BUDDHIST MEDITATIONS on ISLAMIC Contemplative Paths

LESS TRAVELED ROADS & ABANDONED JUNCTIONS

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FOREWORD

The following chapters reflect a life spent thinking and writing about an area of increasing interest to Westerners because of perceived economic potential and geopolitical threats, but an area little understood and seldom appreciated for its rich culture, its philosophical and spiritual traditions which are treated in these pages. I am speaking of the geographical area bounded by the Central Asian Republics, with Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east, and the Mediterranean Basin with Turkey and the Fertile Crescent in the west, an area of largely tribal populations with different ethnic and linguistic roots. While these populations are very different they share, in their philosophies and religions, many themes, ideas, and practices which Westerners would benefit from a better understanding.

Such an understanding would reveal that this repository of spiritual insight and practice, is less remote than we might first imagine, having gained influence and in turn influencing thought in India to the east, and having had similar vital commerce with Greece and other cultures to the west. While some ideas will seem very new, the continuity of thought throughout the east and west is most compelling and with application may provide a larger, unbroken sense of the spiritual knowledge and practice of our world community.

While the following chapters were first conceived as separate papers, and written over a lengthy period of time, their evolution into this book was an inevitable project waiting to happen.

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Editor
PREFACE

Broadly based on the study of Islam, the articles collected in this book are an attempt to focus on the dynamics of an encounter between innate human awareness and challenges presented by the inevitability of life’s realities.

“The ‘Jains’ of Arabia” draws on ancient Middle Eastern poetic traditions. These are gleaned from the poetry found in the Middle East from archeological finds in Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula, an area connected by the famous spice routes to the relatively more recent poetic traditions recorded in the century that preceded Islam. Both contain allusions to a heroic concept of nonviolence that does not adhere to any religious dogmas as we understand them today, both are precursors to what we can today characterize as a monotheistic approach to faith. Although Islam is the youngest of the three monotheistic religions that sprang forth from a Semitic culture, it has kept many archaic traits that are worth revisiting in order to examine what it is that keeps surviving within our human consciousness and is common to all mankind.

The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Lament over Ur date from a very early period, possibly 3000 BCE, if not earlier. They share a set of unique characteristics that scholars and religious leaders call Semitic. The Epic of Gilgamesh was recorded in two very different languages Sumerian and Akkadian pointing to the fact that there were at least two linguistic groups sharing the same tradition. The Arabs and their modern language are considered the living heirs of that tradition, which has maintained a continuous presence on the Arabian Peninsula up to the present day. It is no wonder that their
sixth century odes still represent for the Arabs a continuation of this ancient strand that bypassed some monotheistic religious dogmas developed in their vicinity.

“Sacred Knowledge in Central Asia” focuses on another area. The intent remains similar, to portray the dynamics of our innate reactions to worldly circumstances as played out for millennia in Central Asia and its caravan routes. “The Place of Doubt in Islam” delves into the universal problem of human doubt as expressed by one of the major theologians and philosophers who hailed from Central Asia and succeeded in introducing this important topic not only into the world of Islam but into the monotheistic West by influencing European thought at the eve of the Renaissance. The rest of the chapters represent a short study of what ethics and contemplative traditions have and possibly do not have in common across this vast geographical and historical span, while the last chapter “Modernity, Islam, and Buddhism Face-to-Face” published in Istanbul Turkey by Remzi Kitabevi in 2007, as the eighth dialog of a series edited by Gönül Ayda-Pultar provides a conclusion that leads into the present day. Dr. Nassiri, has been lecturing at the Pacific School of Religion, founding member the Berkeley Graduate Theological Union since 1996 on history of Islam, Islamic theology, Sufism, Islam and modernity and related comparative topics, such as Islam in conversation with Buddhism, sponsored by the Institute for Word Religions of the Dharma Realm Buddhist University.

The trajectory that led to the these writings began on the Balkan shores of the Mediterranean in the wake of the Second World War, when it became more and more evident that better criteria were needed to assess our common worldviews. A quote from the German existential philosopher Karl Jaspers, who coined the very term “existenz” caught the attention of my generation that was finding its way into adulthood in Yugoslavia, a country nestled between East and West.

The dialectic approach to culture that G.W.F. Hegel had revitalized in the early eighteen hundreds did open a door to fresh thought and its ensuing patterns. However, those age-old carefully
constructed dams meant to protect our perennial mental forms soon began to crack under the weight of the unleashed forces and the onslaught of time. By the fifties of the past century young minds were turned upside down, faced with a simplified form of Hegel’s dialectics as extolled by the socialist establishment on one side, and the shadowy resistance of the romantic and idealized realities of a pre-communist world on the other. Both relentlessly persisted to challenge us.

It is at this juncture that Karl Jaspers caught the attention of the young generation. It was in the fifties when he began weekly broadcasts on Radio Basel warning the world about our human thought trajectories in the following way:

“Three millennia of philosophical history are on the verge of turning into one present. Manifold philosophical concepts hide within themselves a single truth. Hegel was the first to attempt to grasp this unity of thought, but he did this by reducing all of what had happened before him to an introductory level of apprenticeship and partial truth that was meant to reach its peak in his own philosophy.

“Now it has become necessary to understand every individual maturation that philosophical thought reaches in each age. In this manner we will be able to grasp its constancy and not assume that we have conquered past achievements, but that we are capable to accept them as our contemporaries. Only when the whole of philosophy becomes our contemporary do we see that its present is also the manifestation of its source.... Only then can philosophy perceive within the impermanent being that the present and its contemporariness have in their essence that what is always true.”

(Jaspers pp 130-131)
Karl Jaspers’ above quoted caveats against a simplified understanding of Hegel’s dialectics resounded heavily also in the ears of my teachers and my contemporaries as they reverberated between communism and capitalism, one represented by dialectical materialism and the other by existentialism. The most obvious victim for us on the Balkans was the Ottoman Turkish culture squeezed between an East-West divide that saw the Orient as the unquestionable, decadent, dying “other.” Yet, this decadent other was very much alive dancing around us with interesting Arabic words, intriguing architectural feats, bridges breathlessly hewn out of canyons over fast flowing rivers, delicacies offered in the markets and kitchens and school teachers who had the courage to teach us, if not Turkish poetry, then at least Goethe’s famous West-East Divan reminds us that East and West should not be torn asunder.

I decided to study the cultures and languages of the Middle East, even venture beyond, in order to find more subtle threads that possibly form a net around this world giving it buoyancy and the needed strength. I wished to learn how to unravel some of the tangles and grasp the array of tensions that run through such invisible threads that keep this planet alive.

By diligently studying Arabic I embarked into the ancient Semitic world of the Arabian Peninsula and its surroundings that flourished during the distant millennia preceding our monotheistic age. But that was only the starting point of my studies and their ventures which led from Europe, both Eastern and Western, to the shores of Turkey, Iran, India and China depositing me (for the time being) on the Pacific shores of the American Wild West as manifested in today’s California.

The original version of “The ‘Jains’ of Arabia” was an attempt to describe my experience of the gentle challenge that these buoyant tensions presented to me and to my age. They resonated with the pre-Islamic poets of Arabia who lived in a period of time that we Westerners know little about, yet their sophisticated poetry is still a living philosophy. How much better could we describe the
perennial human condition than Shanfara, or even such ancients as Gilgamesh and his search for a Dilmun where ‘the lion kills not the lamb?’ Gilgamesh opens his story by inviting those who can read to climb and carefully examine his city’s ancient walls built long before him yet better than anything that his own age could produce, thanks to the wisdom attained by ancient “wise men” from all parts of the world, while Shanfara tells us of his canter and gallop through a wilderness that transformed him by turning his anger towards mediocrity into the temperament of a gentle doe?

Awareness that all life stems from a common source seems to have been an intuition of mankind. Conclusions posited since earliest times imply that the human mind can obtain this awareness through a conscious effort and it is the lack of such an effort which may well be the root of our anxieties. Aldous Huxley recapitulated and described this subject in his popular work, *The Perennial Philosophy*. This he balanced against a ‘time’ philosophy, which can be achieved:

“With the intervention of eternity on the temporal domain—and eternity cannot intervene unless the individual will makes a creative act of self-denial, thus producing a vacuum into which eternity can flow.”

(Huxley pp 229 and 276)

The cultivation of such an awareness and the moral necessities that it implies, form the basis of most world religions which in their initial purity were and still are very simple. Yet, the consistent maintenance of such a state within each individual and its confrontation with an innate ignorance, create a stumbling block for mankind as well as for its religions.

In our age of careful research and the pursuit of infallible proofs as the basic requisites for scientific conclusions, there is a tendency to explain away all similarities between moral achievements of proto-historic ages as mere coincidences that
simply reveal comparable stages within the isolated life span of various lost civilizations.

The Indus Valley discoveries and its connections with the Middle East as well as with other parts of the world are often treated as distant mysteries of an epoch that bears little if any consequence on the further development of mankind. Such an approach limits comparison to little more than a purely visual experience. Consequently very few attempts have been made to analyze the integral worth of cultures, leaving little room for thought about the ethical and moral energies which motivated their achievements. In more pessimistic moments one is tempted to ascribe these attitudes to the fact that in those remote periods of history man had not yet developed his fancy iron weaponry and sophisticated warfare, therefore there remained nothing familiar for us to compare, or to contrast. If we would allow ourselves to accept the fact that the intellectual aspirations of these ancient city states and their inhabitants were at least proportionate to the technical and economic development of which they were capable, then we would have to agree that the great civilizations of a pre-Aryan past undoubtedly point to inner intellectual, ethical and cultural connections which could have provided a launching pad for our contemporary views on life.

If we refuse to dwell upon the question of moral motivation and intention behind these ancient achievements of humanity, we could tacitly find ourselves condescending to the fact that greed was and remains, the only relevant drive behind human evolution. It seems that the alienation and disintegration we are witnessing today, makes it a necessity to give more credit to the unsolved riddles of the past and start paying attention not only to the technical, but also the moral achievements of mankind. The following articles are an attempt to analyze such inner ties, which ancient and not so ancient civilizations had in common with each other and the present.
References

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SOME YEARS AGO THE DE YOUNG MUSEUM IN SAN FRANCISCO HOSTED AN EXHIBIT ON CENTRAL ASIA. AMONG THE ARTIFACTS THAT ATTRACTED LONG LINES AT THE ENTRANCE, A BEAUTIFULLY PAINTED LACQUERED CASE DREW MY ATTENTION POSING A RIDDLE THAT BEGGED FOR AN ANSWER. THE CAPTION UNDERNEATH THE CASE READ: “SUTRA WITH PAINTED TEXTBLOCK AND WOODEN COVER.” THIS WAS FOLLOWED BY CAPTIONS IN MONGOLIAN, TIBETAN, AND SANSKRIT. THE MONGOLIAN VERSION READ
as follows: “Qutughtu bilig-ün cinadu kijaghar-a kürükgsen naiman mingghatu kemekdekkü yeke kölgen sudur orosibai.” The Sanskrit: “Ārya astasāhasrikā prajñāparamitā sutra.”

The next exhibit was a “Book Cover with Three Buddhas and Two Monks.” It had the same Mongolian and Sanskrit captions as quoted above, that is to say another Qutughtu bilig or in its modern Turkish version: Kutadgu bilig. Then came “Page Catalog Number 52” with the same captions in Mongolian, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, but this time also Manchu. The Kutadgu Biligs went on into the next room linked to what I by now assumed to be Buddhist Prajna Paramita texts.

I was familiar with the Medieval Turco-Islamic text known as the “Kutadgu Bilig,” or “Sacred Knowledge” written in Kashgar in the eleventh century. I could not help asking myself, what is the difference between the Moslem text and these obviously Buddhist ones bearing the same name? The texts in the de Young exhibit were mostly from the eighteenth century Qing dynasty, or the Manchu period. Now, the Manchus were a sinified Turkic tribe closely related to the Tungus Turks, relatives of both the Mongolians and the Tibetans. Slowly the whole puzzle grew more and more intriguing.

My wondering thoughts led to Central Asia and the city of Kashgar where the Kutadgu Bilig for Muslims was written. It is located on the northwestern edges of the Turfan Oasis, on one of the tributaries of the River Tarim. Nestled between the southern foothills of the Tien Shan, and the Altay mountains, this oasis represents both the cultural and geographical center of Central Asia. For Western travelers going east towards China, Kashgar emerges as a major crossing on the Silk Route. It is where the road branches into a northern and southern fork, and thus skirts the Taklamakan Desert to unite again further east in Tun Huang, the gate to China.

Kashgar has been a Central Asian trading post since the days when religions, nations, trade and profit found themselves face to face at a juncture in the middle of this vast geographical
depression east of the Altay Mountains. Today Kashgar falls under the jurisdiction of the People’s Republic of China. The text that I associated with the Turks, was written at a time when they were in the process of accepting Islam.

History

Central Asia has been inhabited by the human race from the Paleolithic onwards. The horse had been domesticated there very early on, and the concept of wearing trousers also originated in the region.

Since history emerged as we know it today, this area has housed two distinct linguistic and racial groups. Scholars of the pre-historic period named them Scythians and Huns. The Scythians supposedly belonged to the white race and spoke an Indo-European language, the Huns apparently belonged to the yellow race and spoke a Turanian or Turkish language that belongs to the Uralo Altaic linguistic group.

Migrations and a nomadic lifestyle seem to have characterized both groups. Their ancestral homes were therefore not as distinct from each other as historians would have liked them to be. Today their respective descendants still inhabit the area, and the only suppositions and theories of races and languages that remain obvious and uncontested, would be the incessant interminglings of humanity that at one time or another took place in Central Asia. René Grousset summarizes well the issues in the introduction to his seminal book, The Empire of the Steppes. (Grousset pp xxii-xxiv)

My questions were nevertheless still pending; is there a connection between Buddhism and Islam? History can enlighten us about facts, but there seemed to be more to this puzzle. As I admired the lacquered boxes in the de Young Museum, my thoughts led me to old Bactria.
Bactria

On the Western side of Central Asia there lays an area known to
the ancient world as Bactria. It encompasses parts of Afghanistan,
the Peshawar Valley, Kashmir and the old Soviet Turkish republics
that are now independent. It is a good starting point for untangling
the human knot that still baffles so many historians, linguists,
religionists, not to speak of conquerors and politicians.

My mind attached itself to Bactria hoping to untangle this knot
that started forming inside my thoughts. Historians who follow the
traces and habits of Alexander the Great are still caught in trying
to unravel and reconstruct his demise in Bactria, as are those
who follow the path of the Great Indian Emperor Ashoka. Ashoka
seems to have had much better luck than Alexander due to the fact
that he abandoned the thought of waging battles as a means for
conquering the world.

Let me start at the beginning of the Common Era since from
this age on we find ourselves on somewhat safer ground. It is a
period that succeeded both the death of Alexander the Great and
the death of Emperor Ashoka. Both sovereigns aspired not only
to rule, but also to transform what they considered to be the
world—and possibly the cosmos. After the deaths of both rulers,
their successors found themselves living side by side in Bactria.
The Emperor Ashoka had renounced violence and transformed
his army into a Buddhist ascetic monastic order that began
flourishing there. Alexander on the other hand, barely a century
before Ashoka, told his soldiers not to return to Macedonia, but to
mingle, settle, marry Bactrian women, form local dynasties, absorb
local cultures and thus maintain law and order not only in Bactria
but throughout the cosmos. He established cities that flourished
thanks to trade. These still bear his name and play significant roles
in the world. Alexander believed that he was following the advice
of his tutor, Aristotle. Ashoka renounced violence after awakening
to the advice of the Buddha. Both were set on bringing peace to the
world, albeit each in his own way.
From these two imperial vantage points—one leaning on trade, the other on monastic orders—it becomes possible to tread on somewhat safer historical ground. The Pillar Edicts of King Asoka are scattered from Central Asia all the way to Syria, while the modern state of India took Ashoka’s pillar as its symbol. Alexander left various encampments in his wake. They are known under names such as Alexandria, Skenderun, (S)kandahar, Üsküdar and Suchidar, depending on local phonetic preferences. When observed purely from a linguistic point of view, these Alexandrias scattered throughout the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia incorporate not only Indo European and Uralo Altaic languages, but also the Semitic ones, such as Aramaic and its descendant Arabic.

**Bactria and the Turks**

For the Turks, the political milieu of Bactria becomes important during the so called Kushana period, which lasted approximately from the first to the third century CE. And that is one of the reasons why I chose this period as my point of departure in the attempts to solve the mysterious puzzle of the Kutadgu Biligs. The Kushana kings were by no means all of the same ethnic origins. Some may have been Greek, some Indian, and some Turk.

The famous Turkish Kushanas were known as the Turuska kings, Kaniska and his descendants being the most notable of the lot. The eminent scholar of Central Asia, Sir Auriel Stein, in his well-known book quotes the famous medieval chronicler Kalhana in order to validate this point:

> “With the names of the three Turuska kings Huska, Juska, and Kaniska, we reach once more terra firma of historical record. The identity of Kaniska with the great Kuśana...of Northwest India so well known to us from the Buddhist tradition...from the inscriptions that have been recognized long ago....”
Kalhana’s accounts preserve data of genuine historical tradition.

(Stein p 76)

The Turuska kings, as they are still known in the lands of old Bactria, portrayed on their coins images from the Indian, the Hellenic, and other pantheons. These keep cropping up in the fields of local farmers in spite of the wars and pestilences that still plague this part of the world.¹ This famous syncretism of the Bactrian pantheon reflects the ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the empire’s population. Mithra embodied Justice, there was Siva, Buddha, Helios, etc.

However, what best characterizes Bactria is Buddhism. Kaniska the most famous of the Turuskas, was well known for his kindness towards and affiliation with Buddhism. His capital was the city of Kabul, constructed on the river by the same name, a tributary of the Sind or the Indus. He was the patron of Buddhist monasteries, the builder of the great stupa, or shrine that houses Buddha’s relics, in Kaniskapura, the convener of the Fourth Buddhist Council held in Peshawar, as well as the founder of the great Buddhist monastery in the same area. The council held under him prepared commentaries on canonical texts that spread across the Hindu Kush Mountains along the trade routes into China. This is the period when majestic monuments were built in Bamyan and Tajikistan. A famous document from that period is the Gandhari Dharmapada, often considered to be the basic text of Buddhism. Its famous opening verse sets the tone:

Our life is shaped by our mind; we become
What we think. Suffering follows an evil
Thought as the wheels of a cart follow the oxen
That draw it.
Our life is shaped by our mind; we become
what we think. Joy follows a pure thought
like a shadow that never leaves.

(Dhammapada 1: 1-2)
These were also the days when the Roman Emperor Hadrian was in power building walls in the British Isles against the Barbarians, and the Silk Route was an active highway between China and Rome, as the two first centuries of the Common Era evolved.

During the so called Parthian/Persian hostilities that were taking place on the Iranian Plateau, the Turuska kings were able to divert trade from Balkh to the Indus River Delta and avoid Parthian skirmishes so that the transport of goods could continue from China to the West through the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf circumventing troubled areas. Thanks to such a maritime bypass, trade was invigorated, as woolen tapestries, glassware, etc. were in turn sent from Rome to China via Basra. (Chattopadhyaya) Contemporary excavations in Bagram provide abundant proof of such exchanges.

Bactria is also known for its art and literature. There is no question that cultural exchanges contributed to a new religious awakening which kept the trade routes alive and relatively peaceful. It was an intricate process of mutual influences, and creative adoptions of new doctrines along new bypasses, with modifications dictated by the impact of local traditions. Literature, thought processes, and architecture that developed along the road should not be ignored, nor does it serve any purpose to deny them.

Kashgar and the Tarim Oasis

Chinese writings provide names of Buddhist sages from Bactria, Sogdia, and Parthia who contributed to the vibrant translation activities that took place in the Tarim Oasis and Kashgar. The commentaries included philosophical discourses that incorporated the many traditions which appeared along the routes and thus contributed to the branch of Buddhism known as the Mahayana, the Great Cart, or the cart that accepts all of humanity and the sentient beings around it, be they divine, human, or subhuman. The greater part of such writings is labeled today as the Prajna
Paramita tradition, or the Perfection of Wisdom. And that was the other operative word that caught my attention in the Central Asian Exhibit of the de Young Museum, mentioned along with the Kutadgu Bilig.

The Persian Sassanian conquest that took place between 240-272 CE, as recorded in the inscriptions of Naqshi Rustam, resulted in the seizure of Peshawar and the conquest of Bactria. This conquest however did not completely destroy the already well-ingrained system of travel routes, commerce, and philosophical discourse, although it might have pushed its central location further away from the dangers of conquests into the more isolated and harder to approach Tarim Oasis.

The Hiung Nu

The Turks in Central Asia eventually divided into an eastern and a western branch. Around the year three hundred of the Common Era the nomadic “Hiung nu” as the Chinese chronicles named the Turks, gradually expanded to form a kingdom in the Tarim Oasis, around Kucha - northeast of Kashgar along the eastern foothills of the Tien Shan mountain range.

With time they nominally submitted to the Tang Dynasty somewhere between 630 and 659. In this manner Turks, while confronting the Persians and the Arabs in the West, were also kept busy further east by the Chinese.

The Turfan Oasis, Kashgar and Buddhism

Kumarajiva, the famous translator of Buddhist texts, mentions Kashgar (Sha-le) in his biography, where around the year 400 he came across a miraculous begging bowl of the Buddha. Other monks also mention Kashgar as a great Buddhist center. A well-known seventh century Chinese Buddhist traveler, the monk Hsuan Tzang
described the political conditions of the area in his journals. In his day Central Asia mostly consisted of city states that lacked a political unity and enjoyed considerable independence under local rulers.

Documents found in Kashgar in the present day are mostly in Turkic/Uygur, Tokharian, and Chinese. Although in 843 the Uygur kingdom along the river Tarim was destroyed by the Kirgiz, Buddhism and its texts lingered on in the Turfan Oasis. Annals of the Ming Dynasty tell us that as late as 1420 many people there were still Buddhist.\(^2\)

The role of Buddhism and the part local aristocracies played in its propagation must not be neglected. The beautiful laquered boxes that sparked my imagination should be a testimony to that. Both as a religion and as a philosophy, it served as an integrating force. It is the heritage of the two great rulers: Alexander Great and the Indian Emperor Ashoka. I thought about it all, as I kept admiring the lacquered boxes on exhibit in San Francisco.

It would follow that with the advent of Islam the Arabs would not wish to destroy this underpinning of free philosophical and commercial discourse that kept trade routes relatively operable along these vast stretches of land.

It is notable that many early commentaries on Buddha’s discourses have been preserved in Turkic/Uygur, but lost in the original Pali.\(^3\)

**Kutadgu Bilig**

The *Kutadgu Bilig (Sacred Knowledge)* can be characterized as a learned drama composed in old Turkish using the epic meter of the pre-Islamic heroic Arab odes—the *mutaqarib*. It was composed in the eleventh century of the Common Era and presented in Kashgar to Bughra Khan, as a gift honoring his conversion to Islam. The author of this long poem, Yusuf Hass Hajib, was the private secretary of the Khan. In comparing his work to a “carpet weave of
multi-colored sweet smelling flowers,” Yusuf adds “when a writer completes a discourse, it continues to flow.” The poem concludes with words of caution to the ruler for whom it was meant:

Fickle and unsteady is this faithless world,
The man of intellect keeps far from it.
Now you have attached yourself firmly to the world;
Strive to sever your heart from it.
Trust not this world,
But take refuge in God the most trustworthy.
Many a people has the fickle world let go...
Restrain your tongue, control your throat, do not sleep much,
Close your eyes and stop your ears. Then live in peace.
In you alone I seek refuge,
Oh God! Watch over me
And awaken me from this sleep of neglect.

(Dankoff 6629-6637)

The Kutadgu Bilig was a manual on how to live and how to rule within the parameters of ancient traditions while embracing a new faith. The new faith happened to be Islam. The meaning of this original title carries a syncretic connotation, a term that describes a holy text of any faith. Its operative assumption was that faith depended on wisdom.

Prajna Paramita Sutras

On the Buddhist side of the divide, the genre of Buddhist texts known as the Prajna Paramita, stem mostly from Central Asia and are classified by this Sanskrit term that could be translated more exactly as the “Awareness that Sustains Wisdom,” or the mental “ground” from where wisdom can flow. Here a brief linguistic explanation seems to be necessary. Pali is considered to be the original canonical language of the Buddhists. In the days of the
Buddha it was the spoken language of Northern India. He used it in contradistinction to the more ornate Sanskrit, the language of literary texts and learned treatises, preferring it as a more direct method of communication. Pali and Sanskrit are however very similar and with the passing of time many Buddhist texts were also recorded in Sanskrit. The suffix *pra-* both in Pali and Sanskrit, carries the meaning of forming, or allowing for a possibility to arise. In today’s postmodern and post-hippie world, *pra-jna* could be termed as “giving knowing a chance.” The English word “know” and the “gno” of gnosis stem from the same Indo European source as the “jna” within the word *pra-jna*. The good Buddhist would say that the most notable characteristic of the *Prajna Paramita* texts is that they guide the reader toward a blissful state of being. While prajna could be translated as sacred knowledge, paramita implies the other shore, as it were. The reader of such texts is assumed to be primarily a ruler, or a nobleman, both in the spiritual and the political meaning of the word, therefore, many texts of the kind are also seen as manuals for rulers. This accords with the fact that some early discourses of the Buddha were addressed to local noblemen and kings who came to ask for advice. Among them were also deities of various pantheons, ordinary human beings, and even demons.

Often it is assumed by museum curators that a text titled *Kutadgu Bilig* has Buddhist origins, as I found out that day in the de Young Museum. At times it is also viewed as being Magian (Zoroastrian), Christian, or Manichean. One could also argue quite effortlessly that it is an Islamicized text. Good Muslims would insist that the Islam inherent to the story was merely brought to the fore by an adept author.

Today while reading such texts, the following questions become relevant:

1. How was religion understood in Central Asia in those medieval days?
2. Do we project our own views on ancient texts, and in doing so over-dramatize both the conservative and the liberal elements inherent to such texts?
3. Are we guilty of treating these texts as mere conveniences, to be used out of context, when needed?
4. Finally, would our discussion benefit by the ancient gnostic method of including more players into philosophical discussions in order to highlight the relativity of the player and the importance of the message?

This last question seemed to be the most relevant for our globalized setting.

If we use ancient traditions as a starting point, then the role of philosophical concepts such as faith and the acquisition of knowledge could become somewhat clearer.

Skandhas and the Art of Literature as an Educational Tool

The Pali and Buddhist texts from Bactria indicate that the word skandha (skt.) or kandha (pali), was a pillar of Buddha’s teachings. Buddha never claimed to have invented the concept, but aimed at reinvigorating its meaning in order to help the deity who created and who still cared for our imperfect world. The word skandha meaning simply a “heap,” describes aggregates, or accumulations of vital energy needed to generate and support sentient life. A cultivated human being should become aware of such accumulations of energy and of their flow in order to direct and perfect the art of living as much as possible. This in short is the basis of Buddhism. One cannot help but pose the question where and how did (Al)-Skandar the Great get his name?

The Buddha pointed out that humanity could perfect this art by becoming steadily aware of the processes through which energies inherent to every molecular particle of our bodies and of
our universe, can be activated in a harmonious and conscientious way. To focus on the assumption that the process is constantly evolving toward perfection would miss the point. By withholding the finality of an analytical judgment, we keep in mind that this process is far from over, as its particular attempts may well wax and wane in the course of our lives and the lives of our cultures, traditions and ultimately our planet.

Yusuf Hass Hajib, the Muslim Turk who penned his Kutadgu Bilig or Sacred Knowledge, formulated an important issue as a possible catalyst to such learned critiques of philosophy, faith and the acquiring of knowledge in the multicultural ambience of Central Asian discourse. He did not hesitate to introduce methodologies and parables from many lands in order to integrate them into the emerging Islamic norms. He was the private secretary of a khan. As advisor to the ruler, he deemed it necessary to create a space along the Silk Road where questions of human existence could continue to flow, be discussed from many points of view without being rejected a priori, and that is probably why he compared his work to a meadow of flowers that continues to flow, bloom, and blossom.

Today the Turks still consider the Kutadgu Bilig a treasure that links them across national and religious heritages. This is how Yusuf introduces the work to his readers:

“This book is exceedingly precious. It is adorned with the proverbs of the sages of Chin and the poems of the learned Machin. But the one who reads its contents and makes known its verses surpasses the book in excellence. The sages of Chin and Machin have all agreed, that in the Eastern realm and in all the lands of Turkestan, in the tongue of Bughra Khan, and the language of the Turks, no one has ever composed a book finer than this. Whatever sovereigns this book has reached, and whatever climes, the wise and the learned of those lands have accepted it because of its utmost excellence and boundless beauty. And each one has given it a title and a name. The people
of Chin call it ‘Etiquette of Kings’ and the counselors of the king of Machin call it ‘The Rule of the Kingdom’ and the people of the East call it ‘Adornment of Princes,’ the people of Iran call it ‘Shahnameh of the Turks,’ others call it ‘Book of Counsel for Kings,’ and the people of Turan call it ‘The Blissful Wisdom’ (Kutadgu Bilig)…. This book is built upon four great foundations: Justice, Fortune, Intellect and Contentment. Each of these is given a Turkish name. Justice is ‘King Rising Sun’.... Fortune is called ‘Full Moon’, and he is the vizier, Intellect is called ‘Highly Praised’ and he is the vizier’s son. Contentment is called ‘Wide Awake,’ and is the vizier’s brother. They have debates and dialogues among themselves.

“May the reader’s heart be light, may he remember the author in his benediction.”

(Dankoff 260-261)

Buddha pointed at the “Middle Path” as a paradigm for acquiring an ability to avoid mercilessly breaking away from pathways that humanity painstakingly creates and continues to adjust as it lives on.

The story line of the Kutadgu Bilig is relatively simple. It expounds the Middle Path as the Buddhists call their tradition. It also reminds one of the Prodigal Son, a parable that entered Christianity and Buddhism, in almost identical form (BTTS, The Dharma Flower Sutra) probably around the same time, before the full blown advent of Christianity and before the arrival of Islam, when Central Asia was the hub of Buddhist thought and its most famous proponent was Kaniska the Turkish ruler of Bactria.

The story of the Prodigal Son is still relevant in the world. Its latest famous Western revival being the Return of the Prodigal Son, by André Gide, while Buddhists from Japan to California still chant the Dharma Flower Sutra as one of their major texts. But, this story has deeper roots. It reminds one of the twins that represent
opposite poles in many Mazdean and Vedic scriptures: Yama and Yima

At first there were those two twin souls, of their own accord they called themselves the pure and the impure, In thought, word, and deed, and those whose deeds were good chose one, those whose deeds were bad the other.

(Avesta 30)

And, needless to say, there are Cain and Abel.

In the Central Asian Kashgar version, more players were added to the story line. Full Moon, the prodigal happy go lucky fellow, returns to his homeland after having wasted most of his life away. He is welcomed with great joy by the ruler of the land, King Rising Sun. Soon he is elevated to the ranks of a grand vizier. Full Moon counsels the King from the perspective of one who has led the happy go lucky life, following his star, in other words, a prodigal son. Our Prodigal Full Moon proceeds to listen as the Just King Rising Sun offers his comments on life, without judging nor chastising, but asking for advice and listening instead.

Soon after his success as grand vizier, Full Moon falls ill and dies. However, on his death bed, he repents and bequeaths to his own son, named Intellect, the elevated post of vizier, or advisor to kings admonishing Intellect to serve well the Just King Rising Sun. In order to do so, young Intellect counsels the King from his, “intellectual” perspective. The King heeds this counsel as well, and proceeds to comment. Both King and vizier are haunted by a feeling that things are still somehow amiss, both experience a discomfort. So, with the blessings of the Just King Rising Sun, Intellect goes to seek out the Prodigal Son’s elder brother who in this story also left his father’s home, but went in the opposite direction to become a hermit and live near the father’s kingdom, on a mountain top, in a forest grove. His name is Wide Awake, i.e. Buddha, since the
word buddha means nothing more than that in Sanskrit. Wide Awake benevolently, but determined not to leave his mountain top, counsels both young Intellect and Just King Rising Sun, about wisdom and its ramifications. Wide Awake categorically refuses to relinquish his solitary life-style, explaining that he would not know how to behave in the milieu of a royal palace. Wide Awake very politely and compassionately tries to make Just King Rising Sun and Intellect see where their troubles lie: they lie in too much worldliness, the unfiltered forces of life. To no avail. Wide Awake understands that the king and his viziers cannot leave their world, any more than he can leave his mountain top. Soon after, Wide Awake also dies of old age.

The Buddha perceived the danger and the “tangles” of worldlinesses and mountain tops, forewarned it seems, by our world’s deity at a crucial moment before his final awakening:

The Buddha said this in Savatthi to a certain deity that came to him at night and asked him the following question:

The inner tangle and the outer tangle,
This generation is entangled in a tangle.
And so I ask of Gotama this question:
Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?
When a wise person, established well in Virtue,
Develops Conscience and Understanding,
Then as an ascetic ardent and sagacious,
He succeeds in disentangling this tangle.
...Hard to find such a person even among those desiring purity.⁴

(Sutta nipata I,13)

Buddhaghosa, the famous Buddhist commentator, in his analysis some thousand years after the Buddha, furthered the thought in his seminal work The Path of Purification: “It is a person who has developed conscience and understanding, and therefore possesses energy (ardor—atapa) who stands a chance.” (Rhys-Davids pp 76)
The Mind, the Emotions, and Rules of the Art

In the early days of searching for a Middle Path in the steppes, valleys, and mountain passes of Central Asia and their surroundings, the Buddha’s disciples became terrified at the thought that their teacher might die and leave them without a guide. So they asked him, what they should do and where to turn for guidance after his departure from this earth.

Viewed from a wider perspective, this concern is a test that any mature person needs to face. Buddha’s answer was: “hold on to the teachings and the rules of conduct (dharma and vinaya) that arose from within our community and the answer will clarify itself on its own.”

It is useful to consider how and where these rules and teachings appeared within the course of Buddha’s life. Judging from texts, they appeared as answers to particular events, rising out of circumstances, and if carefully attended, were surely meant to awaken individual minds by gently cleaning out the superfluous cobwebs and the dust.

The teachings were instigated by a particular questions framed in a particular settings and a particular spaces. All of that and more form the settings that allows human thoughts and acts to stand on their own authority without any props.

The Buddha and Islam

Discipline and concentration then, are parts of a process that allows individual minds to observe issues as they arise. They stand guard in order not to allow an onslaught of anger, fear and overpowering emotion, or the tangles of life’s energy, to take over the functioning of a calm mind and run amuck with it. That was the Buddha’s answer. It could be described in Moslem terms as “the position between two positions” (manzila bayna al manzilatayn), which became the central point of Muslim jurisprudence.
An awakened and cultivated mind is a necessity in order to navigate through life consciously. This is still the main if not the only, tenet of Buddhism.

Having thus considered the concept of discipline, where does authority fall in context of religion and faith? Not exclusively on an outside agent, be it even a god, and that is the danger that the Buddha gently warned against by saying that even a god came to him for advice. Authority rests on a whole set of circumstances that allow the mind to form the appropriate setting for an issue to arise and be regarded from many points of view with clarity, patience and the capacity to remove obstacles that may appear along the way. No more than a majestic mosque, a steeple, or a minaret, rests on the sole architect that designed its form, but also on a set of rules and on many other factors capable of working within the parameters of a specific place.

Wide Awake did not go off into the world heedlessly as did his prodigal brother, he merely distanced himself by climbing the nearest mountain in order to gain a better panoramic view of the kingdom to which he belonged and thus disentangle the tangles that the mind and the body are prone to create simply out of habit.

Wide Awake represents that awareness that warns us against mindless habits or habituation processes. The Prodigal Full Moon’s son Intellect, represents a tool capable of leading the senses towards an awakening of consciousness, or conscience. That activity we commonly call knowing.

*Kutadgu Bilig* can be described as a didactic gnostic treatise. The triangle it portrays is the tension between knowledge, or “good thought,” and its opposite: thoughtless action. Thus it is the tension and its constant adjustments, represented by Justice, or the Indic *rta*, the rhythm of the world, that acts as a calibrating agent between these two opposites. In this manner it highlights the concept of injustice not in contradistinction to justice but to an existential malaise that an “either or” type of thinking can lead us into. Thus Yusuf Hass Hajib points at the dangers of accepting superficial concepts of selflessness and of virtue, particularly when
in service of an ill-defined common good into which a king or a god can easily get entangled.

In view of this Central Asian syncretism, one cannot avoid posing the question: why do these two texts, the Buddhist and the Muslim carry the same name, be it in two different languages? One could jump to the conclusion that this transfer of titles from religion to religion was a simple trick of conversion, similar to calling the New Testament “the Bible of the Christians” as opposed to the Old Testament being Bible of the Jews. The more relevant question still remains however: How was the concept of religion understood by the Central Asians of the eleventh century?

When turning to storytelling and literary metaphors, we inevitably encounter heroes and their names. In the Kutadgu Bilig one of the heroes is named Wide Awake. The word buddha in Indic or in this case its Sanskrit representation, means exactly that. Today a person of Slavic origin can spot the link easily and conjure the connection between the two. For one who speaks a Slavic language which has kept most of its roots intact and close to Sanskrit, buddha simply means being awake, as opposed to being asleep. Not so to someone who is from a different part of the world. So the meaning of someone’s name, the noun itself, already has a life energy of its own and can quickly run off on various tangents. These audio, visual, and mental consciousnesses, or awarenesses, in the Buddhist context, are called bodhisattvas, provided they be kind and help humanity, they do their job creating audio, video, and mental patterns that habituate our thinking process in a gentle manner. The monotheistic and polytheistic worlds tended to personify them and consider them as saints, the Buddhists insisted on seeing them also as mental energies that guide the mind.

It seems that Yusuf intentionally hit chords that resonated with the many cultures found in Central Asia. Following methodologies imported from the Middle East, India, Iran, and China, he expanded the scope of religious discourse, enabling it to flow, as he himself stated in the passage quoted above. His Sacred Knowledge offers very traditional dialogues between archetypes of an ancient world.
They are portrayed as court dignitaries and invited to join, yet they also represent disembodied, pure, concepts. The implication is obvious, this is the court of the Sun King, the protagonists are: Wisdom, Might, Justice, Rising Sun, Waning Moon, etc. Each one of them explains the role that it should play, in order to effectively reflect the harmonious moves of the heavens and integrate the present moment into the timelessness of the universes.

In Yusuf’s didactic drama there are also minor players, ethereal creatures who appear between the scenes and perform a little dance. A Ray of Sunshine for example, is brought in as an interjection among the serious conversations on norms and ideals which the main protagonists pontificate upon in the various acts of this drama. She portrays the moods of the play:

With drooping head, Sol came back to earth and the World, her bright complexion now blackened with soot, let down her forelock, and covered her face completely with her love lock....

(Dankoff 147-48)

Such vignettes interspersed throughout the dialogues remind one of Homer’s Helen, and of the Sunlight, as well as the apsaras, or fire and wind beings, found in the Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra, where they enchanted the pilgrim Sudhana on his journey in search of the source of the water of life, and other heavenly beings who attempt to come to this earth in ever new incarnations in order to live the life of human beings without much success.

But, it is in the final act of this didactic Turkic-Muslim story that Yusuf offers an interesting clue. It lies in the figure of the elder brother of the Prodigal Son—the Awakened Sage, the hermit who has retreated from the world and gone up the mountain. The Awakened Sage pleads the argument against worldliness with Justice and with Intellect. He wins by subtly juxtaposing suffering, a discomfort built into the nature of our world, and injustice. By inserting suffering and somewhat ignoring the either or between
justice and injustice, he entreats a king to gain a deeper dimension of the world and its woes. This presentation thus raises the whole drama above the constraints of narrow dogmatisms by fine-tuning crucial concepts without transgressing the limits imposed by any religion and tradition. The Awakened Sage wins the admiration of both king and vizier as they themselves awaken to the more philosophical aspects of life, or to “the nature of our intentions” and delve into the deeper insights about our “transitory world.”

Two concepts: intentionality and mortality became crucial elements of Muslim theology as it was developed by one of Islam’s great philosophers and theologians Al-Ghazali. He also lived in the eleventh century, and his homeland today known as Afghanistan, was part of ancient Bactria.

In converting Bughra Khan to Islam the issue of solitude also needed to be faced and discussed directly, since it must have been relevant to the customs of society. Yusuf Hass Hajib was well aware of that, as was Al-Ghazali, who had to leave the hubbub of a great metropolis, which in his day was Baghdad, and the famous university which he helped his friend Nizam-ul Mulk create in order to find wisdom and pen his great work *Ihya ‘Ulum- al-din*, (*The Revival of Religious Sciences)*.

As most good story tellers do, Yusuf reserved the argument in favor of solitude for the finale, having the courage to offer it as a veritable tour de force. It is only after parading the mundane that he successfully and openly argues the position of a hermit who willingly distances himself from the world in order to gain a better perspective:

> Walk alone, perfect man, all company shun.
> What harm can the hermit do to the sun?
> The parrot learned to speak on his own,
> And the hermit performs his worship alone.

> You say that to associate with men is praiseworthy; but how can that be so? Consider, my brother, that I have been cut off from my devotions ever since you
arrived here today. If I have incurred so much loss by associating with you alone, do not make matters worse by forcing me to reenter society; for in that case, when shall I have time to worship God?

(Dankoff 3359-3367)

Solitude is a concept that is hard to defend in any society since it seems to pose a threat to life itself. It has been traditionally challenged by most socio-religious settings. Its very definition stands in opposition to community as we commonly understand it, since for the majority, communal activity seems to lie at the center of ethics. To arrive at some insights Wide Awake wisely points out the difference between injustice and suffering. But such awareness can come only to those who distance themselves from big cities, powerful kings, and the manipulations of society. The Awakened Sage, with a mildly cynical rebuke very respectfully declines royal offers to actively join the multitudes and its kings in order to help the world.

Can the solitary who ordinarily doesn’t engage society be expected to exert a useful impact on society? Yusuf Hass Hajib’s hermit wisely states:

“Such is the world’s way: observe it well, and the gate of understanding will open. Its pleasures are toil, its joys care, its precious things are worthless, its comforts misery. Therefore bear whatever comes without complaint, for pleasure and pain pass alike....”

(Dankoff 6445)

Thus the hermit distances himself from the world in order to understand it and better grasp its meaning. He advises us to observe and understand the rhythm of the Universe.

A Turkish Bektashi Baba who found his refuge in the vicinities of Chicago after the ravages that destroyed his life in Albania in the wake of World War Two, beautifully described to his American students the process of opening the mind to the vasteness of the
universe—to paraphrase: “The lesson needs to breathe the knowing of the teacher’s not-knowing.” (Trix)

It is not so much the teacher, but the lesson and its breath that keeps the student awake.

Notes

1. A notable and very important branch of the so called White Huns were the Kushanas who ruled in Bactria. They established a great empire in the Southern parts of Central Asia spilling over to Afghanistan, Bihar, Kashmir and Sind. The Kushana were instrumental in bringing an integration of peoples of different nationalities into a single political fabric. They spread Buddhism seeing it as a unifying element that transcends tribal and ethnic interests. These Bactrian Kushanas were those who apparently supplanted the so called “Scythian” Kushanas in their moves Westward from the Altai, a process that took place before the common era and was apparently accomplished by the fifth century CE. The cousins of the Bactrians, or the Turanian Huns, also pushed Eastward. They eventually became the overlords of the whole of Turkestan. In China they are known as the as Tu-Kiu which according to Chinese sources, stems from the word turgut meaning strong.

In the Indian chronicles of the sixth century CE they were known as Turuska (Bagci 6).

The prominent Indian scholar, Professor B.N. Puri, who delivered UNESCO sponsored seminars in Dusanbe in 1968 and in Kabul in 1982, in his Buddhism in Central Asia, published soon after in Delhi 1987, quoting Charles Eliot’s work Hinduism and Buddhism confirms that Buddhist literature is available in many languages, mostly in a “Turkish dialect written in the Uygur alphabet derived from the Syrian...and that Uygur represented the literary form of the various Turkish idioms spoken north of the Tien Shan” (26).

2. The exact date when Buddhism was introduced into the Turfan Oasis could not have been later than the first century CE The full picture starts becoming clear around the third century however. The Tsin dynasty annals tell of a thousand stupas and temples. A member of the Tsin royal family, Po-Yen, apparently translated sutras in the White Horse monastery in Lo yan. Very clear and meticulous records were kept. Also many nunneries existed in the area, their members were drawn from the royal families of the Tarim Basin. The mother of a famous translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese, Kumarajiva, was one of them. She retired into a convent that the Chinese chronicles named Tsio li in the vicinity of Kucha. There she learned Sanskrit, or “the language of India.” Kumarajiva was seven years old at the time. The monastic environment had great impact on him and his acquisition of languages. He was responsible for introducing Mahayana Buddhism into the Tarim basin.

3. See Puri; Zieme and McRae.

4. Sutta Nipata is also quoted by the verse number, the particular quote here is taken from the Path of Purification, ( Visuddhi Magga ) of Buddhaghosa as translated by Bh. Nanamoli and published by BPS Kandy 2010, ISBN 978 955 24 0026-6, pgs 5-10 or I,1-15,(i.e. introductory chapter paragraphs 1-15)
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