

Learning and mission in *The Eastern Buddhist*

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1 Ontology and ethics: from an “is” to an “ought”?

The purpose of this paper, first delivered in Japanese in 2018,¹ is to consider the question of how scholarly or academic studies of Buddhism can have any kind of relevance to life, especially practical life, in the world in which we find ourselves. Can *bukkyōgaku* (Buddhist Studies) “be real”– to quote the phrase which now symbolizes Otani University? The question posed is how any tension between academic studies and practical life can be resolved. Similar questions apply in the case of Christian Studies, Muslim Studies, Tenrikyō Studies, and so on. What is the appropriate relation between textual and historical researches on one hand and systematic or practical theology on the other hand? How can academic studies in these fields be related to problems in “real” life? If practical issues are the guiding interest, can the research itself be at the same time independent and academic?

Here, specifically, I am interested in how the resolution of this tension can be operationalized in the work of *The Eastern Buddhist*, a journal of Buddhist Studies founded in 1921 by a small group of experts including Suzuki Daisetsu, and with a long post-Suzuki history running up to the present day. More details relating to the journal itself will be found in the second part of this essay, but first let us think about the two key words highlighted in the title above, namely “learning” and “mission” respectively. These two concepts, “learning” (Japanese *gakumon* 学問) and “mission” (Japanese *shimei* 使命), may roll off the tongue quite easily, but they are both in need of reflective scrutiny. First consider “learning” which means the practice of learning, studying or researching. The term *gakumon* has an ancient pedigree in Japanese, deriving from the very activity of learning to read and write by means of the study of the Chinese classics, not least *The Great Learning* (*Dàxué* 学學, J. *Daigaku* 大学). In paragraph 5 of this famous text we read:

¹ The original title of this paper, devised for oral presentation at a conference being held in Japanese, was longer, namely: *Gakumon no naka kara kono yo ni ōjiru bukkyō no koe—EB no shimei* 学問の中からこの世に応じる仏教の声—EBの使命. The conference was the annual gathering of the Japanese Association for the Study of Religions, held in 2018 at Otani University, Kyoto, and the president of the university had proposed a panel on the theme of future perspectives for *The Eastern Buddhist*, now published by the university. Cite this paper as: Pye, Michael: *Learning and Mission in The Eastern Buddhist*. Philipps-Universität Marburg 2019.

When things are investigated, knowledge is extended. When knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere. When the will is sincere, the mind is correct. When the mind is correct, the self is cultivated. When the self is cultivated, the clan is harmonized. When the clan is harmonized, the country is well governed. When the country is well governed, there will be peace throughout the land.²

The root of all good government and all good social action is therefore to be found not only in personal discipline but, further back, in “the investigation of things.” *Gakumon* literally means “the gate of learning” and implies the opening of a vista of knowledge. As many readers will know, it is against this background that the term *dàxué* and its equivalents has provided the modern term for “university” in Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese.³ But already in the Kamakura and Edo Periods in Japan there were official schools of learning known as *gakumonjo* 学問所. Moreover *gakumon* itself remains to this day the key term for learning or scholarship, particularly when this is based on written sources. It can be translated by the general German word *Wissenschaft*. Though the English equivalent for this might seem to be “science” we must note that *Wissenschaft* implies all academic endeavour and not just the natural sciences. While *gakumon* sometimes implies a narrowly philological approach (such as the reader might imagine that I am taking just now, irrelevant to the supposedly real world!) it has anciently been embedded into the moral discipline of the self, which in turn leads into the ability to perform tasks of leadership in the world. This we saw in the above quotation from the *The Great Learning*.

Admittedly, Confucianism is a little out of fashion nowadays in the methodologies of the academic world. We can no longer simply apply the advice of *The Great Learning*. In modern times therefore the meaning of the term *gakumon* has become more analogous to that of the German *Wissenschaft* than it originally was. Both terms usually imply *objective* research whether in the natural sciences or in the humanities. But what about the practical aspects of objective research. It is possible to see how research in the natural sciences can be “applied” for the sake of technical advances, without distorting the research. Admittedly this is not an entirely simple matter, because external objectives can always pre-determine the nature of the questions which are asked. If the research is being undertaken for special external reasons, the research itself can easily be affected and may even be distorted quite significantly. For example, research into climate change might be actively seeking to prove

² Translation by A. Charles Muller, see: <http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/greatlearning.html>. Cf. also Uno Tetsuto 宇野哲人 (J. trans. and commentary) *Daigaku* 大学 Tokyo (Kōdansha Gakujutsu Bunko) 1983, 37.

³ Ch. *dàxué*; J. *daigaku*; K. *taehak*; V. *đại học*.,

that there is no such thing, and that could lead to an emphasis on specially selected results or misuse of statistics.

In the humanities even more care needs to be taken than in the natural sciences, for there is much more room for individual judgement. And nowhere is this more significant than in the field of religion. This is because most religions espouse a certain view of the world, and religious persons may seek, at least to some extent, to promote wider acceptance of such a view. They have a more or less clearly defined message, and the message may be *prescriptive* for human life. In short they have some kind of mission. This is true not only for “missionary” religions but also, if to a lesser extent, for other complex developments such as Hinduism and Shinto which, although they have a largely national footprint, easily move into prescriptive recommendations. Where does Buddhism fit in this perspective? There is no doubt that Buddhism must be regarded as a missionary religion. There is a recognisable activity in Buddhist circles which can be referred to in Japanese as *dendō* 伝道. Active Buddhists have for centuries been conscious of their motivation to spread the Buddha-dharma. Even though “mission” might be thought of as a Christian term, we cannot overlook that, after all, the Buddha decided to proclaim the Dharma, to turn the wheel of Dharma (*tenrin* 転輪), to “blow the conch of Dharma” or to “bang the drum of Dharma.”

The question therefore arises about how *gakumon* fits with mission. The Cambridge philosopher, Donald McKinnon (1913-1994)⁴, used to emphasise in his teaching that you cannot get an “ought” from an “is”. Or in other words, you cannot get ethics out of ontology. Just because things are as they are in a certain way it does not mean that a moral imperative arises inevitably. A situation may be unpleasant, but the idea that something must be done about it, the frequent is not an automatic implication. Some sort of an existential decision must be taken. Returning to our previous terminology, how can we get a sense of *shimei* from *gakumon* in the modern sense? How can we move forward from “learning” to “mission”? I am now using the word *shimei* 使命, as in *shimeikan* 使命感 “sense of mission.” Though drawn from Christian usage, this word has taken on a broader meaning in English and can refer to any kind of assignment or project, whether individual or institutional. In this sense it frequently appears in the expression “mission statement” used by many

⁴ Cf. obituary by Stewart Sutherland at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-professor-donald-mackinnon-1427917.html>.

organisations, although I personally do not like this usage in English, since it detracts from the more precise traditional meaning.

With these questions in mind we can approach the question: What is the meaning of “Buddhist Studies” or *bukkyōgaku*? This blanket term leads to a very convenient, but perhaps misleading blurring of the frontiers between philological studies and prescriptive writings. It specifies nothing beyond a broadly named field: “Buddhism.” In this way “Buddhist Studies” is analogous to Islamic Studies or Christian Studies. Such “fields” usually include textual or historical or sociological studies, but also theological or ideological reflections and recommendations. As a result, these blanket designations tend to prevent us from thinking about how to move from an “is” to an “ought” or how to correlate factual knowledge with discussions about what “Buddhism” *should* be saying about the environment, about war and peace, about family ethics, and so on. There has recently been considerable interest in “engaged Buddhism” but it is not at all obvious how this is theoretically related to “Buddhist Studies”. Does the one really arise from the other, or does “engaged Buddhism” simply become a new subject of study for specialists in “Buddhist Studies”?

2 Traditions of *The Eastern Buddhist*

The issues raised above have all been present during the long history of *The Eastern Buddhist*, but, as issues, they have been largely hidden. This is understandable in that the procedures of writing and publication have always been both complicated and urgent. Moreover, the profile of the journal has shifted from time to time in accordance with the political and social situation, pre-war, post-war and later, and with the passing of generations. For the benefit of readers who are less familiar with the relevant complexities, a few details about the history of the journal will now be given.⁵

The origins of *The Eastern Buddhist* go back to 1921 when a group of leading Buddhists in Kyōto founded The Eastern Buddhist Society with the intention of propagating “the true

⁵ The first part of this brief account has been drawn, with a few appropriate adjustments, from the writer’s own introduction to *Beyond Meditation*, the first volume in a series entitled “Eastern Buddhist Voices” (Equinox Publications). This series was published from 2011 onwards in order to make more widely available a variety of key contributions from the earlier issues of the journal, notably those by various scholars mentioned below. The appearance of these selections in five volumes was a collaborative project designed to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the foundation of The Eastern Buddhist Society. Some of the later paragraphs below are drawn from a policy statement about the journal which was drafted by the present writer (in his capacity as general editor) but which for various organizational reasons was not published in the journal itself.

spirit of Buddhism” in the modern world. The leaders of this group were Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (D.T. Suzuki, 1870-1966), Akanuma Chizen 赤沼智善 (1884-1937), Sasaki Gesshō 佐々木月樵 (1875-1926) and Yamabe Shūgaku 山辺習学 (1882-1944). Akanuma Chizen was a specialist in the Buddhism of India and Sri Lanka. Sasaki Gesshō was professor of Buddhist Studies with special reference to Shin Buddhism and became president of the university in 1924. He was directly involved in the foundation of the Eastern Buddhist Society. Yamabe Shūgaku, who made special reference to Hinduism and to Theravāda Buddhism in his studies, became professor in 1921 and president of the university in 1943. Also associated with the project was Murakami Senshō 村上專精 (1851-1929), a professor at Tokyo Imperial University (as it was then known). His studies ranged widely over the field of Buddhist thought and history, and he is known for having set aside his Shin Buddhist priestly functions in 1901 when he recognized the fact that the historical Buddha could not possibly have been the author of the Mahayana Buddhist scriptures. He was, nevertheless, appointed president of Otani University⁶ in 1926. Yokogawa Kenshō 横河顕正 (1904-1940) taught at Otani throughout the thirties but died as a professor of the university at the young age of thirty-six. Sugihira Shizutoshi 杉平颯智 (1899-1984) on the other hand lived well into his eighties and thus experienced the vicissitudes of Japan’s path through most of the twentieth century. He took a second graduation in English literature at the then Imperial University of Tokyo in 1927, before becoming a professor of Otani University, his first alma mater, in the same year. Unfortunately no further information is now available about Mino Kogetsu, who apparently contributed as an independent cultural observer of the day, though with clear Shin Buddhist sympathies. The journal could probably not have appeared without the linguistic support of Beatrice Lane Suzuki, the American wife of D. T. Suzuki; but it should be noted that she also wrote her own contributions on various aspects of Mahayana Buddhism including contemporary observations of Japanese temples.⁷

These scholars were variously interested in Zen Buddhism and Shin Buddhism, and in the relations between these two and earlier forms of Buddhism. It was a time when the complexity of the origins of Mahayana Buddhism was coming increasingly into view. They were also concerned with the question of how best to express Buddhist teaching in a world which was becoming increasingly internationalized, or as one might now say, globalised.

⁶ Ōtani 大谷, but the lengthening sign is dropped in the official rendering of the name.

⁷ There is a collection of her articles in volume 5 of *Eastern Buddhist Voices*, entitled *Buddhist temples of Kyōto and Kamakura* (Suzuki, B. 2013). Her observations are of considerable interest because of the changes which have taken place since her time.

The journal itself was founded in the same year as the society, being edited in the first instance by Suzuki Daisetsu and his wife Beatrice. In the Foreword to the first issue, Suzuki wrote: "The Society has for its objects the study of Buddhism, the publication of the result of such study, and the propagation of the true spirit of Buddhism." These objectives have found ample expression in the pages of the journal over some ninety years so far. To achieve them, the journal has carried articles on many aspects of Buddhism as well as English translations of various classical texts and writings by modern Buddhist thinkers.

These included thinkers who themselves predated the existence of the journal, a particularly poignant case being that of Takagi Kenmyō (1864-1914), a Shin Buddhist priest with a strong social conscience whose views did not at all chime with the dominant spirit of his times. Imprisoned by the government for espousing socialism, regarded as treason, he died in prison. At the time he was disowned by the Shin Buddhist authorities, losing his priestly status, though he was retrospectively rehabilitated.⁸ On the whole however, it is fair to say that doctrinally and philosophical questions, together with textual studies, have played a much greater role in the journal down politically or socially oriented studies.

While the society became most widely known for the publication of *The Eastern Buddhist* it has also encouraged various other projects such as the translation of Buddhist texts and the arrangement of seminars and lectures. Its main office is housed in Otani University, Kyōto, and its researchers benefit from the fine library holdings which are easily accessible there today. There is also a close connection with the Higashi Honganji, the head temple of one of the leading branches of Shin Buddhism (the Shinshū Ōtani-ha⁹). At the same time the approaches of the society as, of the journal, have always been widely appreciative of wider aspects of the Buddhist tradition. It is well known that Suzuki Daisetsu himself was devoted to the Rinzai Zen tradition, while the traditions and texts of other branches of Mahayana Buddhism have frequently been presented in the journal as well.

In the early days, many of the texts of Mahayana Buddhism were still being edited and translated into modern languages (including modern Japanese) for the first time. This process

⁸ On Takagi see his article "My socialism (Yo ga shakaishugi)", in *The Eastern Buddhist* NS 33/2, 54-61, and also Yasutomi Shin'ya 安富信哉, "The Opening of the Spirit of Dharmākara: The Case of Reverend Takagi Kenmyō, a Shin Buddhist Priest of the Meiji Period" *The Pure Land*, 16 (December 1999), 122-130.

⁹ The official English name of the denomination is currently, in full, "Shinshū Ōtani-ha branch of Shin Buddhism", which is an accumulation of the Japanese "Shinshū Ōtani-ha" and an English explanation of the same, giving a double reference both to "Shin" and to "ha" or "branch".

made it possible to explore their contents outside the limitations of specific doctrinal traditions. Consciousness of the common heritage of Mahayana Buddhism became stronger. *The Eastern Buddhist* played a visible, international role in this process. The trend coincided with the need of Shin Buddhist thinkers to come to terms with modernity, intellectually, and this is well evidenced by the work of contributors such as Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976) and Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971). Another early feature was interaction between Japanese scholars and international dialogue partners.

Publication of *The Eastern Buddhist* was interrupted by World War II. It was picked up again in 1949, under the editorship of Suzuki Daisetsu and Sugihira Shizutoshi, but steps to resume publication were hesitant, and philological work led the way while the exploration of wider Buddhist thought seemed to be put on hold. The difficulties of the times led to irregularity of appearance and a new pause in 1958. *The Eastern Buddhist* was then relaunched as a "New Series" in 1965, but in 1966 Suzuki Daisetsu himself passed away, aged 96. A large issue (NS 2/1), near the beginning of the new series, was conceived as a memorial to his memory. In tune with Suzuki Daisetsu's influential success as a global communicator, the journal soon refocused on various aspects of Zen Buddhism. With the "Kyoto School" coming into the limelight, particularly under the editorships of Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–1990), and Abe Masao 阿部正雄 (1915–2006) interactions with western thought again came to the fore. As before, the very success of this phase meant that it would to some extent run its course, and that other themes would then take over. Consequently, under the subsequent editorship of Nagao Gadjin¹⁰ 長尾雅人 (1907–2005), a sharper focus was placed on tighter Buddhological studies as elsewhere conceived. Shortly after Nagao's time, in 2007, the definition of purpose came to be formulated more generally as "An unsectarian journal devoted to an open and critical study of Buddhism in all of its aspects." Nevertheless, a certain counterpoint between "east" and "west" has continued to set the underlying tone, and dialogical features have continued to be in evidence.

The name of the journal *The Eastern Buddhist* implies that studies and viewpoints emanating from East Asia are expected to predominate, except in dialogical presentations. In turn this means that there is a general orientation towards Mahayana Buddhism, even though this is not exclusively specified. While there has often been a strong interest in Zen, matching the shifting expectations of an international public, the presentation of Shin Buddhism has also been actively pursued in the journal right up to the present. At the same time there are many

¹⁰ The orthodox spelling would be Gajin, but he preferred to show it as Gadjin.

themes in the early development of Buddhism which are part of, or relevant to Mahayana Buddhism and the wider ancient culture of Buddhist thought. In a sense therefore the purview of the journal includes practically the whole of early Buddhist thought and practice.

If we consider the overall trajectory over many years, it may be said that the balance has shifted from the straightforward presentation of substance in the early years to an emphasis on interaction and dialogue, first with Western philosophy and later to some extent with Christianity. Quite apart from the editorship, writings by some of the best-known names in modern Japanese Buddhist thought may be found in its pages. Increasingly, non-Japanese advisors with reputations in Indian, Japanese and Buddhist studies have played supporting roles. Moreover, Japanese contributors have been joined increasingly by foreigners in offering translations of texts as well as matters for discussion. Most recently the journal has seen an increasing number of articles by Korean and Chinese specialists. These have typically aspired to follow the historical-philological model of scholarship, and less material has been offered which is devoted to the systematic promulgation of Buddhist ideas. Nevertheless, the original objectives of the Eastern Buddhist Society have by no means been forgotten, and the overall approach, integrating Buddhist scholarship and reflective Buddhist thought has been continued by the present editors under the leadership of Yasutomi Shin'ya, who unfortunately passed away suddenly in 2017. *The Eastern Buddhist* now looks back on a history of almost a century and it may be said that, with some interruptions, it has flourished in an excellent manner.

3 Buddhist studies and practical Buddhist voices today

in what precedes we have first explored some linguistic and philosophical aspects and, second, we have briefly reviewed the trajectory of *The Eastern Buddhist* over nearly one hundred years. In this third, concluding section, the focus is set, quite specifically, on some clear perspectives for the articulation of the Buddhist “voice” or “voices” in the world of today. In the perspective of a general knowledge of Buddhist thought and history, but without espousing any one doctrinal position in Buddhist teaching or practice, it appears that certain trends of a practical, social or ethical kind may be regarded as characteristic of Buddhism. These might well be emphasised in coming years. Whether they should be so emphasised is a matter for active Buddhists rather than for the present writer. However, it seems to me that certain expectations are justified if the Buddhist tradition is to maintain coherence in the years to come. Of course, others may see different themes or additional themes. Conversely

if any of those named here are regarded as not pertinent, then a debate may of course arise. In any case we can make a start by considering the following strands.

- 1) Cultivation of a peaceful mind and a character which is slow to anger and modest in its expectations. This mentality may be expected to arise on the basis of *prajñā* in the lives of individual persons. Its practical effects may lead to a preference for a life of simplicity and an awareness of the beauty of natural or ordinary things (as in the work of Yanagi Sōetsu).¹¹ In modern terms it also implies being anti-consumerist. This can be worked out in practical terms.
- 2) Care for persons in need, arising out of the notion of compassion towards all sentient beings. This may be expected to arise quite naturally in the perspective of *karuṇā* (compassion) as the second, balancing quality of life encouraged by the concept of the bodhisattva path. There are many examples of this in popular sermons.
- 3) The abandonment, and critique, of any sense of social or political identity based on “being Buddhist.” Such an approach is implied by the ideas of non-differentiation and the equality of sentient beings. This expectation is nowadays particularly relevant to the Buddhist communities of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, where Buddhism has become too involved in matters of national identity. In the past it has also been relevant in Japan, although here the matter has been under critical review in recent times, especially in the Shin Buddhist and Sōtō Zen traditions.¹²
- 4) The rejection of war as a means of pursuing national interests, as in the current Japanese constitution. War is organized violence, and it is evident that the teachings of Buddhism do not encourage organized violence. There must be implications for practical life. Well considered political action is required in this connection.
- 5) Care for the environment, arising out of the recognition of the common Buddhahood of all sentient beings and plants. This concern needs to be developed more systematically and programmatically, hand in hand with scientific and social research. Specific proposals and requirements should be developed and recommended.

How are these concerns to be related to “Buddhist Studies”? The way in which each one sits within the context of Buddhism has been suggested above. However, the following steps could be undertaken more systematically. First, the list of items should be widely and carefully discussed. It may be that some further important feature should be added because

¹¹ Cf. his article “The Pure Land of Beauty” in *The Eastern Buddhist* NS 9/1, 18-41.

¹² For this and point 4 below cf. especially Chapter 3 of Ugo Dessì’s *Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism*, Berlin (Lit Verlag) 2007.

the Buddhist tradition implies it, or that one or the other item does not really arise out of Buddhist tradition after all. These points can be investigated and debated in a scholarly manner, that is in terms of *gakumon*. Second, for each area the various traditional and textual sources of inspiration should be studied in detail by those who possess the relevant linguistic and other competence. This is also an “academic” task. Third, arguments should be developed about the specific implications or policy conclusions which might be drawn out, area by area.

The first two steps are really a matter of *gakumon*, but of a *gakumon* which is self-critically guided by these major concerns. The third step is distinctly prescriptive, that is, it leads into what may be regarded and presented, by Buddhists, as the mission (*shimei*) of Buddhism in our present world. Papers that present these implications should be expected to be soundly based in knowledge and understanding of the tradition. Yet they need not be descriptive alone, but also creative, constructive and programmatic. If they are to be successful and convincing, they will have taken the first two steps of *gakumon* into account. It goes without saying that future issues of *The Eastern Buddhist* should continue its main offerings in the scholarly exploration, presentation, and discussion of Buddhist texts, iconography and ideas. In addition, however, it would do well to focus more sharply from time to time on the five practical and social concerns set out above.

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