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Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan
Buddhist Monk***

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A Review of *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping:
The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*

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The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk. By Georges B. J. Dreyfus. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. 445 pages. ISBN: 0-520-23260-7.

After fifteen years of Tibetan scholastic training during the 1970s and early 1980s, Sangye Samdrup became the first Westerner to achieve the Ge-luk degree of Geshe (*dge shes*). In 2000, when I arrived at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, where Sangye Samdrup had studied, his reputation as an excellent debater was still intact. He is known to readers of this journal by his European name, Georges Dreyfus, and for his outstanding scholarship on Indian and Tibetan philosophy. In *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping* he brings his considerable understanding of Western religious studies, philosophy, and cultural theory together with his experience as a monk and his vast knowledge of Tibetan traditions to describe and analyze the elite, scholastic education of the great Tibetan monasteries.

Dreyfus characterizes the intellectual culture of Tibetan monastic elites as “scholasticism.” Scholasticism, he argues, is chiefly distinguished by the reinterpretation of canonical texts within the contextual framework of the authority of a tradition.¹ (Thus, Dreyfus departs from most inquiries into scholasticism, which, in the context of Islam and Christianity, are oriented by the tension between faith and reason.) Because of this constant reinterpretation, Dreyfus argues that “tradition,” as exemplified by the Tibetan scholastic tradition, cannot simply be understood in contrast to a hegemonic modernity; it is not a “static traditionalism.” *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping* shows the Tibetan, monastic intellectual tradition to be complex and always undergoing processes of reinterpretation. This reinterpretation is carried out through employment of the intellectual practices of the tradition, which in Tibetan monastic scholasticism are memorization, commentary, and dialectical

debate. The most significant contributions of this book are Dreyfus's detailed descriptions and sophisticated analyses of these practices, making it the unrivalled account of Tibetan scholastic education.

In Part One, Dreyfus provides a context in which to understand Tibetan scholastic practice. Thus, chapter 1 is a schematic introduction to Tibetan Buddhism that focuses on the primary elements of the tradition, delineates its historical development, and presents its most significant figures. While this chapter is one of the best brief overviews of Tibetan Buddhism and forms a suitable introduction to the text, there is little here that is new on the history of Buddhism in Tibet. In chapter 2, Dreyfus gives an overview of Tibetan monasticism and the monasteries within which scholastic practice exists. Here, Dreyfus is particularly interested in analyzing Tibetan monasteries as residences for monks, ritual communities, and corporate entities. Monasteries are primarily constituted by ritual practice, he emphasizes, not the intellectual practices that are at the center of this book; most monasteries did not provide intellectual training and most monks did not pursue training in scholastic culture. In addition to general themes, such as the role of monasticism in Buddhism, the function of the Vinaya, and the phenomenon of "mass monasticism" in Tibet, Dreyfus gives detailed accounts of the great Ge-luk monastic seats near Lhasa, the constitution and administration of Tibetan monasteries, and the diverse activity of Tibetan monks. Chapter 3 describes the typical career of a Tibetan monk, focusing particularly on his relationship with his teachers from the time he arrives at the monastery through the course of his education. The descriptions of the daily life of a monk are fascinating and there are few as detailed as these. Moreover, Dreyfus consistently provides insightful commentary, drawing on Tibetan and Western texts as well as the many stories he has heard. He is also able to draw from his own experience, especially his long studies with well-known teachers, including Geshe Rab-ten, Lati Rin-po-che, Gen Nyi-ma, and Gen Lob-zang Gya-tso.

Following the contextual material of chapters 1-3, Dreyfus turns in Part Two to the practices which, he argues, constitute Tibetan scholastic culture: memorization, commentary, and debate. Memorization of ritual texts is the first task of young monks upon entering the monastery, regardless of whether they will pursue the scholastic curriculum. This enables participation in the rituals that shape and constitute the monastic community: The memorization and recitation of texts with a style and tune peculiar to each monastery provides a discipline shared by all its monks. Once admitted as a full member of the monastery, the first task of the monk pursuing a scholastic curriculum is the memorization of classic philosophical texts. Following memorization the text can be assimilated, ordered, and interpreted through commentary by the teacher and debate with other monks. As Dreyfus argues, through memorization of the most important texts, knowledge is not simply

retrieved when necessary but permeates the monk's thinking and relationship to the world. In addition, he claims, drawing on his own experience, memorization is similar to meditation in that it brings mental stability and equanimity.

The philosophical texts memorized by monks are generally Indian treatises. These are not simply important for understanding a particular discipline, Dreyfus argues, they provide the material and thereby form the field of study. Thus, Nāgārjuna's *Treatise of the Middle Way* and Candrakīrti's *Introduction to the Middle Way* not only shed light on Madhyamaka philosophy, they constitute the field of Madhyamaka philosophy itself. This "text-centeredness," Dreyfus argues, is a significant feature of scholastic culture. The interpretation of important texts, then, becomes a central site of scholastic practice. It is the task of commentators, Dreyfus claims, to achieve a rationally coherent interpretation that adjudicates between conflicting claims, thus meeting the demands of reason within the framework of the authority of tradition. Dreyfus devotes chapters 5-9 to a description and analysis of commentarial practice in Tibetan scholasticism.

Tibetan scholastics are introduced to a multiplicity of commentaries and are encouraged to develop their own interpretative capacities. Thus, they learn classic Indian commentaries on the memorized text. These Indian commentaries, however, were so obscure that between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries Tibetans composed their own more accessible explications and summaries. Each major monastery then developed its own manuals to provide easier summaries of the most difficult points and material for debate. These monastic manuals and compendiums of knowledge came to dominate the intellectual life of monastic institutions and gained an almost canonical status.

In addition to these layers of written commentary, the authoritative teacher also gives an oral commentary on the text. With its teachings, Dreyfus argues, oral commentary transmits the authority of the tradition. It is through oral transmission that the understanding of the student is legitimized by a lineage traced back to the historical Buddha. According to Dreyfus, oral commentary, along with other oral practices such as memorization and debate, which give Tibetan monasteries their hum and murmur, constitute rational technologies that assure the continuity of tradition. Thus, he rejects the popular approach that relates Tibetan oral commentary to the "mystique of orality" — the primary spoken word that is often said to be closer to nature, holistic, participatory, situational, and belonging to a world of pre-reflective experience in contrast to the abstract, analytic, homeostatic character of written language.

Dreyfus's analysis of commentarial practice draws on Tibetan interpretations as well as contemporary Western theoretical resources. According to Tibetan authors, the great Indian and Tibetan commentaries reinscribe the original meaning of the root text, bringing clarity to what was obscure and articulating the mean-

ing that was always already present. Thus, Candrakīrti's text is thought to reproduce with greater clarity and accessibility a meaning that is implicitly present in Nāgārjuna's text. Each level of commentary is projected back onto the root text and thereby gains its authority. Drawing on the strategies of the post-structuralist critique of commentarial practice, Dreyfus also indicates the limits and aporias of commentary. Derrida, for example, rejects the privileged interpretations of authority, arguing that there is no definitive, interpretive closure, no final articulation of the truth. Tibetan authors do acknowledge a plurality of interpretive possibilities, as evidenced by competing interpretations of important texts. But this plurality is generally mapped out according to a doxographic hierarchy and thus does not indicate the impossibility of closure. Indeed, the Buddhist path is motivated by the goal of definitive closure, a closure that is thought to be present in the founding texts of the tradition.

Upon hearing an authoritative commentary, it is still necessary for a monk to investigate the meaning for himself. The primary practice for this investigation in the Tibetan scholastic context is dialectical debate. In chapters 10-12 Dreyfus presents an inquiry into the nature of debate and its function in Tibetan scholasticism. Two views have come to dominate the considerable literature on Tibetan monastic debate. Some scholars regard debate as an intellectually empty ritual derived originally from Indian Buddhist practices that long ago lost all philosophical significance. Others analyze Tibetan debate according to rules of logic, as if it were an embodiment of syllogistic or formal logic. Dreyfus is critical of both interpretations. Instead, he analyzes Tibetan monastic debates as "dialectical practices aimed at reaching greater understanding and developing crucial intellectual habits, such as a spirit of inquiry and critical acumen" (200). Tibetan debate, according to Dreyfus, is like a game. It is both competitive and cooperative and oriented towards winning an argument. Debate is performative and fun, and, as anyone who has watched debate knows, it can be theatrical and very physical, with occasional pushing and shoving. As Dreyfus notes, debate fully engages monks, which is why many are so fond of it. It is dialogic, and thus open-ended, as well as strategic. Complex and instructive, debate teaches participants and spectators both skills and new information. It is not, however, a search for certain knowledge. Nor does it necessarily follow strict laws of logic; if one cannot provide a counterexample one must accept a universal conclusion even though the universal conclusion has not been proved. Indeed, debate seems to have no immediate goal beyond itself, and yet, like a game, it can still serve a greater purpose.

Dreyfus devotes his final chapter on debate to the question of how debate is related to intellectual inquiry. There is a general agreement amongst Tibetan scholastics regarding the pedagogical value of debate in internalizing their tradition. However, some scholars, for example Dreyfus's teacher Geshe Rab-ten, regard debate

simply as a way of internalizing and reinforcing the teachings, while others, such as Gen Nyi-ma, understand debate to be also a mode of inquiry into the scholastic tradition. Dreyfus reports that many scholars, once they have mastered the rules, speak of an “exhilarating sense of openness that debate makes possible” (268). Based on how he characterizes his own experience, his sympathies seem to be with Gen Nyi-ma. Indeed, Dreyfus gives an eloquent account of how repeated practice of debate can cultivate the capacity to ask pertinent questions and not to accept apparently plausible explanations; to nourish the practice of a hermeneutics of suspicion. Debate is a training in critical thinking, an analytic practice through which a young scholar learns logic and epistemology. Yet, Dreyfus insists, debate also constitutes a moral training, for monks quickly learn not to be too attached to their own view, to lose with grace, and to admit mistakes. This wisdom is manifest in part, Dreyfus argues, by the way in which questions raised by debate enable the student to liberate himself from excessive attachment to opinions (289), a liberation that constitutes a significant aspect of the Buddhist path.

Throughout his discussion of Tibetan scholastic practices, Dreyfus is sensitive to the differences that exist in Tibetan traditions. Ge-luk institutions, in which, prior to 1959, students often debated ten hours a day, make debate their primary scholastic methodology and thereby have a curriculum different from the curricula of Nying-ma, Sa-gya, and Ka-gyü institutions. The three non-Ge-luk traditions each have their own curricula, but they share a commitment to the primacy of commentary, which distinguishes them from the Ge-luk. Dreyfus presents detailed descriptions of both “debate institutions” and “commentarial institutions,” including curricula and primary texts and commentaries, the history that formed their pedagogies, daily schedules, methods of examination, awarding of degrees, and other features of the institutionalization of knowledge and the increase of sectarianism.

The purpose of Part Three is to reflect on the scholastic practices described in the previous chapters. Dreyfus focuses on two questions: 1) the tension between freedom of inquiry and the authority of tradition, and 2) the conception of rationality that functions in Tibetan scholastic culture. The question of limitations to inquiry in the context of Tibetan scholasticism is raised by the extraordinary homogeneity and orthodoxy that characterizes Tibetan intellectual traditions, especially the Ge-luk.² Dreyfus argues that though there is a genuine freedom of inquiry, this freedom is limited by both internal and external restrictions. The internal restrictions arise with the systematic education that scholastics receive. In Ge-luk scholastic institutions, for example, students learn the basic rules of logic and debate through the study of introductory texts. It is through these texts that many of the conceptual categories that govern future inquiry in the great texts of the tradition are learned. The definitions and methodologies employed by Tibetan scholastic education instill a view of the world as a meaningful totality, despite

the anti-essentialist Madhyamaka philosophy to which Tibetan scholastics adhere. Schooled in the categories of a particular tradition of Tibetan scholastic thought, the possibility of thinking outside that tradition is greatly reduced. For young Ge-luk students, who do not study the commentaries of other schools, alternative interpretations are inaccessible until their worldview is fully formed. Of equal importance in limiting inquiry are interventions, including friendly dissuasion, ridicule, and various forms of rebuke, such as verbal attacks on a teacher or his students, or rarely, a monastic sanction. Occasionally the government would intervene, as its power was derived from the Ge-luk monastic seats and it required stability within the big monasteries. Even today, the mere threat of these various interventions leads freethinking or dissenting scholars to self-censor or leave the monasteries, following the well-known example of Ge-dün Chö-pel. Despite his detailed descriptions of these limitations to inquiry, Dreyfus insists that the tension between the authority of tradition and freedom of inquiry is productive of significant thinking, for without creative reinterpretation the tradition would degenerate and lose its authority.

In one of the most philosophically interesting chapters, Dreyfus sets out to “highlight some of the differences between traditional and modern conceptions of rationality” (295). He argues that Tibetan scholastic conceptions of rationality are embedded in the texts that constitute fields of study together with the background of a universe alive with various supersensible entities that require special practices to maintain well-being, including exorcism, divination, and propitiation. According to Tibetan scholastics, Dreyfus argues, “using reasoning to discuss the merits of [Shuk-den, a protector deity] makes perfect sense, whereas this application of rationality seems incongruous to modern thinkers. This gap underlines the degree to which Tibetan scholastic rationality remains embedded in the order of the world and hence is significantly different from modern rationality” (304).³ For Dreyfus, in Tibetan scholastic practice, rationality functions within horizons it cannot transcend and is thus different from “modern rationality.”

While much of Dreyfus’s description is compelling, I believe his analysis could benefit from more refined terminology. Dreyfus moves ambiguously between reason and rationality, as if these two terms referred to the same faculty (295-96). Most Western philosophers, however, distinguish between reason, or *nous*, *intellectus*, and *Vernunft*, and rationality, or *logos*, *ratio*, and *Verstand*. Rationality, as Dreyfus notes, is indeed characterized by presenting reasons for one’s claims and thus providing proofs for one’s beliefs. However, premodern Western philosophers argue that rationality does not provide the first principles upon which its arguments are founded. Thus, rationality requires a distinct faculty to achieve and ensure the correctness of its premises if it is to guarantee the correctness of its conclusions. According to Plato, for example, intuition provides first principles; for Aristotle it

is induction. Thus, reason provides a unified foundation for rationality to operate. Keeping in mind the distinction between reason and rationality, it seems to me that the primary difference between Tibetan scholastic practices and modern scientific discourse is not so much a different conception of rationality, as Dreyfus claims, but a different understanding of legitimate sources of first principles.

Dreyfus's analysis could also benefit from further distinctions between different kinds of rationalities that cannot be reduced to each other. Modern Western philosophers, for the most part, reject the hierarchical structure of reason and rationality; instead they argue for a multiplicity of competing rationalities. Both the Continental philosophers Dreyfus employs in this book and many of the recent analytic thinkers he uses elsewhere have agreed on this point.⁴ Dreyfus is right to emphasize the difference between Tibetan scholastic discourse and modern science, a difference that is often obscured both by Tibetans and Western scholars. However, there are also forms of rationality operative in the contemporary West outside "modern scientific rationality." The difference between Western religious, moral, and aesthetic rationalities on the one hand, and cognitive or scientific rationality on the other, is no less perplexing than the difference between the rationality that operates in Tibetan scholastic inquiries into logic and epistemology and the rationality operative in discussions of protective deities. There is no one "modern rationality" and there is no reason to expect the complex and diverse Tibetan tradition to practice any single "traditional" rationality.

The Sound of Two Hands Clapping is carefully argued and will undoubtedly be the definitive account of Tibetan scholastic culture for many years. It will be of great interest to anyone who has spent time in a Tibetan monastery or is interested in Tibetan monastic education. More generally, it offers much to anyone interested in Buddhist studies, for despite its focus on Tibetan scholastic education, it is a far-ranging study that addresses with clarity and persuasive argument a number of important questions currently debated in Western scholarship. This book also has much to say on the role of intellectual practice in religious life and merits reading by scholars and thoughtful practitioners from other traditions. Though this is not an apology for any particular form of Buddhism, after finishing this book it is easy to understand how Dreyfus could describe his Geshe exams as "an exhilarating conclusion to what I still consider to have been the most fruitful period of my life" (266).

Notes

¹Initially, Dreyfus's definition of scholasticism seems excessively broad. The example of Heidegger as an "unwitting scholastic" (336 n.13) left me confused. But, in later chapters Dreyfus's discussion of Tibetan scholastic practices makes his understanding of scholasticism quite clear.

²In the Ge-luk tradition it is generally believed that Dzong-ka-ba and his disciples have already articulated the definitive interpretations of Indian Buddhism. The task for scholastics, then, is to study the correct views and not to emphasize new or original literary production. For this reason, though literacy was widespread in premodern Tibet, the ability to write was not valorized by scholastics. Geshe Rabten, for example, joked that he was "one of the "great scholars" in Tibet who could not write his own name" (120). Dreyfus shows how this repression of writing in Ge-luk institutions reinforces the conservative power of tradition.

³For what is perhaps the best analysis of the Shuk-den controversy, which led to the murder of his teacher, Gen Lob-zang Gya-tso, see Dreyfus, "The Shuk-den affair: History and Nature of a Quarrel," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21 (1999): 227-70.

⁴The turn to a multiplicity of rationalities begins, arguably, with Kant, for whom reason (*Vernunft*) does not provide first principles but only a certain perspective of totality. For Kant, it is rationality (*Verstand*, traditionally translated as "understanding") that provides first principles through its categories. What is equally important in understanding Modern rationality is the recognition, with Kant, of different kinds of judgments and different types of rationality. This is explicitly claimed by Habermas, who argues for three autonomous kinds of rationality that mirror Kant's three Critiques: pure theoretical or cognitive, moral, and aesthetic. According to Habermas, these rationalities ensure their own first principles and methodologies and thus one cannot be reduced to the other; there is no one underlying rationality. Cognitive rationality, for example, cannot be employed to resolve moral or aesthetic issues. With regard to the question of a plurality of rationalities, Postmodern philosophers generally agree with Modern thinkers, though they tend to emphasize a greater multiplicity of rationalities, including the kind of religious rationality that functions in Tibetan folk practices. Moreover, Lyotard and others argue, there can be, and often are, irresolvable differences between rationalities that cannot be adjudicated, for there is no recourse to an ultimate standpoint.