of science and technology.”<sup>7</sup> But it’s not so much the marriage that is the problem as the perspectives and energies that have driven its direction. Mehta asked whether it might not be true that “Western thought ... enters ... like a Trojan horse ... into the thinking of the non-Western world” or “like a virus ... invisibly altering our perception of reality.”<sup>8</sup> And the point here, surely, is the “invisibly.” It *may* be that one’s perception of reality *ought* to be altered, but only, surely, on the basis of what you judge to be compelling reasons. If there is an abrupt caesura, then the old way of thinking remains unresolved, becomes unconscious and works itself out underground. In 1929 Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya<sup>9</sup> had written that cultural subjection occurs “when one’s traditional cast of ideas and sentiments is superseded *without comparison or competition* by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost” (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> The consequence, as he says, addressing his Indian audience, is that “we either accept or repeat the judgments passed on us by Western culture, or we impotently resent them but have hardly any estimates of our own, wrung from an inward perception of the realities of our own position.”<sup>11</sup>



The states of mind that find expression in the dispositions of “the world” are hardly absent in non-Western countries. As we know, present victimhood is hardly a guarantee of present or future virtue. Even the distinctively *moral* anxiety about western sexual excess can also veil a harsh patriarchal impulse to control women. It would be difficult to show that the alleged moral decline of the West extends to the disappearance of exemplars of courage, justice, and compassion. However, the alleged moral decline of the West and the perceived degeneracy of the culture it has exported are quite closely connected to one of the most influential essays into comparative philosophy.

## PLATONISTS OF THE WORLD

Perhaps it would be prudent if I confessed the misgivings I had when I was invited to contribute to this project on the state of “comparative philosophy” – misgivings, I should say, in the first instance, about my own competence as a contributor to what appeared to be a serious and well-developed specialist field of philosophical *scholarship*, but also the sceptical misgivings of an outsider looking in, about the nature and value of the enterprise, its interest for *philosophers*. My misgivings took the form at once of a suspicion that what is called “comparative philosophy” might represent a *dilution of philosophy* and, admittedly somewhat in tension with that, an anxiety that crucial philosophical work might be ignored because its name allows “mainstream” philosophers to shunt it into a specialist siding of marginal interest.

However, and especially when one takes into account historical periods of intense intellectual contact between cultures, whether Greeks and Romans, Europeans and Arabs, Moguls, Hindus and Buddhists, it seems to me that in fact “comparative philosophy” is just *philosophy*, that philosophy is *intrinsically* “comparative” if we mean by that term that it critically compares and examines the merits of ideas whatever their provenance. In other words, philosophy has frequently in its history been refreshed by “cross-cultural comparison.” Indeed the *failure* to engage with other traditions probably stands more in need of explanation than the readiness to do so.

One fairly obvious explanation extends at least to the mainstream of analytic philosophy – it is both deeply implicated in and partly the product

of the Western process of secularization. Philosophers of this tendency are the least likely to feel any need to look abroad, as it were, apart from for the sake of recruitment to its own ranks. And there is no doubt that many have been very happy to be recruited, as Bhattacharya and others have lamented. Those who are most likely to look abroad for sustenance, both to other traditions and to poetry and literature, are those who feel most strongly that something profound is missing, that the focus is too narrow, and that subjectivity, interiority, spirituality, have all gone from it and need to be restored. But this returns us to the *agon* of philosophy in the modern age and the problem of how, if at all, philosophers can resolve the tensions between religion and secularism. Are not these latter notions also the most contestable, the most implicated in the traditional worldview from which western philosophy has rescued us? And if we claim that we are in a period in which an arid, over-technicalized and self-referential philosophy needs to be refreshed, we should state our grounds, refer to some failure in its *adequacy to human reality* and show that it is of the kind imaginatively represented by the case of the released prisoner. This challenge is not easy to meet, since it invites a conversation between different formations of subjectivity. Not to put too fine a point on it, it is invidious to make this claim, as there is a problem in principle about communication between the chained and the released prisoner, and this problem must lie at the heart of our present philosophical difficulties. And claiming to be a released prisoner is not a comfortable public position. Alternatively, and to introduce a Freudian thought, just as we can judge that an individual is showing resistance in the vicinity of repressed material, we must be able to say that there is material, including significant aspects of human experience, that is not yet incorporated into the world of the philosophers. Their account of experience and reality is unsatisfactory because the way they represent how things are is distorting and deluded.

That its practitioners in the West who have felt compelled to coin a special term for an ancient and intrinsic practice implies, then, a *philosophical critique* of “straight” or mainstream philosophy. “Comparative philosophy” is a coinage that belongs nevertheless to the *politics* of philosophy, and we take it seriously, as more than merely wounded and resentful *amour propre*, only when it can show that there is inadequacy or lack in the tradition. This is that it is blind to significant insights into human nature that are available elsewhere, or that its general conception of the possibilities of

human action and experience, and the forms of our general understanding of the nature of reality, stand in need of significant correction.

But the crucial thing that it also seeks to acknowledge is the political reality that we do philosophy now in a global rather than a merely regional context, and in multicultural not monocultural societies, and that a monocultural philosophy is itself as it were a pale reflection of the tendency towards *assimilation* rather than *integration*. Although politicians regularly distinguish between these two terms, they also regularly conflate them. When we hear it declared that Muslims in the UK, for example, must learn to integrate themselves into some host community, it is hard to see how this is not simply a demand for assimilation. Assimilation is a one-way process, whereas integration is a reciprocal process. Nor is integration achieved simply by the presence of different communities living side by side in mutual indifference. It only takes place when the whole is altered by the participation of the parts in dialogue with one another, generating a new *intercultural* reality. The image of this in a philosophy that recognized and benefited from the new political reality is an enlarged and integrated canon.

In the opening remarks of his famous lecture, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, Henry Corbin<sup>12</sup> expresses regret that

[T]here are today all too few philosophers capable of simultaneously grasping several complete cultural unities and sufficiently prepared linguistically to be able to cope with the texts at first hand.<sup>13</sup>

Although this remark may seem to set the standard impossibly high, nevertheless Corbin's rare philosophical bird is surely likely to hatch out in reasonable numbers eventually – from within the various diasporas in the West. Within those diasporas there will be some who experience, on the one hand, the same disappointment with the state of philosophy as Corbin does, and to which I shall return. On the other, some experience a sense of invisibility and cultural dispossession, all in the form of that most painful but creative condition, the crisis of identity, as they live out the temptations and the pressures towards assimilation – pressures that reflect precisely the arrogance, incuriousness and self-absorption that they find in an alien philosophy. This is an unconscious arrogance that is naturally met

by resentment, so that what emerges is the triumphalism of resentment contending against the triumphalism of arrogance, a state of contention which can also divide the individual psyche. Such states of mind are inimical to philosophy, which degenerates instead into aggressive polemics or defensive apologetics.

Meanwhile, by the criterion Corbin offers here about the ability to “cope with the texts at first hand,” most of us in the profession could never be “comparative philosophers.” That does suggest that philosophers should see it as a very particular scholarly specialism of which they can at best be the beneficiaries. Even in the case of the canonical writings of their own traditions, most philosophers depend on critical translations and commentaries by scholarly experts and are vulnerable to the familiar pitfalls of such dependence.

But it is worth recalling that Corbin’s lecture was given at the University of Tehran. I mention this because, although he regrets the shortage of philosophers who are able to cope with texts at first hand, and, although it is important that scholar-philosophers should make such texts available, it is nevertheless *philosophical dialogue* that is fundamental to philosophy and, *a fortiori*, to comparative philosophy. This may seem a rather obvious remark, but I have already commented that philosophy can descend into aggressive polemic or defensive apologetic, so we need some sense of how philosophical dialogue may be distinguished from these activities. It is also possible to be unconsciously one-sided in one’s account of what might be involved in “comparative philosophy,” so that one thinks of it as *us over here*, as it were, *availing* ourselves of the resources of *another* tradition. One does this by mediating its texts to our fellow philosophers in the West, in the manner of Schopenhauer, say, who found inspiration as well as confirmation in Indian Buddhist texts and sought to naturalize them into the language of the Kantian philosophy.

The first person plural is very slippery in this kind of context. For most of this paper I have used it to associate myself with a particular position within analytic philosophy. But parallel conversations have been going on in India, for example, in which “we” reflected on our proper relation to the philosophy that was coming out of the West. What we need to attain is a first person plural whose scope covers all those engaged in this kind of dialogue as they come to their common conclusions and discuss their common experience. We best understand comparative philosophy as involving

participants on different sides of the dialogue. As in general philosophy, the essential act is one of dialogue, i.e., the sort of dialogue that becomes possible when we become conscious of the presence of different notions of reality – and the interests and the possibilities of appropriation belong to both sides in the conversation. For obvious historical and political reasons, however, the position, if not the interests of the participants, may be different, and this is, again, in familiar ways inimical to the conditions for the possibility of genuine philosophical dialogue.

So, in talking about what I take to be fundamental to philosophy I do so at a particular cultural moment and what I say has the status, not of a pronouncement, but of an overture to someone else who, for current purposes, must be taken to come from a different tradition, and who is now, and this is a matter of both our attitudes, free to respond. I say “both our attitudes” because the demeanour and position of the different parties to a philosophical dialogue can inhibit or promote the freedom to engage in it. But it is worth repeating that we are not dealing with a general notion of dialogue here, but of specifically philosophical dialogue – and in proposing a Socratic conception of philosophy I invoke a form that involves a robust *agon* between the parties to the *elenchus*.

But there is a serious question about what constitutes the freedom to engage in this kind of dialogue. It is one thing to be capable of conducting the *elenchus* and another to be capable of submitting oneself to it. For one thing, there is no assumption of equality between the participants – indeed, it involves an *unequal* relationship, one between a teacher and a pupil, in which the teacher by various means seeks to dislodge the pupil from a condition that obscures their view of reality or of how things really are. But the inequality does not derive from the fact that one person formally holds the role of teacher and the other the role of pupil. Rather it is determined precisely by a more adequate awareness of how things are, by who has something to teach and who something to learn. The premise, to return to the beginning, is that one person can see the obscuring mechanisms and the other cannot. It is vitally important to realize that we are not talking in the *elenchus* simply of changing someone’s beliefs. As I also mentioned at the beginning, we are talking about a transformation of the person, of a kind that reflects not greater knowledge but greater understanding reflected in a changed demeanour. But the upshot of this is a curious one that is extensively discussed in the work of Kierkegaard,

viz. that communication between the parties represented by the liberated prisoner and those still bound by the mechanisms of bondage has to be artistic and indirect. It is not a matter of telling someone something, or defeating them in argument, and there is, no doubt, to recall a famous Zen story, many a professor whose cup is already full.

Corbin's Tehran lecture gives eloquent expression to a disappointment and alarm about the moral condition of the West, the processes of westernization, and the state of philosophy, which, in his case, is a particular secular direction of post-Hegelianism. But as we have seen, Corbin's sense of danger, which no doubt echoes Heidegger's vigorous warnings, is and has been no less felt by thinkers of different cultures who have seen the engulfing effects of "westernization" on those cultures. Corbin's proposal for comparative philosophy represents a politico-religious agenda, a call as it were to arms to thinkers of affected cultures against the encroachment of an occidental ideology, impelling a conception of philosophy that unconsciously conceals what should be the task of philosophy to reveal.

It seems to me that Corbin's notion of comparative philosophy is that of an essential preliminary to the enlargement of a canon. It is the idea of bringing into contact recognizable philosophical traditions that are relatively unknown to one another, traditions that have diverged at some point in the past and lost contact, or traditions that have developed independently but are capable of a fruitful and challenging engagement with one another. In other words comparative philosophy is always aimed towards a new condition of philosophy itself. I say *preliminary* because it stands at the threshold of the enlargement or expansion of a canon. I do not mean here *our*, as opposed to someone else's, canon, but rather the idea of a shared, global canon – so that, for instance, and to use Corbin's own example, both the Cambridge and the Persian Platonists would feature in a common history of Platonism. Once there is a fruitful engagement and mutual integration, then that particular task of the comparative philosopher is over. There is a mutual incorporation, not a continued comparison, of what constitutes a canon in the first place.

I am already of course using some of the language deployed by Corbin, in particular the distinction, familiar from the work of Heidegger, between concealment and revelation, and a conception of philosophy according to which the philosophical task is by no means to conceal from view but to bring to light, to show what is hidden in and by the appearances. And if

we are to take this further with any degree of philosophical seriousness we must surely now turn to the interrogation of the perceived inadequacy to reality and experience of the dominant and threatening condition of philosophy. By putting it in those terms, of course, I am giving less than its due weight to Corbin's sense of the gravity of our predicament. His eschatological Christian Platonism comes out fairly clearly in this passage:

An agnostic humanity cannot organize the world by giving itself the same goals as does a humanity whose effort goes into projecting an arc the far side of which penetrates beyond this world of ours, a humanity which escapes the perils of history gone mad from losing direction.<sup>14</sup>

Corbin's "agnostic humanity" appears here to be in possession only of values that we would associate with "the world" and his agenda for a comparative philosophy is an appeal to fellow Platonists to help stem the tide of an encroaching nihilism set to overwhelm the approaches of the divine. But as we have seen, the major philosophical task is to re-examine the nature and implications of this intellectual fission.

I should want to see whether one can articulate a middle position between this nihilism and Corbin's eternalism, to see whether an "agnostic humanity" need after all be a humanity entirely lacking *gnosis*. It may be that our philosophical labours are better spent seeking to articulate how we can look back at this world and transcend it in the way that the released prisoner is forced to do, so that we become strangers, and in that sense genuine philosophers, just to the extent that we follow the transformation of being and knowledge without seeking to discern the lineaments of another, higher, world. We can do this, it seems to me, without in any way denying that there could be such a world, a world which is unchangeable and ultimately real.

This is the moment at which I might be expected to introduce the Buddhist philosophical traditions into the discussion, and to do so would be an obvious move towards expanding the terms of Corbin's Comparative Philosophy beyond those of the Platonic traditions that developed within the monotheistic religions. I refrain, however, not simply because I do not have the scholarly or linguistic competence or inclination but because when I started to think of myself as a Buddhist in the mid-seventies it



seemed important to conduct an experiment which I think now was a groping attempt to establish an authentic connection between life and philosophy.

My immediate thinking was based on a personal reaction to what Western Buddhist artists of my acquaintance were doing, viz. educating themselves into the traditional techniques of Buddhist artistic forms, especially Tibetan. Though it was hardly for me to say, I thought that they should simply allow their painting to emerge naturally from their practice, to see, in other words, whether there might not be some creative, imaginative response to their Buddhist experience in their seeing and their painting. Simply to copy the forms of traditional art seemed to be analogous to the complaint of Bhattacharya and others about Indians becoming expert in analytic philosophy, say, and allowing this enterprise to overlay the creative currents of their own cultural forms. Perhaps the analogy is misconceived, but nevertheless, rather than making myself familiar with the various Buddhist philosophical texts and the debates between the various Buddhist and Brahmanical schools, which, to be honest, I had no appetite for, I thought that I ought to see to what extent my Buddhist practise impinged upon my thinking, to see whether it made a difference to my seeing and thence to my attempts as a philosopher to articulate that vision. This also excuses me rather conveniently from having an opinion about abstruse disputes between the Buddhist schools. But it was hardly an experiment that could be conducted in a vacuum – the cultural and philosophical background to it was precisely the loss of that faith so vigorously reasserted by Corbin. To put it rather pointedly, I was not about to sit in silence on a meditation mat and become aware of the presence of God, though it was also humbling to discover at last a degree of interior silence that led me to understand a little of the conditions which might have led me to talk just in those terms.

But the underlying premise of Buddhist practice – and the idea implicit in the core Buddhist metaphor of *bodhi* or “awakening” – is the simple human truth that states of consciousness determine the forms and limits of knowledge and experience. Of course, it is a very particular application of an alleged general truth, that very particular states of consciousness do indeed constrain the possibilities of action and experience – possibilities that can be glimpsed when the *kleśa* (defilements) are suspended.



But all this talk of danger and threat is already the expression of a partially suppressed voice and derives from its perspective, a perspective that must, if we are prompted at all by this language of danger, be evanescently present to us. The complication here is that sometimes one is tempted to write as though there were some possibility of *enlargement* or *expansion*, which it is difficult to see how we can discern if our vision is so narrow. It is rather the other way round, that we see a constant danger of a *narrowing* vision because we see it *being narrowed*, again either evanescently or overwhelmingly, both in ourselves and in others. We are in that case all released prisoners, some of us, though, more reluctant than others to acknowledge the truth of our situation.

## Notes

- 1 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).
- 2 Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 57.
- 3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).
- 4 “Der Philosoph ist nicht Bürger einer Denkgemeinde. Das ist was ihn zum Philosophen macht” (Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §455). For a discussion see my “Wittgenstein’s Temple: Or How Cool is Philosophy?” in *Philosophical Investigations* 30, no. 1 (2007): 25–44.
- 5 Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985).
- 6 Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, 296.
- 7 J.L. Mehta, *Philosophy and Religion: Essays in Interpretation* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Philosophical Research, 1990), 38.
- 8 Mehta, *Philosophy and Religion*, 38.
- 9 K. C. Bhattacharya, “Svaraj in Ideas,” reprinted in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1984).
- 10 *Ibid.*, 383.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Henry Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1981).
- 13 Corbin, *The Concept of Comparative Philosophy*, 3.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 10.

