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The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy

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A Review of *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy*

Douglas L. Berger¹

The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy. By Jan Westerhoff. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 9780198732662 (hardback), \$40.00US.

Oxford University's Jan Westerhoff has given us numerous and extremely valuable contributions on Buddhist philosophy in India, including his general work on Nāgārjuna and his translation of the Mādhyamika founder's *Vigrahavyāvartani*, along with several works of broader scope on ontological categories and reality. In the present volume, a contribution to the *History of Philosophy* series by Oxford University Press, Westerhoff provides us with a survey of Indian Buddhist thought from roughly the turn of the first millennium C.E. to the dawn of the thirteenth century. This survey is both broad-ranging and detailed. It covers the various schools of Abhidharma, the major philosophers Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and the most important debates in which they were involved, along with various other philosophers from the associated "schools" of Buddhist thought. The range and specificity of the work render it enormously beneficial for both the general reader and for the specialist. But the volume does not merely take us on

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a journey through the intellectual history of what the author has labeled Buddhism's "golden age" in India; it argues throughout for a nuanced and thoughtful unity of Buddhist philosophy, even while directly revealing its internal diversity.

Before articulating this unifying theme of *The Golden Age*, I will provide an overview of the book's structure and contents, which, I believe, will crystalize the unifying theme. In terms of structure, the book is superbly reader-friendly. It opens with not only a lucid introduction but with several charts of Buddhist schools, texts, and thinkers that will aid the introductory reader in particular. Such basic frameworks are often not provided in the otherwise excellent (but dense) texts in English on the Indian philosophical tradition as a whole, and that lack can make the sheer weight of the covered materials daunting. The entirety of *The Golden Age* is even further enhanced by extraordinarily helpful subject headings in the margins of the text, which, being more detailed than the standard section headings, keep the reader attuned to exactly what is being discussed. Given both the breadth and depth of the content, these marginal guideposts make reference and orientation during reading and review extremely easy.

In the book's introduction, Westerhoff lays out the plan of the journey, vowing to consider Indian Buddhist philosophy in terms of four features: arguments, texts, meditative practices, and historical background. We are dealing in this text with forms of thought and practice that developed from several centuries to a millennium and a half after the historical Buddha's lifetime. Therefore, we should see the claims of each successive and interacting movement of Buddhism not as attempts to pristinely and solely represent the ideas and values of the Buddha, but as taking the "seeds" of ideas associated with the Buddha's teaching and helping them "germinate" in a wide field of needs and contexts (12). In other words, the introduction emphasizes the importance of debate, commentary, and doxography, especially as these depict not the static nature but the development and dynamicity of Buddhist philosophical

thought. At the same time, Buddhism's variegated monastic claims to authority in rendering their respective teachings as consistent with the words and intentions of the Buddha should still be respected (24-28). What we are tasked with then in studying the history of Buddhist thought is not a "quest for the historical Buddha" that adjudges to what degree different schools of Buddhism remained faithful to or departed from the originary teachings and practices. Instead, we will hit upon "soft" hermeneutic criteria that will allow us to understand why any given school of thought chose to grow certain seeds of the Buddha's realizations and practices in the ways they did.

The Abhidharma chapter begins by describing the notion of Abhidharma itself, the genre and functions of its literature, and the extents to which the treatises represent both authentic Buddhist philosophical tendencies and introduce later innovations regarding Buddha nature and divine Buddha existence. The focus of the chapter is trained on five Abhidharma schools, the Theravāda—with special emphasis on the Kathāvatthu—the Mahāsaṃgīkas, Sautrāntikas, Puggalavādins and, to the largest extent, the Sarvāstivādins, given the expansiveness of their respective influences on future Buddhist thought (43-44).

The Mahāsaṃgīkas prove themselves to be pivotal for the development of certain ideas in Indian Buddhist thought, such as their emphasis on the emptiness of all things (not merely persons) and on the "luminosity" of the mind that serves as the potential for awakening in all sentient beings (43-49). Westerhoff spends some time analyzing the argumentative structures of another crucial treatise, the Kathāvatthu, which addresses and refutes a variety of opposing Buddhist views regarding the illusory nature of the historical Buddha's appearance in the world and confrontations with Buddhist Personalists, in order to define the orthodoxy of its composers and readers (49-55). The author then considers the Buddhist Personalists in their attempts to pull together the "minimal framework" of the *skandhas* and the "maximal framework" of continuous experience which, even if the composite of those frameworks

does not overtly construct a Buddhist version of a “self” doctrine, depicts beings that seem to all other Buddhists as “self-like” (55-60).

The next account is of the Sarvāstivādins, with particularly virtuous and skillfully explicated analyses of their five theories of relations between past, present, and future entities as well as of their conceptions of causal efficacy (*kāritra*) and self-nature (*svabhāva*) (60-73). The chapter concludes with a section on the Sautrāntikas and their conviction that the idea of “momentariness” most accurately represented the Buddha’s teaching of impermanence and their own meditative insights (73-83). Given how deeply influential these early Buddhist scholastic views were on developing major movements of Buddhism over the next 1000 years, both in terms of influence and by way of opposition, this chapter is especially valuable.

The following chapter turns to the author’s specialization in Indian Buddhist thought, Madhyamaka. After a general historical background on Nāgārjuna, Westerhoff outlines themes that relate Nāgārjuna to the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature: a critique of Abhidharma, a doctrine of illusionism, and an explicit acceptance of contradiction. Particularly important components of these factors to Nāgārjuna were the notions that all dharmas were empty (101), that a comprehensive illusionism would render the transition from saṃsāra to nirvāṇa itself illusory (104), and, despite the absence of citations of Mahāyāna works in his *yukti* treatises, an embrace of the Mahāyāna style of contradictions in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*’s dedicatory verse (106-07).

In Westerhoff’s estimation, what really makes the case that Nāgārjuna is a Mahāyāna philosopher, even with the comparative lack of textual citations in his works, are Nāgārjuna’s arguments against *svabhāva* and the argument that Nāgārjuna’s work posits an illusionism, though of a “communal” variety, based on MMK 17:31-33 (115-17). Clearly, whether Nāgārjuna should be categorized as an “illusionist,” apart from some textual attacks on certain concepts or approaches to conceptualization, is a matter of lasting debate. Nonetheless, Westerhoff insists,

that the embrace of contradiction resides in what Nāgārjuna says about there being no ultimately non-empty nor empty thing, and how the two truths theory he embraces enables contradictions to stand between them without being “domesticated” within some more encompassing scheme (117-20).

The remainder of the chapter has very fine sections on commentators, Buddhapālita, Bhāvaviveka, Candrakīrti, Śantarākṣita, Kamālaśīla, and then on Madhyamaka-Nyāya clashes over *pramāṇas*. Of special note in Westerhoff’s rehearsal of the later Tibetan doxographical contraposition between Bhāvaviveka and Cāndrakīrti is his taking note of the fact that, in the Indian tradition, the latter was not a particularly influential figure.

Chapter three contains an insightful exposition of the Yogācāra school of thought and practice. The beginning of the chapter emphasizes the importance of the *Laṅkāvatāra* and *Samdhinirmocana* Sūtras in the formation of Yogācāra, and then turns to a brief exposition of Maitreya and Asaṅga. On page 151, Westerhoff observes that, while Nāgārjuna’s texts can be clearly rooted in Mahāyāna, the early Yogācāra authors are more properly seen as emerging from pre-Mahāyāna intellectual traditions. Although Westerhoff considers the monumental figures of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti to come under the broad umbrella of Yogācāra and the chapter spends some time enumerating their central ideas, a detailed explanation of their works is reserved for the following chapter (160-68).

In extensive sections stretching from pages 168-93, the signature doctrines of Yogācāra are enumerated as (1) “cognition-only” (*cittamātra*), though understood through the context of meditational practice; (2) the “storehouse consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*) and the eight types of consciousness; (3) *trisvabhāva* (three-nature theory); (4) *svasaṃvedana* (self-reflexive awareness); (5) the three turnings of the wheel of dharma; and (6) “the womb of thusness” (*tathāgataghārbha*). It is interesting that Westerhoff argues on 183-84 that the *trisvabhāva* or “three self-natures”

theory could be a Yogācāra version of the two truths of Madhyamaka that fills a “conceptual gap” of “anti-foundationalism” in the latter, which can be read as advocating for only conventional reality. This observation is at least debatable given the fact that Mādhyamikas spend all their time assailing *svabhāva*, which should make a theory of *trisvabhāva* repugnant to them. Furthermore, Madhyamaka insists all along that there are two distinct truths, a paramount and conventional truth, and should not be read as reducing the paramount to the conventional.

It is also interesting that, from 189-193, Westerhoff accompanies some speculation about Buddhist-Brahminical cross-fertilization of ideas about luminous consciousness with an almost apologetic stance about this luminosity. He argues that Buddhists found “luminosity” appealing so as to make Buddhism seem less nihilistic to Brahminical thinkers and thus more philosophically palpable. That would make *tathāgatagarbha* teachings a kind of *upāya* or mere “skillful means” in attracting non-Buddhists of the period. On pages 210-212, Westerhoff returns to the possible rapprochement between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, but we will return to this in the discussion of the “unifying” tendency of the work below.

Chapter four undertakes a detailed examination of the “logico-epistemological school” of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, with special focus on their theories of perception, inference, causality, momentariness, exclusion (*apoha*) as the mechanism of linguistic meaning, scriptural authority, and yogic perception. Like the other chapters, this one is admirable for the ways in which it appropriately brings together the sophisticated arguments of these two giants of Buddhist logic. Their precise conceptions of knowledge and their innovations in the theory of inference, their representations of meditative insight as a variety of perception, and their ideas of scriptural authority were profoundly important in the development of Buddhist thought. It also features a lengthy and most helpful section on the confrontation between the principles of this “logico-epistemological school” with the *Mīmāṃsā* thought of Kumāṛila.

Once again, we will delay for a moment some of the specific arguments of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti that are explored in this chapter for the more general discussion to follow. Śāntideva and Atiśa, two philosophers of the five long centuries that passed between Dharmakīrti and the end of Buddhist philosophy in India are examined next (270-281). Despite its brevity, this section, labeled the “end of Buddhist philosophy in India,” might best have been fused with the following “Concluding Remarks” chapter to close the book; it sits oddly where it is in the Dignāga and Dharmakīrti chapter.

In the “Concluding Remarks” chapter, Westerhoff begins with a repetition of the “germination” model of Indian Buddhist philosophy presented in the Introduction, which views differentiated trends in Indian Buddhist thought as grounds within which seeds of the Buddha’s teaching were allowed to sprout and discouraging an investigation into which schools did or did not depart (and by how much) from the Buddha’s teaching. The observation is made here that, in the Buddhist tradition, distinct from the Western tradition, philosophical argument dynamically and continuously interacts with the realizations of meditative praxis (283-84). It is precisely because Buddhism, from the beginning and carried out through all of its movements, is not only detached logical investigation but a reflective evaluation of human life that, in carrying out Indian Buddhist philosophy, the history of philosophy in ancient texts must be done simultaneously with philosophical thinking itself (284-85).

There is no question whatsoever that Westerhoff’s *Golden Age* is a masterful achievement of both scholarship and serious reflection on the Buddhist philosophical traditions of India. Throughout, it engages issues as fine-grained as Frauwallner’s theory of the “two Vasubandhus” of Abhidharma and Yogācāra and as far-reaching as the relations of Indian Buddhist ideas on developments in Eighth and Ninth century Tibet and China. The work presents the broad strokes of scholastic relations, the specificities of the relationships of major thinkers with *sūtra* heritages,

and, as nuanced and subtle as the five kinds of temporal relationships in Sarvāstivāda thought, does so with admirable clarity. It can be said with perfect fairness that no library of English-language scholarship on Indian Buddhist philosophy could any longer be entirely adequate without this volume on one of its shelves.

The overarching theme of Westerhoff's work is a presentation of Buddhism as a subtly unified religious and philosophical movement. This theme is articulated through several of the book's most important arguments. The book began, as we have seen, with the metaphors of "seed" and "germination," suggesting that, while one cannot find perfect correspondence between the Buddha's words in the Discourses and any one scholastic view, all schools nurture various sprouts of his teaching. The same introduction includes an argument that we should, without necessarily abandoning the methodological approaches of modern history, bracket them in order to adopt hermeneutic stances in evaluating the relationship between Buddha's teachings and each school's recensions of them (33).

As we have also seen, the chapter on Yogācāra posits that the school's three-nature theory could have been designed in part to fill a "conceptual gap" in the two-truths theory of Madhyamaka, making the schools at least complimentary and at most the latter a kind of fulfillment of the former (183-84). But the edges between these different schools continue to be made progressively more vague throughout the volume.

This unifying trend reappears later in the Yogācāra chapter, which does, without question, squarely confront arguments between Madhyamaka and Yogācāra thinkers. But Westerhoff largely blames the differences between these on Bhāvaviveka's unnecessary insistence that Madhyamaka arguments be put in traditional inference patterns that were employed in Nyāya debate. Westerhoff thinks that this insistence on Bhāvaviveka's part could be softened if we are not too attached to his peculiar approach to logic.

On page 205, Westerhoff again proffers the observation that Madhyamaka and Yogācāra theories can be interpreted in ways that explain one another's views within a larger whole. From 210-212, at the end of an examination of the issue of how Madhyamaka and Yogācāra take different approaches to asserting why ultimate reality is inexpressible, Westerhoff leaves the issue by saying the interpreter has one of two options: accepting the schools are incompatible or accepting that the schools can be resolved at the highest levels of realization. But the tone of the entire discussion seems to reveal that Westerhoff prefers the latter view.

In chapter four, on the "logico-epistemological school" of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, the apparent difference between Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's framework of means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) and Nāgārjuna's seeming rejection of any means of knowledge is smoothed over by the claim that Nāgārjuna denied only a justification of *pramāṇas* that relied on their self-nature (*svabhāva*) without rejecting the possibility of knowledge entirely (224). The last section of the chapter wrestles once again with doxography and challenges the notion that the school specifically, and Indian Buddhism as a whole, can be classified in a scholastic manner for any other reasons than hermeneutic convenience (250-59). That Dharmakīrti may defend mutually inconsistent positions held by adherents of Abhidharma and Yogācāra is explained in terms of the notion of slow teaching and Nāgārjuna's verses that refer to stages of teaching (252). On page 256 Westerhoff asserts that Dharmakīrti may have picked out the "particularist" position to articulate much of his thought because it was the "lowest common denominator" of Buddhist agreement, but he still strives for the "final word" of the Yogācāra position that subject and immaterial mental object are of one nature. One gets the nagging suspicion that, with enough qualification, there is no disagreement between Indian Buddhist philosophers that cannot eventually be smoothed out.

The individual arguments supporting the particular, and certainly highly nuanced, “unitive” view of Buddhist philosophy in India have varying degrees of plausibility. For example, with reference to the book’s introduction, it may certainly be a good idea to “bracket,” as Westerhoff likes, our urges to articulate a determinate vision of the historical Buddha in order for hermeneutic sensitivity to each school’s depiction of its own relationship to that vision to prevail. But it seems we only do such hermeneutic “bracketing” from within the modern historical framework anyway, and the suspension of belief in a historical Buddha’s teaching only delays historical judgments in our own framework by one or a few steps.

When we consider Westerhoff’s efforts at more closely aligning Yogācāra and Madhyamaka, it seems the specter of Critical Buddhism looms closely over such considerations. The schools may in fact be left at a fundamental divide, with the resounding reintroduction not just of *svabhāva*, but several kinds of *svabhāva*, into Yogācāra discourse on one side and the Mādhyamika, who spends almost all of his time trying to remove the roadblock of *svabhāva* completely from the practitioner’s path to liberation, on the other. To merely reduce opposed philosophical perspectives within Buddhism to stages of realization and mutually directed “skillful means” may give “skillful means” too broad of a sway. What teachings can be left out of bounds if all disagreements of conviction and praxis can simply be dissolved by *upāya*?

On to another argument; while it is somewhat difficult to ascertain what Nāgārjuna meant by lampooning the “self-nature” of the means of knowledge, Westerhoff is very probably right in pointing out that Nāgārjuna did not denounce the framework of means of knowledge entirely, but only certain conceptual formulations of their efficacy. Even if this is the case, it is hard to see how much friendship can be made between Candrakīrti’s Madhyamaka and Yogācāra. This is particularly doubtful when one considers Candrakīrti’s trenchant attacks on the real-

ist's portrayal of objects and his protestations that no good *Mādhyamika* can be caught espousing or defending a philosophical thesis.

What all this reveals, I think, is that Westerhoff is right to explicitly remark that the interpreter of Indian Buddhism seems again and again to be brought to the dilemma of whether to ultimately see the variety of Indian Buddhist teachings in oppositional terms or in the light of mutually reflecting jewels. For those who are inclined to the second option, Westerhoff makes an outstanding attempt to vindicate it. But, in the end, whichever option the interpreter prefers, Westerhoff's *Golden Age* is a highly readable and most valuable achievement of sustained and brilliant scholarship.