

## **Sudden/Gradual and the State of the Field<sup>1</sup>**

Robert Sharf, University of California, Berkeley

Just a couple of decades ago there seemed to be a simple litmus test to determine whether you were haplessly out-of-date, or whether you were a young Turk hip to the historicist, post-colonialist, and Foucauldian turns in the academy. If you believed in an ahistorical "Buddhism" that moved across cultures, times, and places, you were decidedly unhip. If you believed that Buddhism in the singular is a mere construct, and that the proper focus of research should be on multiple and somewhat incommensurable "Buddhisms" that are the products of particular people embedded in particular times and places, you were hip. For the hip, Buddhism in the singular was a spurious projection of the essentializing Orientalist imagination.

For the unhip, the idea of multiple and incommensurable "Buddhisms"—the notion that there is no essence or set of core teachings common to culturally and temporally disparate Buddhist traditions—was a threat to the very viability of Buddhist studies. This sense of peril and disciplinary angst was in no way unique to Buddhist studies, of course. Take religious studies: like so many fields in the humanities it was in transition, as constitutive categories once taken for granted—supposed universals such as "faith," "belief," "experience," and so on—came to be the subject of sustained and often strident critique. The results of this critique are still with us; in some circles today, to admit to being a specialist in comparative religion is to admit to being brain-dead. The

---

<sup>1</sup> These remarks were prepared for the panel "From San Juan to Sukhāvātī: Reflections on Buddhist Studies and the Career of Luis O. Gómez," held at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, November 1, 2008.

hip accuse the unhip of failing to appreciate the turn to thick description and local knowledge, and of lacking the philological, archival, and theoretical tools requisite for critical scholarship.

So what emerged to take the place of comparative analysis? For one thing: genealogical critique. Within Buddhist studies this meant that instead of reading Pali or Mādhyamika or Zen or Tibetan texts, scholars, or at least the hip scholars, were reading on the history of the study of the Pali Canon, the history of the study of Mādhyamika, the history of the study of Zen, the history of the study of Tibet.

The historicist and genealogical critique—the argument that our approach to Buddhism has been compromised by unexamined Eurocentric, Orientalist, and Protestant biases—has had a major impact on the sort of work being done in the field. Budding Buddhologists once focused their energies on the study of scriptures and scholastic treatises, doctrinal history, and on other literary products of the clerical elite. This focus was predicated, at least in part, on the belief that we were dealing with sophisticated minds whose musings about the world might still be of some interest or relevance to us today. But the genealogical critique proclaimed all this to be mere projection, and thus it behooved scholars to shift their attention to objects that resist easy appropriation. Thus we have seen, over the last two decades, a flurry of work on Buddhist icons, relics, mummies, spells, talismans, and other material and sacramental objects that underscore the seemingly irrational, magical, and/or "primitive" aspects of Buddhist culture. This focus on alterity is supposed to be an antidote to the Protestant and modernist presuppositions that transform medieval Buddhists into modern bourgeois rationalists.

Again, none of this is unique to Buddhist studies. The historicist turn in the humanities encouraged research not on what different groups have in common but on what sets them apart. This explains, I believe, the fascination with material *objects* and ritual *practices* that, unlike texts, resist discursive analysis. Be that as it may, when grappling with relics, or icons, or talismans, scholars are wont to say *something* about why these things were so compelling to generations of Buddhists, and how they were understood locally. In making this step from mute material object to cultural artifact it is impossible to avoid discursive formulations. And these formulations, at the end of the day, tend to sound suspiciously "doctrinal." We are told repeatedly, for example, that Buddhists venerated relics and icons because they were thought to be vital sources of salvific power and vehicles for the generation of merit. But this isn't analysis, much less explanation, so much as a paraphrase of scriptural and doctrinal (i.e., emic) formulations. In attempting to move beyond the text to the (non-linguistic? non-mediated?) material culture of Buddhism "on the ground," scholars may simply exacerbate the hermeneutic muddle. And this, I suspect, is behind the theoretical aporia in the field at the moment.

I apologize for this long excursus, but I thought it necessary in order to highlight what I think is so important and commendable and timely about Luis's contributions to the field. Today I have been asked to address Luis's writings on "Sudden and Gradual"—his interconnected body of work that spans the so-called Samyé debate on the one hand and the roughly contemporaneous controversies within early Chan on the other. This includes his work on Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākramas* that supposedly represent the Indian gradualist side of the Samyé debate, Luis' work on the fragmentary corpus of the northern

Chan master Heshang Moheyan who took the sudden side in the debate, and finally his work on the sudden/gradual debate as it took shape in China proper.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that Luis' body of work on these issues continues to be exemplary of the best work done in the field of Buddhist studies writ large. As all of you are undoubtedly aware, the sudden/gradual debates are an extraordinarily difficult topic. For one thing, research in this area demands a command of Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese; in addition, many of the primary sources exist only as undated, unedited, and often fragmentary manuscripts, and the philosophical issues that animated the controversies, and the various literary and doctrinal traditions that are brought to bear on the subject are copious, subtle, and often convoluted. Luis is one of the very few who possess the requisite philological, philosophical, and linguistic tools to grapple with this subject; moreover, he brings to his scholarship a deep familiarity with and sensitivity toward the Western literary, religious, and philosophical heritage. But it is not Luis' technical skills and erudition that I want to highlight today, but rather the intellectual frame through which he approached the sudden/gradual debates.

The sudden/gradual moiety emerges from a tension or paradox that lies at the very heart of Buddhist soteriology, namely: how is it possible that conditioned dharmas—that

---

<sup>2</sup> My comments are based primarily on the following English publications by Luis: "Indian Materials on the Doctrine of Sudden Enlightenment," in Lewis Lancaster and Whalen Lai, eds., *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series 5 (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), 393-434; "The Direct and the Gradual Approaches of Zen Master Mahāyāna: Fragments of the Teachings of Mo-Ho-Yen," in Robert M. Gimello and Peter N. Gregory, eds., *Studies in Ch'an and Hua-Yen*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 1 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983), 69-167; and "Purifying Gold: The Metaphor of Effort and Intuition in Buddhist Thought and Practice," in Peter N. Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 5 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 67-165. To date, Luis' publications on Kamalaśīla exist only in Spanish.

intentional action or religious practice of *any* kind—could ever give rise to unconditioned liberation? While Indian Buddhism was profoundly transformed as it migrated through the distant cultural worlds of Tibet and East Asia, Buddhist exegetes everywhere continued to hone their dialectical skills on (or, one might say, bang their heads against) this intractable if philosophically fecund problem. The main Buddhist schools of East Asia—Zen, Tiantai, Pure Land, and so on—can all be viewed as different approaches to the seemingly insuperable gap between path and goal.

Sudden/gradual is then one of a variety of related problems (the two truths being another) that emerge from this soteriological conundrum. In his chapter "Purifying Gold," Luis summarizes the sudden/gradual issue this way:

The fundamental rift as seen in Indian Buddhism can be defined as an ideal polarity between those who understand enlightenment as a leap into a state or realm of experience which is *simple* (integral, whole), *ineffable*, and *innate* (that is, not acquired), and those who see enlightenment as a gradual process of growth in which one can recognize degrees, steps, or parts—a process, that is, which is amenable to description and conceptual understanding, and which requires personal cultivation, growth, and development.<sup>3</sup>

What is key, at least for my comments today, is that Luis was grappling with the sudden/gradual debates through the 1980s, at the very height of the intellectual transformations—the "culture wars"—mentioned above. It should be noted that Luis was as versed in the postmodern, historicist, and genealogical literature as anyone in the field of Buddhist Studies. He had his graduate students reading in a dizzying array of fields,

---

<sup>3</sup> "Purifying Gold," 71.

from post-structuralism to philosophical hermeneutics to anthropological theory to literary and Biblical criticism. He was clearly excited and energized by these theoretical interventions. Yet this never compromised his regard for the literary and philosophical legacy of the elite clerical tradition: he continued to treat it with the utmost seriousness and respect.

His approach may best be seen in his response to Demiéville's earlier essay "Mirror of Mind." Demiéville's work may have been the first to place the sudden/gradual issues in a broad comparativist frame, noting parallels not only across Asia but in Western traditions as well. Luis did not reject Demiéville's comparativist project; quite the contrary, he seems to have taken it as a challenge. Luis too senses that there is a shared set of religious and existential concerns that run through diverse and even historically discontinuous discourse communities, and the collective responses to these concerns can be used to deduce a sort of philosophical "deep-structure" that cuts across time and place. But Luis' approach to this comparativist enterprise is one of "thick description"; his focus is on local inflection and difference. In other words, the culturally specific and local inflections often reflect, albeit obliquely, concerns that reach across cultural and historical divides.

So pace the intellectual Zeitgeist of the 1980s, there was still a place for the study of "Buddhism"—for treating Buddhism in the singular as referencing, in part, a set of overlapping soteriological and ethical problematics, along with a shared set of textual, conceptual, liturgical, and institutional resources for dealing with them. Buddhist studies could then be construed, without apology, as a comparative exercise. Luis writes: "no matter how disparate the religious, philosophical, and aesthetic ideas may be that we

subsume under the terms *sudden* and *gradual*, those ideas share enough of a common ground to make their comparison worthwhile." And to illustrate his approach he goes on to ask: "what can we learn from the questions raised and the solutions proposed during these controversies regarding the nature of the sudden-gradual polarity in this *particular set* of cultural contexts?"<sup>4</sup> It is his ability to balance the big picture with the local and particular that, I submit, makes Luis' work even more significant today.

So my point is simple: some would claim that scholarly interest in elite Buddhist literature is passé. They would castigate comparative, cross-cultural, and philosophical analyses as theoretically naive if not intellectually bankrupt. They prefer to focus instead on Buddhist popular culture, on material exotica, on alterity, and on genealogy. Such work, we are assured, will serve as a corrective to our misguided tendency to view premodern Buddhists as folks like us. But beyond rehearsing a critique now some fifteen or twenty years old, what is the future of work that reiterates only difference, alterity, and the exotic? Luis' work stands as a model of how to have one's cake and eat it too; of how to take Buddhist thought, or if you will, "Buddhism," seriously, while at the same time exemplifying theoretical sophistication and scholarly rigor.

---

<sup>4</sup> "Purifying Gold," 67.