

The Problem of Text and “Personality Context”: Intercultural Approach (Oriental Dimension)

Sergei Lepekhov

Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences

One of the central problems of society and a civilization was always the ratio of personality and common culture. One of these aspects is a hermeneutic problem of understanding and interpretation of the text, or as one of options, —a ratio of the text and a personal context. There are both generality and distinctions in approaches of various cultures to this problem. There are many parallels that can be drawn between the directions and results of the investigation of the European and Buddhist hermeneutic traditions. The European hermeneutics on the whole is known to be based on the presumption of the unique personal authorship of a text, a multitude of historical viewpoints and meanings. Thus, the problem of understanding and interpretation acts as a problem of combining differences. The mechanism of conveying the cultural traditions under such conditions inevitably turns into a mechanism of interpreting the message conveying a definite cultural meaning. Modifying the meaning of any message is supposed to be dictated by the very fact of the temporal distance between the moments of creating and reading the text. In a number of oriental cultures, we face a somewhat different understanding of the problems of authorship, communication, ontology, and existence and on the whole, with a different understanding of the very problem of understanding. Just like we admit that it is necessary to preserve all existing natural landscapes, in the cultural life, we must consider every existing culture and their bearers—ethnic groups self-valuable and necessary.

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1. Introduction

The problem of correlation between the personal and the general cultural always was one of the central problems of society and civilization. One of its aspects is a hermeneutical problem of understanding and interpretation of a text, or as a variant, the correlation of a text and a personal context. There are both commonalities and differences in the approaches to this problem in different cultures.

The notion “hermeneutics” meaning “the art of interpretation” is known to appear in Ancient Greece. Initially it was the interpretation of the signs gods sent to the humans. Thus hermeneutics was initially a correlation of sacred knowledge and profane knowledge, an understanding of the way the sacred world penetrates into the profane world. The problem of interpreting the sacred knowledge remains in the Christian theology as well. As patristic ideas evolves, there appears an extra problem of integrating different

Sergei Lepekhov, Ph.D., professor of Philosophy, deputy director of the Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia; main research fields: Buddhist Philosophy, Culture, and Geopolitical Problems of Buddhist Civilization. Email: lepekhov@yandex.ru.

interpretations of the main dogmas of the Christian teaching contained in the works by the patriarchs of the Christian church. As philosophy starts to digress from theology, hermeneutics focuses on the critical study of texts and there forms pure philosophical hermeneutics.

2. Hermeneutic Approaches in European Philosophy

A prominent role in the forming of philosophical hermeneutics was played by protestant theology claiming that people can learn the truths of the Holy Writ on their own, without the mediation of the Church. The traditions of protestant theology and philosophy were revised by F. Schleiermacher treating hermeneutics as a universal tool for all the humanities. As he sees it, all problems of interpretation are in fact the problems of understanding. Every spoken word and every text are treated by him as directly linked to the art of understanding. Moreover, the object of understanding is not the text mostly but the personality of the author. Grammatical interpretation for F. Schleiermacher is much less interesting than psychological one. The author’s personality can be understood directly as if by “turning one into another person” (Schleiermacher 1977). According to F. Schleiermacher, the possibility of such conversion is conditioned by the immersion into the common life and its integrity. Schleiermacher revised the problem of the criterion of understanding. He claims that the author should be understood better than he understands himself (Schleiermacher 1977). Thus, the author’s understanding by no means can pretend to be the standard of interpreting the text’s meaning. Moreover, this rule is universal and pertains to the sacred writings as well.

The approach of Wilhelm Dilthey has borrowed much from that of Schleiermacher, but he brought the problem of understanding into the historical plain. Wilhelm Dilthey sees “understanding” as an intuitive penetration into life by “growing accustomed to it,” “feeling it,” and “sympathy” to the culture of the past, and the culture as a whole is considered a universal method for the “sciences of spirit” as opposed to the “explanation” used in natural studies (Dilthey 1950).

According to W. Dilthey, the integrity of the human history is conditioned by the integrity of the human personality whereas the possibility of intersubjective relations is rooted in “life” itself seen as some unity. So hermeneutics is defined by W Dilthey as the art of understanding the “signs of life” contained in written texts (Dilthey 1950). The basis of hermeneutics is supposed to be “understanding psychology.” The desire to leave the boundaries of the narrow psychological definition of individuality and consciousness stimulated E. Husserl to formulate the basic principles of the method of “phenomenological reduction” which frees consciousness from its individual characteristics. At the same time, the search for solid foundations makes later E. Husserl turn to the notions of “horizon” and “life world,” making his phenomenology closer to “the philosophy of life” of W. Dilthey.

Heidegger (1959) treats the “life world” primarily as some language reality. There is some historical horizon of understanding hidden in the language which not only explains the past to us but also defines the language’s destiny. According to Heidegger (1959), it is not we who speak the language but it is the language that “speaks us.” Through the word, primarily the poetic one, we are able to “stand in the light of the true being.” Thus Heidegger’s hermeneutics is as if it returns to its ancient roots. Heidegger himself finds his understanding of the language similar to some stipulations of Zen Buddhism which is stated in his “Dialog between Japanese and a questioning one” (Heidegger 1959).

This dialog is particularly significant because it makes it possible to state somewhat similar results achieved by the European and Buddhist hermeneutic traditions which evolved independently from one another.

3. The Indian and Buddhist Hermeneutics

Buddhism is based on the ancient complex Veda tradition inherited many of its concepts—those of the language, sign, the marked and marking, recognition, understanding, and interpretation.

In Ancient India as well as in Ancient Greece, there existed a necessity of interpreting sacred texts. One can say that the role of interpretation in ancient India’s culture was even greater than that of ancient Greece since its commentaries was represented in the main bulk of the ancient Indian texts. Moreover in the Indian culture, the Buddhist culture as well, the function of a sacred text was never limited to mere understanding. It is the other way around in the Western culture which sometimes treats sacred texts as literary ones.

The Buddhist hermeneutics has evolved in the forming process of a vast Buddhist canon out of a necessity to correlate various viewpoints and variously used terminology. The possibility and even necessity of existence of different viewpoints in the Indian philosophy and consequently the necessity of their interpretation and understanding are rooted in its constitutive principles according to that philosophic viewpoint cannot be formulated without a detailed examination of his opponent’s viewpoint (certainly followed by its rejection). That is why the pluralism of viewpoints is essential to the Indian and Buddhist philosophy. The necessity to combine different viewpoints within one collection of sacred texts they belonged to according to their status called for their further interpretation.

The teaching of Buddha from the very beginning was hermeneutically directed since Buddha did not claim his sermons to be absolutely true. It was Dharma that which was absolutely true and was followed and taught by Buddha but could not be absolutely adequately expressed by words. Furthermore, since the sermons were addressed to different people with various levels of consciousness, one and the same content had to be expressed in different ways.

4. The Initial Principles of Buddhist Hermeneutics

The initial principles of Buddhist hermeneutics were expressed in the sutra “Mahaparinibbana” describing the four criteria according to which saying could be classified as “a word of Buddha.” Firstly, solid proofs that the words were heard from Buddha himself were needed. Usually all Buddhist sutras begin with concrete data on where, when, by whom, and in the presence of what witnesses a Buddha’s sermon was read. Secondly, an evidence of direct Buddha’s disciples is possible. Thirdly, evidence can be given by a group of elders. In the fourth place, an evidence given by only one elder can be enough if it does not differ from the main acknowledged dogmas of the Teaching (Dharma) and the code of moral rules.

Naturally a question arises: Which signs make it possible to reliably identify “the true word of Buddha?” This problem’s solution testifies to a sufficient hermeneutical experience of the early Buddhists. It is not for nothing that Luis Gomes (1987) defined their position as “hermeneutical pluralism” since the criterion mentioned in a number of the early texts including the sutra “Kaśyapa-parivarta” turns out to be exceptionally broad: “everything said well is said by Buddha.” These call for a more precise definition: What does it mean “everything said well?” The further development of Buddhist philosophic hermeneutics proved a possibility of two self excluding answers to this question. The first answer says: “everything said well” is said in concordance with the rules of logic. The second answer claims that logic can only make the truth closer but does not contain it.

A peculiar compromise combining these to opposite answers is reached in the sutra “Chatuh-pratisarana” formulating four primary hermeneutical rules of early Buddhism:

- (1) Focus on the Teaching (Dharma) but not the personality of the teacher (pudgala);
- (2) Follow the aim (artha) and meaning of a text and not the words it contains;
- (3) Follow the direct meaning (nitārtha) but not the interpretation (neyārtha);
- (4) Follow the intuitive and evident knowledge (jñāna) and not the reasonable knowledge (vijñāna).

5. Further Development of Buddhist Hermeneutics

The necessity to convey the meaning of the teaching in accordance with the abilities and opportunities of the listeners was stated in the Buddhist canon as well. Hence, there appears a logical necessity in a number of classifications. The first classification had to divide texts according to this or that hermeneutic criterion. The second one represented a typology of the listeners’ personalities in accordance with their ability to comprehend “the word of Buddha” in the form of a concrete teaching of this or that Buddhist school. There also existed the teaching’s classifications based on the methods used in concrete situations of the real life.

The sutra “Samdhinirmocana” dividing all Buddhist texts into three parts or “turns” is an example of a common classification of the first type. A classification of the second type is represented in Tsonghapa’s “Lam-rim.”

An example of using various methods depending on a concrete situation including an individual’s abilities is given in the sutra “Saddharmapundarika.” It contains the “tale of a burning house.” It reads that Buddha, in order to “lead his disciples out of a burning house” (samsara), uses a trick (upaya) speaking of the three ways of salvation corresponding to the “three chariots.” In reality, there is only one chariot—the chariot of the Bodhisattvas which is able to contain and save everybody.

There appeared a problem in front of Buddhist interpreters—which words of Buddha are to be treated as a trick (upaya) and which are a direct advice for action?

In order to solve the problem, the Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists had to develop complex classifications of schools in which a part of their teaching was classified as a preparative one, preceding the transition to the “final” teaching necessary to reach the “Complete and Final Awakening of Buddha.” The “Awakening” in the Buddhist philosophic hermeneutics was that only and absolute point, making it possible to escape the dead end of the “hermeneutical pluralism” and define the real criterion of the knowledge’s truthfulness.

6. A Comparison of European and Buddhist Hermeneutic Approaches

There are many parallels that can be drawn between the directions and results of the investigation of the European and Buddhist hermeneutic traditions. Moreover, the definition of this goal represents an independent hermeneutic problem.

The European hermeneutics on the whole is known to be based on the presumption of the unique personal authorship of a text, a multitude of historical viewpoints and meanings. Thus, the problem of understanding and interpretation acts as a problem of combining differences. The mechanism of conveying the cultural traditions under such conditions inevitably turns into a mechanism of interpreting the message conveying a definite cultural meaning. H. G. Gadamer in this connection writes that the task of narration is the most definite when there exist written texts. Everything recorded in the written form has something alien about it and therefore presents the same problem of understanding just like words said in a foreign language. An interpreter of a

written source like an interpreter of the God’s or human words removes incomprehension and makes the text understandable. This task may become harder when there has been realized a historical gap between the text and the translator. At the same time, it means that the tradition represented by both the translated text and its translator has become fragile.

Modifying the meaning of any message is supposed to be dictated by the very fact of the temporal distance between the moments of creating and reading the text.

In a number of oriental cultures, we face a somewhat different understanding of the problems of authorship, communication, ontology, and existence and on the whole, with a different understanding of the very problem of understanding.

The problem of understanding and interpretation of texts already appeared in the ancient Veda tradition. But the peculiarities of the Veda hermeneutics originated in the fact that neither learning sacred texts by heart and learning to meditate, nor transiting the truth about the Atman was the main content of the traditional Veda learning. Its main purpose was not the reproduction of the text but the personality of the teacher giving a new spiritual birth to his pupil. The living personality of the teacher as a spiritual being was exactly that content that through a sacred text was passed from one generation to another in the process of translating the Veda culture. But as the practice has proved this way leading to a dead end—no matter how perfect the methods (mostly unconscious) of imitating their teacher’s conduct were, they were unable to completely get rid of their own “personality layers” added by every new generation to the process of translating the tradition. But the essence of the Veda ritual insisted on its invariability. The efforts aimed to make the transition of knowledge more reliable through various methods of protection from innovations and thorough control expressed in stricter requirements of the teachers, a more aristocratic and conservative Veda tradition.

Bhagavad-Gita offered another method of preserving the traditional Indian culture based on making it possible for the bearers of the tradition to directly address the primary teacher of this tradition (in Bhagavad-Gita it is Krishna) and be given spiritual birth directly from him without any intermediary teachers.

Buddhism solves the problem of “intermediary teachers” and the “tradition founder” even more radically. The personality including the one of the teacher is simply omitted. This is exactly what Buddha has meant not only in his teaching of the absence of the individual “self” (anatmavada) but also when he tells his disciples “to search for shelter in no one but themselves.” Then what is it that is expressed in culture and what can be its purpose?

Whereas the personality of the primary teacher (riśi) in the Veda tradition primarily represents a definite basic historical type containing characteristics of real people and characters of myths, their main function being the demonstration of ideal examples of conduct significant in the given culture, then in Buddhism, such personal patterns even they do exist in the canon (and in abundance), play not the main part but just a secondary one. The general laws of psychology in correlation with the main principles of the Buddhist Dharma are much more important than certain real and ideal personalities.

Estimating and comparing the role of Buddha Śakyamuni with the role of his teaching, Dharma, one can recall a well known fragment extract from the sutra “Mahāparinibbana”: “Be your own lanterns, search for shelter in yourself, do not look for shelter outside. Let Dharma be your lantern, let Dharma be your shelter” (Tasmātiḥānanda, attadīpā viharatha attasara nā anaññasara nā, dhammadīpā dhammasara. nā anaññasara nā). Thus, leaving this world Buddha leaves no successor. The usual task of the successor is to correctly interpret the teacher’s words. Buddha seems not to care that his teaching is conveyed in the authentic form. He even tries

to make a boundary between himself and his teaching, Dharma, highlighting its impersonal character. Still, the impersonality did not imply the supernatural.

As we can see, the divergence in this point both with the ancient Indian tradition and more recent Bhagavad-Gita tradition is striking! Not in the Indian tradition only—in any other religious traditions such attitude to the Supreme teacher as we see in Buddhism is impossible. The differences in the attitude to the canonical literature between Buddhism and other religions are also significant. In Buddhism unlike Christianity and Islam, there were no clearly marked differences between canonical and non canonical literature which in its turn did not let distinguish “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy.” It was typical of theoretical contacts among different Buddhist schools that they did not involve rivalry or hostility but that what P. Hacker (1978) has called “inclusivism” that is a striving to add to one’s teaching everything that was recognized as valuable and useful from the opponents’ arsenal. The Buddhist literature does not distinguish any certain text acquaintant with which would have the same enormous religious and moral meaning for Buddhist believers as an acquaintance with the Bible or the Koran for a Muslim. Let’s pay attention to the fact that alongside with the expression “a believing Buddhist,” there is a quite possible expression “an unbelieving Buddhist,” and it would not appear such a nonsense as “an unbelieving Christian” or “an unbelieving Muslim.”

Not the Almighty but a common man was talking through Buddha’s mouth and he talked like all people usually do, that is according to a definite communicating situation, mental abilities, and intentions of the collocutors, there was no reason to consider one text more sacred than another as containing “the absolute Truth” unlike the others. Everything that Buddha said was primarily related to Dharma, but at the same time, the notion of Dharma and what was said by Buddha did not coincide completely.

In the Buddhist traditions, the meaning of a text (written or oral) and the meaning of acts of conduct change from one into another and continue on another. The presence of universally recognized “personality” samples, behavioral patterns in classically significant situations made it possible to use concrete behavioral acts and psychic conditions not only as the signs and sign structures relevant to the sign structure of a classical Buddhist text but as a direct continuation of the text itself.

From its very inception, theoretical Buddhism has developed as hermeneutical metapsychology. A number of Buddhist texts represent basic (i.e., significant from the Buddhist perspective) psychic states and their patterns of emergence, transition, and decline. That is to say, the sign structure of a Buddhist text reflects the individual’s psychological structure. From universally acknowledged personal models and behavior patterns in classical significant situations, examples of which are given in the Buddhist cultural tradition, certain individual behavioral acts and psychic states started to be used as signs and sign structures, which not only correlated with the sign structure of a classical Buddhist text, but were also direct continuation of the text itself. The reading of a Buddhist text assumes not just the creation of an objective conceptual model that exists independent of the subject, but also an immediate “building into” the ideal psychological structure which is represented by the text and assumes the changing of one’s own psychic state concurrently with one’s assimilation of the text. That is, the reading of a Buddhist text presupposes not only its comprehension, but also its simultaneous practical realization. Therefore, the procedure of initiation and special permissions during which the Master makes certain of the adept’s ability and readiness for the contact with the text precedes the reading of the text. All of one’s life after the introduction to the text can be considered (and usually is considered by Buddhists) to be some form of “behavioral” and “existential” commentary on the text. The Buddhist text not only assumes this possibility, but regards such a personal commentary as necessary; this necessity is reflected in the text structure and its lexical peculiarities.

Adepts' lives, considered to be existential commentaries, are supposed to have a common foundation which is a text regarded as a source of existence. The “Buddhist dialogue” examined from this perspective is not a form of a personal communication. The participants of the “Buddhist dialogue” only seem to convey something about each other to each other. In reality, there is no direct communication: Both participants of the dialogue “communicate” more with own selves and with the basic text. The behavior unfolds as a succession of interpretants which, due to the accurate correlation with the sign structure of the canonical text, become independent sign vehicles and form the secondary semantic structure. Thus, the interpreter's task is to understand correctly and master the modeling structure of the text and identify one's actual psychic state and determine its place on the scale of the psychic states of the text and of the Universe's perspective of Buddhist, as well.

One of the factors beneficial to the quick penetration and dissemination of Buddhism to the east of India was its “textual compatibility” with the cultural traditions of China, Korea, and Japan. Buddhists having a vast canon by the time of coming to China met a real literary cult there and the highly literate elite prepared to perceive complex philosophical ideas. The quick adaptation of Buddhism was also facilitated by the similarity of many Buddhist ideas to the Chinese autochthonic tradition (the Dao tradition), and they could be presented with the use of quite similar Chinese terms. An especially significant role at the initial stage of the spreading of Buddhism in China was played by the translation school of Kumarajiva who systematized the principles of translating Buddhist texts into Chinese and developed the basic Chinese Buddhist terminology. Among all Chinese Buddhist schools, Chan probably had the strongest influence on Chinese literature and arts, making a start of an original aesthetic tradition based on the ideas of Prajñāpāramitā and Madhyamaka.

The Buddhist hermeneutics evolved as a realization of a great task—to prove that the variety of texts and methods of expression of the Buddhist canon contain the unity of the teaching's plan and purpose. The movement along the “hermeneutic circle” was understood in Buddhism not as overcoming the historic difference between the author's and recipient's consciousness but as a movement of a self-perfecting personality from a darkened consciousness to an awakening one. There are four significant levels of Buddha's sermon pointed out in the “Mahaprajñāpāramitā-śāstra”: *laukika* (the profane one), *pratipakṣika* (acting as an antidote against mental darkening), *pratipaurikṣika* (conditioned by a certain type of personality the sermon is addressed to), and *paramarthaika* (the absolute one). The historical progress in the Buddhist hermeneutics has a tendency to reduce to the intra-personal dynamics. Spiritual self-perfection is understood as purification from everything accidental and as liberation from the chains of the form, including the form of expression. The assimilation of the text to the personality and the personality to the text led to a search for a perfect “personality-text” structure, to defining the “living word” from the “dead word” of the Chan Buddhism, to the “true word” of Renyan (真言), and to the liberation of the text from signs. Thus, the ideal that the Buddhist hermeneutics strived for came to the reduction of all meanings to one, all texts to one, all signs of the text to one sign symbolizing the final absence of signs and expression. There is a short sutra “*Ekakṣāra-prajñāpāramitā*” (The Perfection of Wisdom in One Letter, the Mother of All Tathāgatas) in the vast collection of *prajñāpāramitā* texts in which Buddha conveys his teaching through a single sign—the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet “A.”

The whole aggregate of the notions introduced by various Buddhist philosophic schools at various times and interpreted differently by them led to the necessity of forming a special hermeneutic approach. The Buddhist exegetics has proposed to divide sutras into those accepting direct interpreting and those demanding additional commentaries. But the consistent realization of this principle in every concrete text leads to a situation when every term used requires a commentating text which needs another commentating text to make it

more precise and so forth. In some degree in reality, everything was like that, and the commentaries for the commentaries of the main classical texts are created nowadays as well which have conditioned the insurmountable amount of Buddhist literature. Finally, there was a need in an independent criterion of understanding, and such criterion was the logic and the common sense. As Buddhists themselves admit, “this means that from the viewpoint of the Mahayana tradition reason is more important than the sacred text.”

Thus, modern Buddhism having faced just like the other religious traditions the necessity of correlating its teaching with the modern universal scientific knowledge from the viewpoint of philosophy, hermeneutics and culture appears to be most prepared to interpret its sacred texts according to the modern science. The cultural aspect of this problem also comes from the fact that Buddhists in order to define their teaching have never used the word “Buddhism.” They defined it by the word “Dharma” which was understood as the most fundamental traits. Furthermore, Buddha himself has stated that his sermon is only a part of Dharma and not the whole. In this sense, a Buddhist considers the scientific knowledge as Dharma as well as all the other religious teachings.

7. Conclusion

It is exactly this approach that can be adopted as a model for elaborating the concept of a cultural reform in developing countries since it combines the principle of cultural pluralism and respect for the national traditions with the principle of the universal scientific knowledge and universally recognized human values. This principle does not provide for a struggle of different religious ethics and civilizations no matter if it is a Christian, Judaist, Islam, or Lao-tzu one. A cultural reform both in developing and developed countries must be based on the necessity to preserve the culture and nature as a basis for the biological and social life. Just like we admit that it is necessary to preserve all existing natural landscapes, in the cultural life, we must consider every existing culture and their bearers—ethnic groups self-valuable and necessary. If someone claims that certain cultural traditions are backward and hindering the technological progress and economics, there is an argument saying that a slowed down rate of technological and economic development with the culture kept intact is more acceptable than economical records leading to a desert in the direct and literal sense of the word.

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