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*Buddhist Spiritual Practices: Thinking with Pierre Hadot
on Buddhism, Philosophy, and the Path*

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A Review of *Buddhist Spiritual Practices:
Thinking with Pierre Hadot on
Buddhism, Philosophy, and the Path*

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Buddhist Spiritual Practices: Thinking with Pierre Hadot on Buddhism, Philosophy, and the Path.
Edited by David V. Fiordalis. Berkeley, CA: Mangalam Press, 2018, 328 pp., ISBN 978-0-89800-117-4 (Paperback), \$35.00.

In the twentieth century, the French philosophers Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault published a series of essays and lectures on what they respectively termed spiritual exercises (*exercices spirituels*) and technologies of self (*technologies de soi*). Hadot famously called the contemplative and imaginative practices from a variety of ancient European traditions, “philosophy as a way of life.” In this mode, philosophy is not just logic and rational argument but a set of guidelines and practices that shape day to day experience. Foucault used the term “technologies of self” to categorize such practices because they are specifically aimed at personal transformation. Hadot and Foucault were both curious about the relationship between European and Buddhist spiritual exercises, but neither of them engaged in a comparative project. In recent years, however,

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scholars of Buddhism have taken up Hadot's work in order to examine the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and praxis. *Buddhist Spiritual Practices: Thinking with Pierre Hadot on Buddhism, Philosophy, and the Path* is the first-ever collection of essays that explores this very theme, primarily through the lens of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist texts. The volume is accessible to an interested reader with little background in Hadot's writings, as each author summarizes key ideas and always includes translations of French quotations. The extensive bibliography includes a comprehensive list of works by Hadot and Foucault, as well as Buddhist texts and secondary scholarship related to the topic of spiritual exercises.

Buddhist Spiritual Practices opens with a contribution by the late Steven Collins, "Some Remarks on Hadot, Foucault, and Comparisons with Buddhism." Collins explores the ways philosophy and spiritual exercises are contextualized by what he terms "regimens of truth" and institutions; historically they were not done willy-nilly but, rather, according to the goals and norms of a given school. In "Schools, Schools, Schools—Or, Must a Philosopher be Like a Fish?" Sara L. McClintock defines schools as (1) physical institutions; (2) broadly aligned communities; and (3) doxographical categorizations (77). McClintock draws from Hadot in order to emphasize the situated nature of philosophical work. It is notoriously difficult to identify the affiliations of certain ancient authors, yet we are reminded that Buddhist philosophers of old were also "involved in an existential choice; that they, too, had commitments to particular schools" (102).

In the essay "The Spiritual Exercises of the Middle Way: Reading Atiśa's *Madhyamakopadeśa* with Hadot," James B. Apple presents Atiśa's *Special Instructions* as a Buddhist philosophical text meant to inform a transformative way of life. The relevant authorial information and the text's reception in Tibet help us read the text as *philosophia*, both in its prescriptive content and the way it informed specific teacher-student relationships. McClintock and Apple (and later in the volume Fiordalis) contend with Vincent Eltschinger's argument that certain Buddhist phil-

osophical texts are not necessarily informed by ethical or soteriological concerns. Eltschinger's work is referred to throughout the book and at multiple points it is reproduced at length (78, 111-112, 114-117, 254-255). Given the contrasting conclusions about the nature of Buddhist philosophy, it would have been fascinating to include a standalone contribution from Eltschniger in the volume.

Genre is another significant theme explored in *Buddhist Spiritual Practices*. Pierre-Julien Harter's essay, "Spiritual Exercises and the Buddhist Path: An Exercise in Thinking with and against Hadot," introduces a number of distinctions that parse Hadot's category of spiritual exercises (152-158). Harter is particularly concerned that the idea of philosophy as a practical "exercise" fails to capture what is distinct about theoretical texts. Buddhist path literature, for example, "does not tell the reader *what to do*, but it tells the reader what will count as a practice on the path" (172). A text that provides instructions for meditation practice and one that provides reasons why meditation is important belong to different genres and should be read accordingly. While Hadot opens up new perspectives for reading across categories, Harter focuses on instances when it is more accurate and productive to examine the specificities of each genre.

Maria Heim's contribution to the volume, "The 'Fecundity of Dialogue' and the Philosophy of 'Incompletion,'" also focuses on genre. Heim pays close attention to the various exegetical modes used by the Pāli commentator Buddhaghosa, especially the systematic *abhidhamma* impulse to examine a topic comprehensively and the more particular analysis of the narrative contexts (*nidāna*) found in the *suttas*. Although the strategies employed by a medieval commentator differ greatly from a historicist approach, Buddhaghosa's focus on context is considered in relationship to Hadot's emphasis on the "dialogic, circumstantial, and relational aspects of ancient philosophy" (182). Heim also notes Hadot's "double hermeneutical move" of first reading a text in its own context and then seeing what relevance it holds for the present (193-194). In his own "double hermeneutical move" Buddhaghosa shifts between genres,

drawing from analytic practices in order to elucidate a type of philosophy that is intertwined with pedagogical methodologies.

Buddhist Spiritual Practices also examines the impact of culture and worldview on the performance of spiritual exercises. Collins introduces the idea of “regimens of truth” (based on the famous Foucauldian term *régime de la vérité*) in order to emphasize the ways spiritual exercises are a culturally specific form of conduct (43). As such, they are meant to irrevocably transform “the individual’s entire persona” and lead to the “discovery of as a universal truth” (44). The essay “Philosophy as a Way to Die: Meditation, Memory, and Rebirth in Greece and Tibet” by Davey K. Tomlinson relates to this set of themes, as it examines the ways memory and cosmology inform the performance of Greek and Buddhist spiritual exercises. In Tibetan Buddhist cultures, a wide variety of meditative practices, rituals, and yogic techniques are meant to prepare one for death. The practices described by Tomlinson are not necessarily meant to improve one’s quality of life or serve as reminders that death is inevitable and unpredictable. Instead they are meant to literally prolong life, facilitate a favorable rebirth, or lead to awakening at the moment of death. Rhetorically, these promised outcomes differ significantly from those that offer more immediate results. As Buddhist views of rebirth and soteriology provide a specific context for spiritual exercises, Tomlinson’s essay raises the Hadot-like question of how certain Buddhist practices can be assimilated by contemporary cultures that emphasize different truth regimes, say for example the pursuit of happiness.

In the closing essay, “Learning, Reasoning, Cultivating: The Practice of Wisdom and the *Treasury of Abhidharma*,” David V. Fiordalis uses Vasubandhu’s analysis of *abhidharma* to revisit many of the themes explored in the volume. Fiordalis’s article provides an early example of the interplay between prescriptive and theoretical approaches, as the *Treasury* analyzes the practice of the three wisdoms in a philosophical mode. For Vasubandhu moral training (*śīla*), reasoning (*cintā*), and cultivation (*bhāvanā*) are not undertaken in discrete phases, but rather “build upon one another and work together to instill wisdom in the practitioner”

(279). The prototypical genre of scholastic Buddhism, *abhidharma*, plays an important role in this three-fold schema. Knowledge gained through study establishes certainty (*niścaya*) on the path, informing the performance of non-discursive practices (287). As Hadot emphasizes in his analysis of ancient philosophy, theory and practice are not completely distinct. The exegetical, soteriological, and theoretical contexts articulated by Heim, Tomlinson, and Fiordalis provide important examples of the ways Buddhist authors integrate philosophical perspectives and spiritual exercises.

Buddhist Spiritual Practices is of obvious relevance to anyone who studies Buddhist philosophy or Hadot. It should also be of interest for a reader curious to better understand the relationship between Buddhist practices and their numerous frames of reference. For Hadot, the study of ancient spiritual exercises and their applicability in a modern context was partially substantiated through descriptions of his own spiritual experiences (65). The authors in *Buddhist Spiritual Practices* employ a different approach, starting with a close analysis of various Buddhist philosophical texts and then exploring the factors that shaped their production and reception. The volume details the reasons why *context matters*, as Buddhist philosophy and practices are necessarily informed by institutions, genre, and “regimens of truth,” in the past as well as the present.