Response to Lou Nordstrom's Review of "The Twilight Language: Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism"

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Roderick Bucknell and Martin Stuart-Fox Response to Lou Nordstrom's review of *The Twilight Language: Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism*

In his review of our book (*Philosophy East and West*, volume 39, no. 1), Lou Nordstrom rightly focuses on our discussion of meditation, since this constitutes the real kernel of the work. His appraisal of that discussion is generally critical, and we welcome this opportunity to respond to it, believing it to be based on an imperfect understanding of certain key aspects of our argument. To provide the factual basis necessary for our response, we begin by briefly summarizing the main thrust of the book, in particular the section on meditation.

In *The Twilight Language*, our principal aim is to elucidate the higher stages of meditative practice culminating in enlightenment, as these are described in early Buddhist texts. This ambitious project entails, among other things, the following: an examination of textual descriptions of enlightenment and the stages immediately preceding its attainment; a survey of current meditative practices, particularly those believed to lead to insight; and a consideration of the conditions that probably prevailed within the Buddhist Saṅgha throughout the first few centuries of its history, with particular attention to the question whether there may have existed an esoteric transmission of knowledge regarding the higher stages of meditative practice. Our conclusion is that such a transmission did exist, which leads us into an analysis of the "Twilight Language." This is an elaborate system of Tantric symbolism (well exemplified in the dhyāni Buddha *maṇḍala* and the *cakras*), widely considered to have been used as a secretive medium of communication by adept meditators within an exclusive line of transmission originating from the Buddha Gotama himself. We analyze this symbolic system, trace the major stages in its development, and arrive at a decipherment of its principal components.

Our approach is objective and historical. On the nature of enlightenment, we take as our main textual source the first four Nikāyas of the Pali Sutta-Piṭaka. This corpus, though certainly not an infallible record of Gotama's original teaching, is the best available, and more likely to be reliable than historically later tests. We point our that the account of meditation contained in these texts is apparently incomplete: of the two broad types of meditation recognized by Gotama—tranquility meditation (concentration) and insight meditation—only the former is described in any detail. Explicit instructions for the practice of insight meditation are lacking, which poses a problem both for scholars and for practicing meditators.

By systematically comparing parallel lists of stages, we demonstrate that insight meditation is to be equated with the "three knowledges," a set of supernormal attainments frequently mentioned in the texts as intervening between the perfection of concentration and the final attainment of enlighten-

ment. While this is a significant step toward clarifying the nature of insight meditation, it is in itself of little actual value to meditators because the three knowledges, as described, seem to make little sense in practical terms.

We seek a solution to this problem by considering the possibility that the description is to be interpreted symbolically—more specifically, that the textual account of the three knowledges may be a symbolic description of three meditative techniques, handed down in the time-honored Indian fashion by adept masters to their practicing disciples. Pursuing this line of reasoning, we survey a selection of currently practiced meditative techniques that could be classified as "insight meditation." This is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of Buddhist meditative practices; indeed, as we point out (p. 75), many recognized Buddhist practices are ignored as having no insight component, while on the other hand the three insight techniques that we single out for particular attention are not usually considered Buddhist practices at all.

We then demonstrate a close one-to-one correspondence between these three insight techniques and the three knowledges as described in the texts. We show that this correspondence becomes virtual identity if one adopts a symbolic interpretation of certain key terms in the account of the three knowledges. We point out that such an interpretation accords well with the notion, implicit in the world view prevailing in India at the time of the Buddha, that the macrocosmic divine world was a reflection of the microcosmic human world and could be manipulated by the proper performance of ritual (microcosmic) action. We also point out that the perfection of the third of these three insight techniques could appropriately be termed "enlightenment," and we argue, on the basis of numerous detailed correspondences, that the attainment of such perfection was, for Gotama, the microcosmic action that would effect macrocosmic liberation from *saṃsāra*. The perfection of the third technique would in any case be a superlatively worthwhile attainment, regardless of one's world view. We interpret the close correspondence between the three knowledges and the three insight techniques as evidence that the former constitute a cryptically worded account of the latter.

Our interpretation is put to the test as we proceed to analyze other symbolic aspects of the early Pali texts, and to elucidate certain components of the Twilight Language of Tantric Buddhism. After disentangling a number of basic symbol sets from the confused mass of Tantric symbolism, we present a detailed case for identifying those sets as representations of advanced meditative practices, in particular the three insight techniques. However, that section of our book need not be detailed here, as it is not touched on in Dr. Nordstrom's review.

Dr. Nordstrom, while expressing himself generally satisfied with the quality of our research and argumentation, claims to find two major flaws in our work. The first is a bias toward Theravāda: according to the reviewer, our interpretation of the three knowledges takes into account only "Theravāda

Buddhist insight meditation" and "unjustifiably excludes Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna forms of meditation."

Unfortunately Dr. Nordstrom does not explain what he means by "Theravāda Buddhist insight meditation." We are forced to assume he is referring *either* to practices going by the name "insight meditation" such as are currently taught and applied in Theravāda meditation centers, *or* to insight practices described or referred to in Theravāda meditation manuals, classical or modern.

Either way, we have difficulty seeing any basis for the criticism. In our book we interpret the three knowledges not in terms of "Theravāda Buddhist insight meditation," but in terms of a set of three little-known meditation techniques, none of which is, as far as we are aware, known or practiced by Theravādins. When we seek (in chapter 4) to demonstrate that our three insight techniques have parallels in certain existing recognized Buddhist practices and are referred to obliquely in certain Buddhist texts, it is almost always from Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna that we draw our evidence. For example, we point out probable connections with the *kōan* practice of Rinzai Zen and with the visualization practices advocated in Tibetan sects, while finding no such connections on the Theravāda side (pp. 57–58). Again, in our discussion of the historical implications of our findings, we conclude that the practices we describe are likely to have been best preserved in the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition (pp. 189–190). We find it puzzling that Dr. Nordstrom should see in this a "special pleading" for Theravāda practice at the expense of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna.

In alleging that our interpretation neglects non-Theravāda meditation practices, Dr. Nordstrom points specifically to our view (shared by both Theravāda and Mahāyāna authorities, whom we quote, on pp. 49–50) that deep concentration is an obstacle to insight practice; and he claims that this effectively excludes "Zen Buddhist meditation (*zazen*)" from the practices that might be considered in interpreting the three knowledges. He declares that Zen meditation (as well as other Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna forms) is "perfectly legitimate Buddhist meditation practice" and charges that we unjustifiably accept only insight meditation as "legitimate."

In pointing out that deep concentration and insight cannot coexist simultaneously (a proposition that Dr. Nordstrom appears to accept), we are not denying that concentration is "legitimate" Buddhist practice. What we are doing is seeking to differentiate the roles of these two distinct kinds of practice. Far from excluding concentration, we devote an entire chapter to it (chapter 3), and we point out its value in providing a foundation for the subsequent development of insight (p. 53). At no point do we exclude, as Dr. Nordstrom alleges, any current practices by advancing a "stipulative definition" of what constitutes "Buddhist meditation."

What appears to disturb Dr. Nordstrom (though he does not say so explicit-

ly) is the suggestion that Gotama may have taught a second, more advanced form of practice (insight meditation), to be taken up once concentration has been perfected. Our reviewer seems to assume that concentration is all there is to Buddhist meditation, and that once this has been mastered, insight will arise of its own accord. If so, then he is in good company because, as we point out, many present-day meditation masters, including many Theravādins, share this view (p. 49). We maintain, however, that the evidence indicates this view is mistaken—at least to the extent that the perfection of concentration was *not* the end of the meditative path taught by the Buddha. We claim to have demonstrated that concentration was, for Gotama and his immediate disciples, no more than a preparation for an altogether different kind of practice termed "insight meditation"; and we claim, furthermore, to have identified the three techniques that constitute this insight meditation.

We account for the present lack of knowledge of Gotama's insight practices as due to a gradual dying out of the secretive oral transmission by means of which this higher knowledge was passed on. We maintain that as a result, meditation became increasingly limited to concentration, which, incidentally, is not a specifically Buddhist practice, but one shared by most Indian religious traditions. If Dr. Nordstrom wishes to refute the proposition that the Buddha taught another, more advanced form of meditation, he must do more than merely point out that most present-day Buddhist schools teach only concentration. He must attempt to overturn our argument (based on strong textual and symbolic evidence) that these higher meditative practices *were* taught, but were subsequently forgotten.

In view of the above, it is odd that Dr. Nordstrom should accuse us of assuming just "*one* 'Buddhist meditation'" and of forcing on Buddhism "a specious semblance of . . . oneness." In fact the picture we present of Buddhist meditation and of Buddhism as a whole is considerably less simple than that implicitly accepted by Dr. Nordstrom and indeed by most scholars and practicing Buddhists. Our interpretation supposes an entire area of meditative practice, and an entire line of transmission (the élite meditative tradition), additional to those normally recognized, as well as supposing various historical processes of change that are incompatible with the notion of "*one* self-consistent 'Buddhism.'" Contrary to what Dr. Nordstrom implies, we highlight the divergences within Buddhism, and consider how some of them may be accounted for historically. For example, we attribute to probable Hindu influence the development of a Mahāyāna path of practice leading to *prajñā*, which was "similar to the Hindu 'path of knowledge' (*jñāna-yoga*)" (p. 187). (Incidentally, Dr. Nordstrom misrepresents us when he speaks of this observation regarding the similarity of the two paths as a "mistaken classification of *prajñā* . . . as 'Hindu'.")

The second major flaw that Dr. Nordstrom claims to find in our interpretation is that we "psychologize" meditation and the three knowledges. Our

recognition of the importance of ancient Indian ideas on macrocosm/microcosm parallelism leads us to distinguish terminology relating to the macrocosmic realm (the physical world as understood by Gotama, including the realms of gods, demons, and so forth) from that relating to the microcosmic realm (the human mind, as it can be known through systematic introspection). This, Dr. Nordstrom says, is a grave error because it conflicts with what he calls "the fact of the Buddha's realization of *oneness*." He makes much of this "fact," and implies that "realization of the primordial oneness of nonduality" should be recognized as the essence of enlightenment. When there is realization of oneness or nonduality, he says, the distinction between macrocosm and microcosm ceases to exist. It follows that we are in error in resting our case on this distinction, and still more so in according primacy to the microcosmic side, that is, in "psychologizing" doctrine and practice.

That our interpretation of enlightenment says nothing about realizing oneness will constitute a genuine flaw only if it can be shown that such realization really has the status Dr. Nordstrom ascribes to it. In effect Dr. Nordstrom is opting for an alternative and supposedly better (more canonical? more widely accepted?) interpretation of enlightenment. But before his criticism of our work can be taken seriously, he must argue for this alternative interpretation, showing in what ways it is superior to ours. It will not do merely to cite the views and practices of a Japanese sect that is historically far removed from the origins of Buddhism and bears a strong Taoist imprint. To carry conviction, an interpretation of enlightenment as the realization of oneness should at the least be supported by (1) a clear account of the nature of "oneness" and of the mental state that constitutes its realization; (2) a convincing argument that such realization would be a supremely worthwhile attainment, characterizable as "ultimate liberation"; and (3) evidence, based on the earliest available Buddhist texts, that this attainment was indeed what Gotama Buddha achieved and taught. We challenge our reviewer to justify his position in this way because it is on precisely such rigorous criteria that we have proceeded in arriving at our own interpretation of enlightenment. Without such rigor, interpretation is likely to degenerate into fuzzy, ahistorical, intuition-based guesswork.

Dr. Nordstrom's concern at our failure to deal adequately with oneness may well be linked to his concern at our evaluation of concentration practice. One of the many striking subjective effects characterizing the state of mental one-pointedness that results from concentration practice is a sense of having "become 'one with all things'" (p. 40). As we point out in our chapter on concentration, this experience in its fully developed form can be so powerful and impressive as to convince a naïve meditator that he or she is already on the verge of the final attainment. Perhaps it is this experience that Dr. Nordstrom means by "realization of oneness." If so, then we beg to disagree with his identification of it as the goal of the Buddhist path. (For a simple psycho-

logical explanation of the experience, see pp. 40, 74.) If, however, Dr. Nordstrom has something else in mind in speaking of "realization of oneness," then he must tell us more precisely what it is so that we can respond adequately.

Our reason for basing our interpretation on introspective psychology is that in our view all the evidence points unmistakably in that direction. The teaching presented in the Nikāyas is predominantly psychological in orientation, and the preoccupation with psychology that is so evident in the Abhidhamma literature indicates that this orientation was maintained during at least the first few centuries after the Buddha's death.

One of Dr. Nordstrom's principal grounds for rejecting our "psychologizing" is that the gains it brings in terms of intelligibility and relevance appear to him not to justify the seemingly drastic diminution in scope of the Buddha's achievement and teaching that it entails: to gain psychological "enlightenment" at the expense of what he calls "that extraordinary sense of triumph and victory that is the Buddha's realization/liberation" is not worth it; "the price . . . is just too high."

We can appreciate Dr. Nordstrom's feelings on this point, but we cannot accept them as a basis for evaluating our thesis. We reaffirm the stand we take in *The Twilight Language*, that the message of an Indian sage of the sixth century B.C., expressed in terms of an archaic world view in which the notion of macrocosm/microcosm parallelism is implicit, cannot be genuinely intelligible and useful for modern humankind unless it is translated into the modern scientific idiom—in this case predominantly the idiom of psychology. Our terminology is different from that of Gotama, but, we argue, the realities referred to are the same. In any case, we suspect that Dr. Nordstrom is being a little hasty in judging our "continuous unobscured insight into the workings of one's own mind" as inferior to his "realization of primordial oneness." It goes without saying that an assessment of the two competing claims can carry little weight unless it is supported by actual experience with the relevant meditative techniques.

As will be evident from the above, we are not at all persuaded that Dr. Nordstrom's criticisms of *The Twilight Language* are valid. We are disappointed that his review offers no positive suggestions as to how we, or anyone else, might either improve on the interpretation presented in *The Twilight Language* or develop an alternative to it. As we point out in our final chapter, our interpretation is only a first attempt and is in many respects incomplete. We would welcome further scholarly discussion of the issues it addresses, in the interests of improved understanding of Buddhist doctrine and meditative practice.