

Article

The Methodological Implications of the Buddhist Model of Study, Reflection, and Cultivation

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Abstract: This paper discusses aspects of the Buddhist concept of threefold wisdom and their implications on methodology for Buddhist studies, especially the academic study of Buddhist philosophy. The first part of the paper discusses aspects of threefold wisdom as presented in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist sources, arguing that threefold wisdom is not simply a presentation of mental cultivation and philosophical practice, but that it also proposes what can be called a practical hermeneutic, that is, a method to maximize a reader's understanding of Buddhist scriptures and their full implication. Second, we consider how certain methods of studying Buddhist thought, especially those that deal with philosophical engagement with Buddhist thought, should be adapted to include the dimension of Buddhist philosophy that is exemplified by threefold wisdom. More particularly, Buddhist philosophy's perspective on what a successful reading method consists of, which is exemplified by the practical hermeneutic described by threefold wisdom, should be included as part of what scholars pay attention to when studying Buddhist philosophy. Thus, only will the conditions for an open dialogue between Buddhism and other philosophical traditions be sufficiently present for such a dialogue to take place in a fruitful way.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy; Buddhist doctrine; Buddhist meditation



Citation: Turenne, Philippe. 2022.

The Methodological Implications of the Buddhist Model of Study, Reflection, and Cultivation. *Religions* 13: 1029. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111029>

Academic Editor: Marc-Henri Deroche

Received: 9 May 2022

Accepted: 13 October 2022

Published: 27 October 2022

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1. Introduction

While historical studies of Buddhist philosophy are still pursued, we see on the other hand a continued popularity for philosophical methods that target engagement with Buddhist ideas as the main goal of the study of Buddhist philosophy, whether for the purpose of keeping Buddhist philosophical ideas alive by bringing them in conversation with contemporary philosophy,¹ facilitating conversation or dialogue between philosophical traditions,² or to reconstruct a reading of classical Buddhist authors in a charitable and coherent manner. For example, see Westerhoff (2009, p. 8). Unfortunately, we have to admit that the divide between historical and interpretative methods noted by Cabezon (1995, pp. 231–68). still exists in Buddhist studies. While philosophers deepen their analysis of specific philosophical issues, our overall understanding of Buddhist intellectual traditions is still partial and could be improved not only by narrowing down on specific topics, but also by deepening our knowledge of Buddhist intellectual cultures in general. In addition to learning the specifics of various schools and thinkers of Buddhist philosophy, we could learn more about topics such as the relation between Buddhism and the various fields of knowledge,³ various models of the place of logic and rationality on the Buddhist path and in Buddhist culture more generally, the relation between specific Buddhist views and the cultural background in which they appeared, and the specific features of Buddhist intellectual cultures from which specific philosophical traditions emerge.⁴ As some of the heretofore ignored features of Buddhist intellectual cultures come to our knowledge, it becomes necessary to draw the implications of newly acquired facts about the traditions we are studying on the methods we use to study them, for our methods should be open to

be evaluated and redefined when they are no longer able to account for known facts about what they study.

This publication does not focus on a particular school or concept of Buddhist philosophy, but rather on a widely shared model of study and practice attested in various forms of Buddhism, the model of wisdom defined as three-stage progression from study to reflection and finally cultivation. Scholars of Buddhist doctrine (whether or not they use the expression “Buddhist philosophy”) often mention the fact that Buddhist philosophy, since it ultimately targets liberation from *saṃsāra*, has soteriological dimensions; what exactly that entails for the way they read the same sources, though, is often left unsaid and unanalyzed. In this paper I will argue that the model of threefold wisdom that is the topic of this special issue has more to tell us than the theoretical recognition of liberation as the final goal of philosophical practice: it offers a model for what we could call a practical hermeneutic, that is, a model to be applied to make the most of what can be communicated across generations interpreting the same Buddhist teachings. Because the threefold wisdom model provides a detailed hermeneutic model, a cross-cultural or reconstructive model should consider engagement with that model as part of the conditions for a fruitful conversation between contemporary philosophy and Buddhism to take place.

After offering a summary of the threefold wisdom model and showing how it is a model not only for spiritual cultivation, but for a practical hermeneutic, we will survey individual features of study, reflection, and cultivation that, I argue, are methodologically relevant, and should be part of any treatment of Buddhist thought presented as a cross-cultural conversation or dialogue. A real dialogue with Buddhist intellectual culture requires scholars to appreciate the specificities of a Buddhist model of reading and its relation to the practice of mental cultivation on the path to liberation.

2. The Threefold Wisdom Model as a Practical Hermeneutic

In this section we will consider classical descriptions of the three-wisdom model that help define a model for the use of textual study as part of the Buddhist path of spiritual cultivation. We will see that the threefold wisdom can be seen as a method explaining how to use study and reading as part of Buddhist spiritual cultivation. The method described is based on what we can call a practical hermeneutic, that is, a reflection on how the transmission of understanding can happen between a student and written or oral text, often assumed to be Buddhist scripture, that is, for the authors we are considering here, either words that are considered as the words of the Buddha or authoritative commentaries thereon. The classical locus for, and probably one of the earliest definitions of the threefold wisdom model is found in chapter 6 of Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa* and its auto-commentary.⁵ First, let us note that, for Vasubandhu, the threefold wisdom is part of a larger model of the path towards liberation. Cultivation (*bhāvanā*) and concentration (*saṃādhi*) are only possible after prerequisites have been established, generally following the Buddhist model of progression from morality (*śīla*) to concentration (*saṃādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). In that regard, first, it is worthwhile noting the *Kośa*’s mention that “[Cultivation] is produced in the persons who are equipped with the two withdrawals”⁶; that is, the study of scripture is recommended for those who have already achieved a certain level of contentment and have few desires. In other words, one’s general emotional and cognitive orientation towards the world is already established as a relevant factor in being able to apply the threefold wisdom model to the understanding of scripture.

In chapter 6, verse 5 of his *Abhidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu makes it clear that the stages of threefold wisdom function as a progression. He describes the process as, “Settled in one’s conduct, equipped with [listening to] the teachings [*śruta*] and reflection [*cintā*], one will be capable of devoting oneself to cultivation [*bhāvanā*] (Ibid 1893)”. It is therefore fair to say that, for him, cultivation is the result and goal of study⁷ and reflection. Both classical and modern sources typically refer to the third part of the threefold wisdom model as *bhāvanāmayīprajñā*. Let us note, though, that the expression translated here as “cultivation” is glossed by Vasubandhu as “*saṃādhibhāvanā*”, i.e., the cultivation of *saṃādhi*: “Having

reflected, they devote themselves to the cultivation of concentration (*samādhībhāvanā*) (Ibid 1893).". In chapter 4 of his auto-commentary, Vasubandhu also explains the phrase "The wholesome which is concentrated or the wholesome which is concentration in its intrinsic nature is *bhāvanā* . . ." as "That which is concentration (*samādhi*) in its intrinsic nature and that which coexists with what is concentration in its intrinsic nature (Ibid 2012)."

Another highly relevant source on the threefold model, especially with regard to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, is Kamalaśīla's first *Bhāvanākrama*. Here, Kamalaśīla adds to the prerequisites for cultivation the development of great compassion. He then brings the distinction between the provisional and definitive meanings of scripture (*neyārtha* and *nītārtha*) as the proper subject of the wisdom of reflection, which results into the disappearance of doubt and, following that, "perfect wisdom" (*samyagjñāna*). The progression of the threefold wisdom is described by Kamalaśīla as follows:

There, first of all, the wisdom of hearing should be generated. For through it one enters into the meaning of the scriptures. Thereafter one penetrates their provisional and definitive meanings by the wisdom of thinking. After that, having ascertained the meaning that is real (*bhūtam artham*, i.e., non-origination, emptiness) by means of that (wisdom of thinking), one should cultivate it, not that which is unreal (*abhūtam*, i.e., *neyārtha*). Otherwise, on account of meditating upon the false and the (consequent) non-disappearance of doubt, there could be no production of perfect knowledge. Additionally, then meditation would be pointless, just like that of the non-Buddhists (Translation in Adam 2002, p. 128).

Summarizing the application of the threefold wisdom model to Mahāyāna doctrine, he adds,

Therefore, when the wisdom consisting in thinking has investigated by way of both logic and scriptures, the very reality which is the natural condition of things should be cultivated. Additionally, the natural condition of things is ascertained, on the basis of scripture and reasoning, to be in the ultimate sense only non-origination. (Adam 2002, p. 128)

As will be made clear below, it is important to note that the wisdom of reflection uses both scripture (*āgama*) and reason (*yukti*). Thus, scripture is important not only as the object of the wisdom of study, but of the wisdom of reflection as well. Regarding the wisdom of cultivation, Kamalaśīla says, "Thus having ascertained the real meaning by means of the wisdom of thinking, one should give rise to the wisdom of meditation in order to directly perceive it (Adam 2002, p. 134)." *Bhāvanā*, thus, leads into a clearer perception of reality, not mediated by conceptions (the Sanskrit phrase used is "*pratyakṣīkaraṇāya*"). The final result of the process is the removal of both afflictive and cognitive obscurations, the latter's root described as mistaken notions such as existence:

... on the basis of the removal of all conceptualizations of existence and so forth by this practice of yoga, there is the removal of the mistaken transposition of all existence, which is the nature of ignorance and the root of the afflictive obscurations. Thus, on account of being cut off at the root the afflictive obscuration is completely removed. (Adam 2002, pp. 145–46)

Kamalaśīla's treatment of the threefold wisdom model is interesting in many ways, for it details his understanding of the relation between conceptual and non-conceptual methods of training, supplementing his analogy of two sticks which, when rubbed against each other, end up burned (Adam 2002, p. 207), with more details about removing doubt and hence wrong conceptualizations as the root of removing cognitive and afflictive obscurations.

In brief, classical presentations of the threefold wisdom model by Vasubandhu and Kamalaśīla stress the importance of concentration for cultivation, the importance of scripture as well as logic as part of reflection, and the fact that the direct experience of reality that happens during cultivation (and therefore concentration) is where study and reflection are supposed to lead.

The model thus described can be understood as what I would call a practical hermeneutic. We do not find, in these sources, an explicit abstract discussion of the question of

prejudice, bias, and how the reader's predisposition determines understanding as much as the author's words. What we do find, though, is the description of a method to ensure that the reader is able to produce the best possible understanding of scripture, leading to the right result. Study and reflection help one get close to what a scriptural statement means, but the full circle of interpretation is only complete when a direct experience of what scripture conveys is produced in the context of cultivation, that is, as the object of concentration (*samādhi*). The hermeneutical model described does not offer much of a theoretical and critical reflection on interpretation in general, but a clear method to ensure that genuine understanding is established with confidence. If the reader does not have the prerequisites, does not base their reflection and concentration on adequate scriptural statements, or misunderstands them with regard to their reality and their status as provisional or definitive, then understanding is not complete, and the reader has failed to receive the full message intended to be conveyed. If wisdom is to penetrate reality, all these elements are required. Without the direct cultivation of reality as conveyed in scripture, the act of interpretation is not complete.

In the next section we will discuss the methodological implications of these points for scholars who wish either to obtain a full picture of the place of intellectual practices in Buddhist cultivation or to establish a solid basis for dialogue on the views discussed by Buddhist philosophy.

3. The Methodological Implications of Threefold Wisdom

Threefold wisdom can thus be understood as the description of the process by which one ensures that the best possible understanding of Buddhist scripture is achieved. It seems to include an awareness of the fact that rational analysis and concordance with scripture can convince one of the validity and truth of a statement, but a full understanding of the same statement is not achieved until one has cultivated it as a lived reality, that is, after having applied a reading method and connecting it with cultivation exercises. The simple fact that the Buddhist tradition has a quite clearly defined model of how we can and should learn from scripture is significant for the interpretive models we use in the academic study of Buddhism, especially if the method privileged to study Buddhist thought is that of philosophical engagement through conversation or dialogue, an awareness of how differently Buddhists understand the process of interpretation to work will be necessary for a fruitful conversation to take place. This section highlights specific elements of that model and their implications on method.

(a). Separating listening and reflection

Little detail is given by Vasubandhu and Kamalaśīla on the wisdom of study itself other than to say that it is the basis for reflection and then cultivation. To help us distinguish between the Buddhist model and the contemporary philosophical approach⁸ with which it is often brought in dialogue, it is worthwhile noting that the fact that study and reflection are described as separate steps is itself significant for a comparative methodology of Buddhist and contemporary models of textual interpretation.

The separation of study and reflection is evidence that, according to the Buddhist model described above, it would be a mistake to engage in critical reflection before a proper study of a text has been conducted. The objective of critical reflection is the properly established meaning of the text we are studying; the process of identifying that is distinct from the evaluation of its truth through scripture and logic.

Contemporary academic conversations tend to see these two parts of the process of interpretation as inconsistent methods. One can either engage (philosophically or theoretically) with the ideas in a reinterpretation of the text based on current context⁹ or set aside one's own evaluation of the same ideas by attempting to get as close as possible to the original circumstances of the creation of the same text. While proponents of philosophical engagement reject the purely historical method as based on the illusion of objectivity,

historians criticize proponents of a philosophical reading as having no way to show that they are doing anything but projecting their own ideas on to the material.

The Buddhist model of the threefold wisdom is different in several ways. First, it goes beyond the apparent dichotomy between an objective reading free from evaluation and an engagement based primarily on evaluation. Both these approaches are required and properly applied, that is, in succession, they lead to the full understanding that is lived in cultivation. The approach based on critical, philosophical engagement is thus, from the Buddhist perspective, incomplete and inadequate not only because it does not include cultivation, but because it fails to take the wisdom that comes from study seriously. Being able to suspend judgment and evaluation is a prerequisite to a proper study of scriptural statements.

Proponents of philosophical engagement as the only way to engage with Buddhist texts should therefore be aware that the view according to which understanding proceeds through evaluation of the validity of ideas goes against the gradual process described in Buddhist sources. They should also be happy to hear that an approach that suspends judgment altogether is, from the Buddhist point of view, also incomplete: it would amount to using only the wisdom that comes from study, and not continuing on to the other two stages of interpretation. The Buddhist model thus offers the double benefit of, on the one hand, making our best effort at understanding a text on its own terms while, on the other, retaining the possibility of engaging with the ideas conveyed using available epistemological tools to establish their validity. Any model of reading Buddhist scriptures that limits itself to either one of these two approaches is thus, from the point of view of threefold wisdom, incomplete.

Finally, separating the wisdom of study from that of reflection paints a reader that lets, at least provisionally, the text establish its own interpretive environment. Through explicit statements of the purpose of a text, who it is composed for, and what attitude one should take in reading it, it advocates a skill in study that consists essentially in orienting one's disposition, as a reader, with the text. That does not imply that the process ends there and that there is no evaluation going on: indeed, a rigorous evaluation of statements found in scripture is conducted using criteria such as logical and scriptural consistency. Nor does it open one to the faults of assuming the possibility of objectivity: an objective reading that sets aside one's criteria for truth and validity is itself only provisional and is a crucial yet only partial feature of the ideal picture of the Buddhist art of reading.

Thus, the Buddhist threefold wisdom provides an interesting and unique take on the question of interpretation and the role of philosophical evaluation and engagement, seemingly avoiding a false dichotomy between descriptive and philosophically engaged methods. Engaging philosophically with its textual tradition while skipping the phase of listening is likely to undermine the establishment of ideal conditions for a fruitful dialogue to take place.

(b). The importance of scripture for the wisdom of reflection

The wisdom of reflection gives us the most obvious common point between contemporary philosophical and Buddhist approaches to reading Buddhist texts, especially when approached more specifically through emphasizing reflection using reason. Logical coherence is an obvious point of contact between Buddhism and contemporary academic and philosophical approaches, hence probably why most philosophical studies of Buddhist thought highly emphasize the polemical dimensions of doctrinal writing. Logical arguments, insofar as they tend to be readily isolated from specific contexts, lend themselves to generate confidence that we understand what they are about.

Just what the role of reflection using scripture is in the process of developing threefold wisdom, though, has not been fully appreciated by studies of Buddhist philosophy. How does reflection using scripture differ from the wisdom of study? How exactly does one apply scripture as a way to reflect on the validity and the interpretive status (i.e., as provisional or definitive) of statements? While I think this issue requires further research, basing ourselves on the example of Kamalaśīla, the process seems to describe a cross-

referencing with other established scriptural statements. Kamalaśīla stresses, for example, that contradictions should not be found within scriptural statements (Adam 2002, p. 125); seemingly incompatible statements should be reconciled by being interpreted using the distinction between provisional and definitive statements. While rational analysis is used to critically evaluate statements and views, scripture is kept in play to complement logic. The text one is interpreting is judged not only against logic, but also against other scriptures. The rationality used as part of the wisdom of reflection is synthetic as well as critical.

One possible consequence of this point for methodology is to stress efforts at checking one's philosophical readings against other texts: other scriptures, possibly other works stemming from a same tradition. More importantly, it shows the importance given to scripture in the process of interpretation, not only as the basis for study, but as part of the process of reflection.

A large part of philosophical readings of Buddhist sources deals with rational elements, completely ignoring aspects of Buddhist thought related to scriptural interpretation. This can only lead to an extremely partial understanding of the discussions taking place in Buddhist philosophical literature. Some of the debates on emptiness, for example, can be explained as having to do with the principles of interpretation much more than with purely logical arguments.¹⁰ More attention to the scriptural, exegetical and hermeneutical discussions that surround Buddhist doctrinal conversations could certainly improve the mutual understanding of the various methods that face each other in cross-cultural readings of Buddhist sources.

Moreover, Vasubandhu and Kamalaśīla both convey an important point: reflection on the validity of ideas is not the end of the process of interpretation. It is an important yet only preliminary stage of the process of making the meaning of what one studies integrated in one's life by removing doubt about its meaning and validity.¹¹ Any interpretive approach that deliberately ignores this fact will limit the space for dialogue, that is, the range of questions that are considered relevant to the discussion, so as to make a vast portion of Buddhist discussions of texts and their application in mental cultivation fall outside the space set for dialogue. Setting aside from the start issues of scripture and scriptural interpretation, unsurprisingly, can feel alienating to live conversation partners and, correspondingly, lead to selective and highly directed readings of the literature. A more open and impartial attitude towards the works we study is impeded by the decision not to pay attention to the scriptural dimensions of these discussions.

(c). Methodological implications of cultivation

The importance given to cultivation as part of the practice of reading scripture is often referred to by scholars, but its implications, especially with regard to method, have not been fully fleshed out. Discussions of reading, exegesis, and hermeneutics are usually based on Western notions of hermeneutics, assuming that the debates about hermeneutics we are familiar with exhaust the possibilities of what thinking about interpretation entails, and that Buddhist intellectual culture does not have its own understanding of how interpretation works and should be done. As a result, the way we engage with Buddhist text—philosophically or otherwise—is determined by our understanding of hermeneutics, making no effort to include a specifically Buddhist understanding of how the “art of reading” should be performed. Here, we will consider two aspects of the Buddhist art of interpretation described by the threefold wisdom model and their implications on method for scholars who study Buddhist culture.

First, as we have seen above, for Vasubandhu, Kamalaśīla, and followers of that tradition, reading culminates in the direct cultivation of the direct experience of the reality described in the scripture studied. That emphasis on the practical dimension of reading—the stage where the ideas studied and analyzed are put into practice—distinguishes that understanding of reading from what we often assume reading to be about in contemporary discussions of hermeneutics. When applied to Buddhism, those discussions stress the model of the hermeneutic circle: the determination of meaning is performed by the reader in relation to the text, but there is never a way to obtain a view of what the text says outside

of our perspective as a reader (See, e.g., [Garfield 2002](#), pp. 229–50). As Andrew Tuck has shown, attempts at objectivity can often be shown to be as likely to lead readers to project our assumptions on the text as more openly “engaged” approaches ([Tuck 1990](#)).

An emphasis on cultivation allows a different perspective. When reading following the model of threefold wisdom, the back and forth between the reader and the text is not a closed circle because it also reaches out into practical application. The addition of cultivation, especially when conceived, following Vasubandhu, as *samādhībhāvanā*, brings an additional way to test our reading against the text. Adding cultivation to the act of reading brings an element to reading that is different from study and reflection, an element that is eminently practical and as close as a direct experience as is available to us. Concentration, insofar as it includes non-discursive practices, enriches the experience of interpretation with elements that are not limited to the realm of words and ideas. Tested against descriptions of concentration found in the text, it adds a richer, lived dimension to the act of reading.¹²

An important distinction should be made here. The point is not that non-Buddhist philosophical traditions, even the professionalized academic approaches to philosophy, have no practical application. Philosophical reflections have consequences on many aspects of our lives. The important difference is rather in the underlying belief that the reality—often conceived in metaphysical terms—and which is the main and final object of study and reflection is considered to be something that can be attained or realized not simply through words but through some other form of experience. That experience is itself to be further refined against study and reflection in a dynamic process, but the very possibility, even if only theoretical, that one can see reality for oneself adds an important dimension to interpretation: you can check it for yourself, so to speak.

Vasubandhu describes the wisdom of cultivation using the analogy of the person crossing a river:

One can compare three kinds of persons who are crossing a river: (1) those who do not know how to swim do not abandon their swimming device [*plava*] for one moment; (2) those who know how to swim a little sometime hold onto it, sometimes let go of it; (3) those who know how to swim cross without support ([Vasubandhu 2012](#), p. 1893).

If we take the threefold wisdom model to describe the process of reading, debating the meaning and validity of textual assertions without direct cultivation is like debating the nature of swimming without having practiced it. More importantly, it gives a different take on the problem of interpretation. It hints at the level of confidence a reader can gain as to the accuracy of his/her interpretation of a text by applying the practice itself. The experience of cultivation is as certain and straightforward as we can get. We can debate whether our understanding of the feeling of hot, cold, sweet, or seeing red or blue is the same as anybody else’s experience of the same things, and maybe ultimately they are not the same, but our confidence that our understanding of what hot is is as good as understanding can get.

Such a view of textual interpretation gives a different perspective on our ability to understand textual statements; while on the one hand being aware that understanding needs to be set up by adequate preparation, “listening” with an open mind to what the text is saying, and applying analysis to determine the exact meaning of the text, it aims at an understanding that is pragmatically adequate, that is, to be validated in experience unmediated by concepts. In that light, arguments against the possibility of a perfect understanding of the author’s “intention” appear irrelevant; the point is not to get the exact same experience as the author, for such a thing would only be possible after an equal level of mental and spiritual development has been reached, but to reach an experience that confirms our understanding by practical standards. Now, of course, such a model of interpretation presupposes that one accepts the possibility of such an unmediated experience, and contemporary readers, whether they are philosophers from a tradition that does not emphasize or acknowledge that possibility or Buddhists who disagree with the importance given by some to an unmediated experience, may disagree with such an

assumption. The fact remains that Vasubandhu and Kamalaśīla do seem to accept that presupposition, and that it makes a model for understanding through study and reading valid to the extent to which it is needed. If contemporary philosophers disagree with that assumption, it would be a good idea for them to have a conversation on why that is the case.¹³ However, ignoring it and assuming that the Buddhist model of interpretation shares their assumptions about experience and hermeneutics can only undermine the quality of the common basis for dialogue they use to support their own method.

The question of the role of experience is now familiar to scholars and students of Buddhist studies, and I want to emphasize that I do not wish to bring back the idea that the only important thing in Buddhism is experience, especially in the context where some Buddhists, and some Buddhist scholars, still promote the idea that all that matters about Buddhism is some form of non-conceptual experience that arises during meditation. Cf. Sharf (1995); Gyatso (1999). I rather wish to emphasize that study, reading, and reflection are part of a continuum of cultivation that includes both discursive and more practical, hands-on dimensions. For example, in the mind training (*blo sbyong*) system of cultivation, we find a lot of teachings emphasizing that self-cherishing is at the root of saṃsāric experience, and that one can only benefit from reducing all self-centered dispositions and behavior. That cultivation involves reading, but also imagination and some rationally derived arguments and contemplations. They also include the cultivation of certain mental qualities such as friendliness and compassion, coupled with some discussions of ultimate bodhicitta that depict the latter as being free of conceptual constructions.¹⁴ That system of practice is not simply about the latter, non-conceptual experience, but it is there, at least theoretically in the beginning, and attaining familiarity with it is recognized as something real at least in the life stories of the great adepts of the past. So, while we cannot reduce that whole tradition to the experience of ultimate bodhicitta, it does acknowledge it in part. It also includes the idea of post-meditation (*rjes thob*), that is, what happens when you try to carry on the attitudes developed into your daily life. What I am proposing here is that we pay more attention to those elements as part of our philosophical study of those traditions, at least insofar as they are relevant contextual elements without which the interpretation of the analytic, discursive dimensions of the reflection is difficult.

The point is not to reduce Buddhism to experience, but to recognize that the unmediated experience of the reality (or realities) described in scripture and studied philosophically is, for Buddhist philosophical traditions, at least theoretically possible. The degree to which an unmediated experience of reality is possible, and the conditions that are required for that to be possible, are understood differently by different people. Those ideas form the basis of much Tibetan debate, for example. As far as I know, though, inasmuch as one recognizes the possibility of attaining the state of buddha, or awakening, the fact that the buddha's gnosis is also real is also accepted. Correspondingly, most practices, whether they are called *vipaśyanā*, meditation on *rig pa*, the completion stage (*rdzogs rim*), is understood as cultivating a perception of reality that is mediated as little as possible by wrongly imposed views and latent cognitive and emotional tendencies. For authors such as Mipham, topics of philosophical debates are described in highly "experiential" or subjective categories such as the absence of constructions (*niśprapañca/spros pa dang bral ba*) or unity/coalescence (*zung 'jug*) Wangchuk (2012, p. 15). Without going into how representative these ideas are of Tibetan philosophy, or their place in contemporary philosophical debates, I hope the reader will at least agree with me that such ideas give a clear indication that, for authors like Mipham, the rational analysis of ideas like emptiness is done while keeping in mind the wish to make a full realization of reality the final, more or less remote, yet undoubtedly real goal of philosophical practice.

In short, we could say that, in the context of the study of Buddhist philosophical argument, an attitude opposite yet similar to what Buddhist modernism has created about experience has appeared: while the secularists and modernists focus on experience, philosophers tend to eliminate it from the discussion. Revalorizing the importance of the

context for philosophical discussion, especially the practical context, can only help gather more conditions for a fruitful discussion to take place.

4. Conclusions

If taken as describing a method of reading leading to understanding scriptural statements so as to lead to an unmediated experience of the realities pointed out in scripture, the threefold wisdom model offers its own take on the question of interpretation, a model that, by focusing on a practical notion of understanding, circumvents issues related to the impossibility of objectivity and recovering authorial intent. Methodological implications of such a model include the expectation of striving for understanding prior to evaluation, to the recognition of the importance of the role of scripture in the act of interpretation, and to the necessity of cultivation, that is, of a practical application to our experience of the object of study for understanding to be complete. As a result of this analysis, I propose that any method that claims dialogue or conversation based on a commonality of purpose should include a conversation about these topics as well as specific philosophical issues, lest the basis assumed for dialogue be established from the unique point of view of academia rather than being a genuinely shared basis. Buddhist presentations of threefold wisdom thus offer us an interesting topic for philosophical conversation, a fact about Buddhist intellectual life that is good for us to keep in mind as we read Buddhist literature, and an area that should be addressed by future discussions of comparative or cross-cultural philosophical study. Further study should probably consider to what extent the model of understanding described in Buddhist literature are actually carried out in living traditions,¹⁵ and the variations found in various Buddhist traditions. It would also be useful to the present discussion to see how similar questions were addressed in other religious traditions. It is to be hoped, though, that in the meantime modern assumptions about reading and understanding are not projected on to Buddhist traditions, but that a properly Buddhist understanding of study and reading and their place in cultivation will be appreciated for its unique character and importance.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ For a discussion of “productive encounters” as the work of cross-cultural philosophy, see for [Garfield \(2002, p. 244\)](#).
- ² Such a method is described for example in [Garfield \(2015, p. 3\)](#).
- ³ Recent contributions bring much needed information on the intellectual background of Buddhist traditions. For example, the relation between linguistic philosophy and Buddhism is described in, [Bronkhorst \(2019\)](#).
- ⁴ An example of such a study is offered in [Gold \(2007\)](#).
- ⁵ For a wider discussion of hermeneutics in Buddhism, see [Lopez \(1988\)](#).
- ⁶ Translation in [Vasubandhu \(2012, pp. 1894–95\)](#).
- ⁷ While the term *śruta* (“listening”) carries the connotation of orality, it can be applied to written text as well as oral text, so that listening can stretch into study more generally to include the potential use of written support as part of study.
- ⁸ While a detailed definition of contemporary academic philosophy is too big a topic for the current essay, and since I certainly do not want to imply that contemporary philosophy, even when practiced in purely academic settings, cannot be applied to one’s life, the difference between the two types of philosophical practice I want to emphasize here rests on the notion that the possibility of connecting correct views of reality to a lived experience of that reality, distinct from deluded experience, as part of Buddhist mental cultivation. See below, Section 3 for more on that point.
- ⁹ This method corresponds to what Kapstein calls the “problems and solutions approach.” See the introduction of [Kapstein \(2001\)](#). It also corresponds to Garfield’s “cross-cultural philosophy”, cited above.

- 10 An example of this in the thought of the Tibetan author Śākya mchog ldan is given in Philippe Turenne, “Interpretations of Unity: Hermeneutics in ŚĀKYA MCHOGLDAN’s Interpretation of the Five Treatises of Maitreya.” (Montreal, McGill University, 2012).
- 11 Kamalaśīla describes the disappearance of doubt as the result of reflection. See [Adam \(2002, p. 128\)](#).
- 12 A similar point of comparison is to be found in Hadot’s description of philosophy as spiritual exercise. See [Hadot \(1995, 2003\)](#). For applications of that discussion to Buddhism, see [Fiordalis \(2018\)](#), [Eltschinger \(2008, pp. 285–544\)](#) and [Deroche \(2021, pp. 19–32\)](#).
- 13 We should note that, as a significant part of comparative or cross-cultural studies of Buddhist philosophy pursues the overt goal of convincing Western philosophers of the importance of studying Buddhist philosophy, and as an open discussion of the spiritual dimensions of Buddhist thought may be seen as going against that purpose, philosophers interested in engagement with Buddhist thought may be tempted to set aside such dimensions.
- 14 Many instances of teachings belonging to that system can be found [Jinpa \(2006\)](#).
- 15 A good example of such a study is offered in [Lieberman \(2007\)](#).

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