

Dissenting Yogis: The Mīmāṃsaka-Buddhist Battle for Epistemological Authority

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Abstract

While dissent connotes a type of split or departure, it can bind as much as it separates. This paper traces a millennium-long history of debate between Buddhists and other religionists who championed the Vedic authority rejected by the Buddha, a camp that came to be known as “Mīmāṃsā.” My analysis illustrates dissent can have the paradoxical feature of forging strong relationships through its seeming antithesis: opposition. Specifically, I explore Mīmāṃsaka-Buddhist debate on meditation. Buddhists argued that meditation could yield authoritative spiritual insight once a meditator had honed their yogic perception (yogipratyakṣa). Mīmāṃsakas rejected yogic perception, arguing only the scriptural corpus of the Vedas had authority. By undermining yogic perception, Mīmāṃsakas aimed to defang religious movements, like the Buddhists’, who appealed to meditative experience as legitimate grounds for dissent. Counterintuitively, such exchanges were essential for the construction of each faction’s identity and were continually mutually formative over the long history of their interaction.

Keywords: *Buddhism; Mīmāṃsā; epistemology; meditation; Yogic perception.*

Introduction

Cain, who turns away from the God who turns away from him, already follows the line of deterritorialization, protected by a sign allowing him to escape death. The mark of Cain. A punishment worse than imperial death? The Jewish God invented the reprieve, existence in reprieve, *indefinite postponement*. But He also invented the positivity of alliance, or the covenant, as the new relation with the deity, since the subject remains alive. Abel, whose name is vanity, is nothing; Cain is the true man... It is the regime of betrayal, universal betrayal, in which the true man never ceases to betray God just as God betrays man, with the wrath of God defining the new positivity (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 123).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) here describe “the line of flight.” They note that in contrast to the priest, the prophet ushers in a new religion with betrayal, through a “face-off” with God. This “double turning away” between God and prophet, perhaps counterintuitively, ensures their ongoing relationship. Rather than a pure fleeing, it is the “faciality” with God that “organizes the line of flight” (p. 124). Cain’s dissent against God, therefore, elevates him to the status of the preeminent prophet. As the impetus for God’s covenant with humanity, he founds an ongoing relationship of betrayal. Although a seeming flight and deterritorialization from God’s kingdom, Cain’s actions ensure his being marked by God, the mark of Cain; after all, it is Cain and not Abel who lives on in humanity.

Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation is equally applicable to the complex and seemingly paradoxical dimensions of dissent. Although dissent connotes a turning away and a rejection, the process is bi-

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directional and mutually informing: while the dissenting party's dissent occurs in reaction to the provenance of a larger regime, that regime in turn also reacts to that dissent, becoming "obsessed" with the dissenter's line of flight, and even reforms itself in contradistinction. As Geleuze and Guattari note, this is a "double turning away." Although we may think of prophets in continuity with God's message, Deleuze and Guattari conceive of prophets as the product of tension with, even betrayal of, the powers that formed them. There is thus both continuity and opposition. Dissent reveals itself as both a reaction and a continuation of those powers that it "resists." This analysis reveals that although religious dissent superficially appears to be a departure from orthodoxy, it maintains an intimate relationship with it, one that is mutually informing and ongoing.

Focused on Abrahamic traditions, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) further argue that the Book is emblematic of this line of flight, which "takes the place of the face and God, who hides his face and gives Moses the inscribed stone tablets" (p. 127). In forging a new path, the prophet writes about God away from God. In this paper, I argue that the relationship *cum* opposition between Vedic authority and Buddhism suggests an inversion of the Abrahamic transition from the face of God to the Book. While the Vedas profess that only its scripture can describe the divine, Buddhism attempts to recover the face of "God" through direct experience. The Buddhist line of flight retreats from the separation entailed by the Book and seeks to recover a direct connection to spiritual insight unmitigated by scripture. But as Geleuze and Guattari theorize, this opposition puts Buddhism and Vedic authority in an ongoing relationship, a "face-off" which mutually influences. It is in response to Buddhism that the Mīmāṃsā approach arose as an attempt to recover the authority of the Vedas. This paper analyzes a short history of this dissent, showing its role in the evolution of both Buddhist and Vedic epistemology. Specifically, their argument centers on the role of meditation and whether it can lead to veritable spiritual insight. Dissent is thus the friction that heats the forge in which both these schools developed their sophisticated theories on the soteriology (or lack thereof) of meditation.

The Śramana Movement

Buddhism was just one of many contemporaneous religious movements that sought independent authority from the Vedas—the dominant orthodox scriptures of pre-sixth century BCE India—Jainism being another well-known example. Modern scholars collectively categorize these religions under the "śramana movement." The term "śramana" itself is not alien to the Vedas. It was only later repurposed to refer to groups that dissented against Vedic authority, and even this connotation may reveal a Buddhist bias.² Etymologically, it simply denotes "making effort." However, it is easy to anticipate how *spiritual* effort can quickly transgress orthodoxy. If spiritual effort results in spiritual acumen, this in turn may lead to entitled claims of a rival spiritual authority. The Buddha reflects a general trend of religious figures during this period who laid claim to novel spiritual authority through the graces of their own efforts.

This is beautifully allegorized in Aśvaghōṣa's (c. 80-150 CE) *Buddhacarita*, a hagiography of the Buddha's life and one of the earliest Sanskrit Buddhist works. Being confronted for the first time with old age, sickness, and death, Siddhārtha Gautama (as he was known before his awakening as the Buddha) was deeply troubled. Upon seeing a mendicant—whom we could also proleptically identify

² Much of what we know concerning śramana religions comes from the Buddhist *Samaññaphala Sutta* (Dīgha Nikāya 2), which, predictively, describes other śramana rival movements rather disparagingly. On the other hand, Patrick Olivelle argues that in the larger religious context, "śramana" had no connotation of being anti-Vedic. See Olivelle (1993) for a discussion (p. 14). This, of course, does not undermine the existence of several anti-Vedic movements of which Buddhism was one; it merely questions their appellation as "śramana."



as a member of the *śramaṇa* movement—he was inspired to become a renunciate in order to escape these otherwise inevitable sufferings. However, Siddhārtha was a prince. He would have to gain permission to take leave from his father, King Śuddhodana, which would be no small request, since Siddhārtha had been groomed since birth to take over the throne.

Bowing down with folded hands, [Gautama] said, “Grant me leave, O God of Men, to become a mendicant. I want to completely renounce [the world] and focus solely on the causes for liberation, separated from this life.”

Hearing his words, the king shook like a tree that had been struck by an elephant. With beseeching hands, shaped like a lotus, he said this in a tearful voice,

“Stop thinking like this! This not the time for you to concentrate on dharma. They say that the practice of dharma during the confusion of early youth incurs many faults.

“The senses of the young are curious about the world. They do not have the determination necessary for the difficulties of religious austerities. Their minds shirk from the forest, and they are especially naïve in their judgments.

“Giving my wealth to you, Dearest Dharma, you have become wealthy, and now *my* time for [religious] dharma has come. For you, firm in your strides, it is your dharma to do this in stages, for abandoning [me], your master, would not be dharma.

“Giving up this resolve, be satisfied with the dharma of the householder. Forest-dwelling austerities are acceptable after first enjoying the pleasures of manly youth.”

Hearing these words, the Illustrious One replied in a sparrow's voice, “If, King, you can assure me of four things, then I will not pursue forest austerities:

“That my life will not just be for death, that disease will not separate me from health, that old age will not destroy my youth, and that misfortune will not deprive me of this wealth.”
(v. 528-35).³

Of course, the king can make no such guarantee, and so Gautama departs for the forest, his literal line of flight and deterritorialization. In this dialogue, King Śuddhodana represents Vedic orthodoxy, which calls for a delay of the spiritual path. Religious pursuits are not for the young; only once one has fulfilled certain household duties—raising a family, amassing wealth for one's progeny, and, in Gautama's case, completing his commitments as king—is it appropriate to become a mendicant. Aśvaghōṣa gestures specifically to the *āśrama* stages, the four life stages that every Brahman is meant to undergo. King Śuddhodana specifically mentions the second stage, the householder (*gṛhastha*), during which pleasure (*kāma*) is the primary pursuit. The king, by contrast, has reached the appropriate age to pursue religion as a mendicant (*samnyāsa*). Gautama's decision to part with this expectation—to deny the burden of kingship—signals an egregious form of dissent, but one indicative of the larger *śramaṇa* movement, within which wandering ascetics became an emblem of the individual quest for spiritual truth. As Deleuze and Guattari note, Gautama's turning away from his father *cum* orthodoxy is a line of flight that not only gives rise to the Buddhist tradition, but one that conditions its ongoing relationship with that orthodoxy.

³ Translations from Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan are my own throughout unless specified otherwise.

Gautama's journey reflects an ongoing pursuit of individual insight: even the teachings of other *śramaṇa* figures failed to satisfy him. He was a meditation student of both Ārāḍa Kālāpa and Udraka Rāmaputra, but eventually abandoned them to seek his own enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Though not unique to Buddhism, individual insight as the foundational claim to spiritual authority—and thereby the justification for dissent against Vedic orthodoxy—became a central trope in the formation of Buddhist religiosity. Like the founders of many *śramaṇa* religions, the Buddha claimed that not only was the legitimacy of his movement based on his direct perception of the truth—in contrast to the necessity of a textual intermediary in Vedic religion—but also on the claim that his insight was replicable. This marks a paradigm shift in spiritual epistemology, for now instead of the necessity of scripture to relay truth to the adherent, this intercessional medium could be dispensed with in favor of a direct insight that is theoretically available to any ardent seeker.⁴

Suttas in the Pali canon, the oldest strata of Buddhist literature available, are rife with conversion narratives that demonstrate direct access to truth as a superior feature of the Buddhist religion. One such story concerns the Brahman Kūṭadanta. Knowing the Buddha to be learned, Kūṭadanta requests that Gautama instruct him on the proper way to perform a sacrifice. Kūṭadanta's plan is to perform a sacrifice according to well-known Vedic customs, including the slaughter of several livestock. But the Buddha suggests instead examples of increasingly more profitable forms of sacrifice, starting with replacing live sacrifices with vegetarian offerings and continuing with making these offerings to Arhats directly (those who have gained nirvāṇa). The highest form of “sacrifice,” however is to become enlightened oneself, such that “having realized the clairvoyant forms of knowledge oneself, one teaches.”⁵ This stock phrase occurs some 36 times in the sutta canon. Interestingly, it is usually used as an introduction for the Buddha—“the one who teaches having realized the clairvoyant forms of knowledge himself.”⁶ Here, however, it is used proscriptively. Thus, in lieu of following Vedic injunctions for sacrifices that will ensure a higher rebirth, the Buddha implores the Brahman Kūṭadanta to realize the truth for himself and be liberated from rebirth altogether—to become like the Buddha. Kūṭadanta's response is predictably zealous. Once he vows not only to release the animals planned for sacrifice, but provide them wide pastures to live peacefully, the Buddha begins to teach him:

Then, lo, the Bhagavan gave the progressively sophisticated teaching to the Brahman Kūṭadanta. He gave the talk on giving, on ethics, and on the heavens. He pointed out the disadvantage, uncouthness, and impurity of desire and the profit had by renunciation. When the Buddha knew the Brahman Kūṭadanta to be of sound mind, a good heart, unbiased, with a happy disposition, and pious, he then gave him the condensed teachings of the Buddha, [the Four Noble Truths]: suffering, its cause, cessation, and its path. Just like a clean cloth free of stain may take to dye perfectly, so too did the stainless and clear dharma eye arise to the Brahman Kūṭadanta in his seat thereby [as he realized,] “Whatever arises also ceases.” Then, the Brahman Kūṭadanta became someone who saw the dharma, who attained the dharma, who found the dharma, who penetrated the dharma, whose doubt was deflated,

⁴ There is some undeniable similarity here to the Protestant Reformation, which emphasized a direct experience of God over the necessity of the church as an intermediary. However, the Western gaze on Buddhism as a Protestant-like religion has also engendered a slew of misleading projections and misreadings. See Thompson (2020) for a discussion (loc. 1886 of 3328 ff).

⁵ *sayam abhiñña sacchikatvā pavedeti*

⁶ See, for example, *Dīgha Nikāya* 12.1, para. 3 and *Majjhima Nikāya* 3.5, para. 1.



whose uncertainty disappeared, who gained confidence, and who need not rely on others [in order to understand] the Master's teaching (Dīgha Nikāya 5.12-3).

This last line describing those “who need not rely on others [in order to understand] the Master's teaching”⁷ is part of another stock phrase that occurs ten times in the sutta canon and is usually reserved for those disciples who gain a direct realization of the Buddha's teaching. It is also most often associated (as it is here) with the “dharma eye” (*dharmā-cakkhu*), suggesting a direct perception of the dharma over and above mere intellectual comprehension. The Pali canon, however, offers no clear epistemological account of how adherents transition from mere intellectual grasp of the Buddha's teaching to this deeper realization denoted by the “clear dharma eye.” But this transition is essential, for it marks the point at which the practitioner becomes an authority unto themselves, no longer needing to “rely on others.” Indeed, the potential of this direct realization becomes the promissory appeal of Buddhism over Vedic authority.

Intersectarian Debates

Fifth and sixth century CE India saw an explosion of intellectual exchange among religious factions. With several religious schools well-established and all vying for influence, the Indian intellectual milieu developed a sophisticated shared language with which to compete and debate, including a system of formal logic, discussions of epistemic instruments, and a copious list of agreed-upon logical fallacies. Dignāga (480-540 CE) was most likely the earliest Buddhist figure to engage in this language and was undeniably instrumental in its development. His connection to earlier Buddhist conceptions of realization is also apparent, specifically the notion that insight marks a break with reliance on others.⁸ Specifically—most likely drawing from *yogācāra* philosophy or *yogasūtra* terminology—he dubs those practitioners who gain this direct realization “yogis.” Thus, his *Pramāṇasamuccaya* verse 1.6 states that “yogis see just the object, *unmixed with the guru's instructions* [emphasis added].”⁹ Dignāga thus concurs with the suttas that true realization is marked by independent authority, not relying on others, including the instructions of one's guru. Dignāga's notion that realization involves seeing “just the object” (*artha-mātra-dr̥k*) is also reflected in the Pali suttas, where there are hundreds of references to realization as “seeing things as they really are with wisdom” (Pali *yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya* √*pass* or √*dāsi*). Both phrases denote a perception with the veil of ignorance lifted, such that the object itself as it really is (Skt. *artha-mātra*, Pali *yathā-bhūta*) appears. But Dignāga elaborates on what this means technically. He explains that the ignorance that prevents our seeing reality “as it is” is our ongoing conceptual proliferations, which we superimpose on reality. Thus, the “guru's instructions” does not simply denote one's intellectual understanding of the dharma but is a synecdoche for *all conceptualization in general*. Dignāga therefore explains in his auto-commentary that “those very yogis have a perceptual vision (*darsāna*) of just the object, unmixed with any conceptual understanding (*vikalpa*) from scripture.”¹⁰

⁷ *aparappaccayo satthūsāsane*

⁸ Coming almost a millennium after the suttas, Dignāga clearly also drew on Buddhist literature and figures closer to his own era in developing his theory of yogic perception, notably, likely, Asaṅga (300-370 CE), and assuredly Abhidharma works. While I do not have the space here to reconstruct that entire lineage of thought, my aim here is to show its continuity from the Pali sources up to Dignāga.

⁹ *yogināṃ gurunirdeśāvyaṅgyavakīrṇarthamātradr̥k* || (Dignāga 2005, p. 3). Dignāga (1744a) was also consulted (f. 2a): /*rnal 'byor rnam kyī bla mas bstan / 'ma 'dres pa yi don tsam mthong /*.

¹⁰ *yoginam apy āgamanīkalpānyavakīṃ arthamātradarśanam pratyakṣam* / (Dignāga 2005, p. 3). Dignāga (1744b) was also consulted (f. 15b): *rnal 'byor ba rnam kyis kyang lung las rnam par ritog pa dang ma 'dres pa'i don tsam mthong ba ni mngon sum mo /*

In this way, Dignāga elevates the mark of self-possessed authority—direct understanding without the need of the teacher—to an epistemological principle: the ability to see reality without the confusion of conceptual overlay. Although the guru may impart some necessary instructions, “seeing without the teacher” denotes both the practice and achievement of spiritual insight, where the adherent strives to see these truths autonomously and thereby become an independent authority. And it is the possibility of gaining this independent authority that furthermore justifies dissent against Vedic orthodoxy.

Buddhists still must explain how this nonconceptual direct realization of the truth can be cultivated. Without a clear delineation of praxeology, the epistemological description of yogis’ perception as nonconceptual is inert, since it gives no method by which the Buddhist may come into their own authority. The tradition quickly identified adept meditation as the *sine qua non* of gaining this direct insight. Dharmakīrti (fl. 6th or 7th century CE), who greatly elaborated Dignāga’s system, understood the generation of yogic perception as a specifically meditative practice in which one has a vivid encounter with the meditated object, as if it were “right in front of them.” Dharmakīrti (1972) thus writes:

One is driven crazy by desire, fear, and sorrow
And haunted by dreams, robbers, etc.
They see what does not exist
As if it were right in front of them.

[...]

Although considered unreal, meditative bases
Like of the ugliness [of the body], the earth, etc.
Can arise in a nonconceptual clear appearance
Constructed by the power of meditation.

Therefore, whether existing or non-existing,
Whatever one meditates upon intently
Will end up forming a nonconceptual cognition
Once that meditation is perfected. (v.3.282-285 except verse 283).

The transition from intellectual understanding to nonconceptual, direct insight, therefore involves intense habituation. By meditating on some object unabatedly, it no longer appears as an idea in the mind’s eye, but as a visceral sensorial object. Dharmakīrti gives several examples of similar experiences. He cites how intense emotions are known to produce hallucinations—namely fear and grief.¹¹ He also cites traditional meditation examples, specifically a meditation practice known as “*kaṣīna*,” which involves meditating on one of the elements (i.e., earth, fire, water, or air) until one can control them. Meditation on ugliness is a practice meant to cultivate renunciation of worldly life,

¹¹ Dharmakīrti is not wrong here, especially concerning grief. See Sacks, (2012, pp. 229-54) and Castelnovo et al. (2015, pp. 266-274).



where the meditator imagines the world as full of bones.¹² Both instances are said to produce vivid appearances of the object of concentration, be it the substance of earth or skeletons.

While one can imagine what the hallucination of one's loved one provoked by grief, or a similar experience through excessive fear, or the appearance of earth or skeletons through meditation might be like, it is unclear exactly what the clear appearance of something like the Four Noble Truths might be. As we saw from the Pali strata, as the essence of the Buddha's teaching, the Four Noble Truths are the object of the "dharma-eye," and Dharmakīrti (1744) concurs their place as the object of yogic perception (f. 161a-b). What exactly does it mean to see something as abstract as the Four Noble Truths vividly, like a hallucination? Moreover, the fact that Dharmakīrti analogizes yogic perception to hallucinations does not bode well for his aim to substantiate it as epistemologically robust. If yogic perception is phenomenologically identical with hallucination, what makes it any more trustworthy than an illusion?

The Mīmāṃsā school leveraged this exact point of attack. As Deleuze and Guattari would anticipate, the Buddhist break with Vedic authority was not excepted from the general historical trend in which dissent is usually accompanied by a resurgent conservative effort from orthodoxy in resistance.¹³ Such movements typically result in the creation of various forms of fundamentalism, which, though usually claiming a return to tradition and a recovery of deteriorating values, often involve novel, strict forms of religion that seek to reassert control over perceived threats to a tradition's integrity. Mīmāṃsā may be construed as fundamentalist in this limited sense, for it seems to have gain traction in reaction to the *śramaṇa* movement and (at least in its earliest strata) strictly rejects the possibility of meditative insight, something that was never explicit in the Vedas proper, just as creationism proposes a literalism to the Bible that had not been previously championed.

In considering Mīmāṃsā as a fundamentalist reaction against *śramaṇa* religion, it is not surprising then that its earliest work, the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras*, hail from a period roughly contemporaneous with the Buddha, around 450 BCE (Verpooten 1987, pp. 4 §4 and 5 §7). I examine two Mīmāṃsā works in this lineage of Buddhist critique. The first is a commentary on the *Vidhiviveka* by Maṇḍana Mīśra (7th-8th century CE), who was a student of Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa, who in turn wrote a sub-commentary on the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras* (see footnote 13). This commentary on the *Vidhiviveka* is entitled the "*Nyāyakanikā*" by the eclectic author Vācaspati Mīśra (9th or 10th century CE). I also investigate a Buddhist response to this work in the *Yoginimāyaprakaraṇa* by Jñānaśrīmitra (fl. 975-1025 CE). I then examine a further Mīmāṃsā critique in Sucarita Mīśra's (c.1120 CE) *Kāśīka*, which is a commentary on Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa's work (see footnote 13). Jñānaśrīmitra's student, Ratnakīrti (11th century CE), gave a rebuttal to Sucarita Mīśra in his *Sarvajñāsiddhi*, which we will also discuss. Throughout my analysis, I will demonstrate that the stakes of this exchange concern the epistemic validity of meditation—whether it can produce credible knowledge. Through the lens of dissent and the longstanding feud between Mīmāṃsikas and Buddhists, the preoccupation with meditation and yogic perception becomes clear: if meditation is an authentic means of spiritual insight, it threatens the necessity of Vedic authority,

¹² See Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa (1991, p. 111) and (pp. 118–264) respectively for a discussion of the *kaśīna* meditation and meditation on ugliness.

¹³ As Kanchana Natarajan (1995) explains, the initiatory Mīmāṃsā work, Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtras* in the fourth century BCE, constituted an attempt to rescue proper Vedic sacrificial technique from its declining use. Furthermore, the first principle commentary on these sutras, Śābara's *bhāṣya* during the early centuries, was written specifically in response to Buddhist attacks on Vedic dharma. Its commentary, the *Mīmāṃsāslokavartīka*—of which Sucarita Mīśra's (c.1120 CE) *Kāśīka* is a sub-commentary—written by Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa (fl. 700 CE)—of whom Maṇḍana Mīśra was a disciple—was also in defense against Buddhist attacks (pp. xviii-xx). My paper explores both the *Kāśīka* and a commentary on Maṇḍana Mīśra's work, highlighting an almost millennium long rivalry between Buddhists and Mīmāṃsikas.

since these truths can be realized directly without the need of an intermediary medium like Vedic scripture.

Does Meditation Correspond with Anything?

As we noted earlier, Dharmakīrti's analogies for meditation and yogic perception involve a glaring weakness. If yogic perception is like a hallucination, what guarantee is there that it corresponds with any real object? If it does not, it cannot be knowledge producing or trustworthy. Vācaspatimiśra (1978) attacks this very ambiguity in Dharmakīrti's formulation, arguing that yogic perception cannot correspond to reality. His *Nyāyakaṇika* first gives his consensus of why meditative objects cannot correspond with anything real. "That momentariness [as described by the Four Noble Truths] has no correspondence (*avyabhicāra*) with this [meditative] object, neither through a shared identity nor causally. The process of having a peak experience in meditation thus assuredly is distinct from engagement with [real] objects" (p. 105). As stated earlier, the Four Noble Truths are the object of yogic perception. The Mahāyana Buddhist tradition came to recognize 16 aspects of the Four Noble Truths, four aspects per truth, which are realized in quick succession.¹⁴ The first of four aspects in the Truth of Suffering, the first Truth, is impermanence (*anitya*): the Buddhist realizes that life is conditioned by suffering because all things are momentary, in constant flux, and thus doomed to decay—nothing ever lasts. The fact of impermanence is supposedly realized in yogic perception. But Vācaspatimiśra notes that even if he were to concede that phenomena are impermanent, impermanence or momentariness (*qua* quality) is distinct from those objects, just as beauty is distinct from beautiful objects. Not only, thus, do impermanent objects not share an identity with impermanence, but neither is impermanence causally related to impermanent phenomena, since it is an epiphenomenal abstraction. According to Buddhists, these are the only two ontologically robust relationships two objects can have—identity or causal connection—and both appear untenable between impermanent objects and impermanence. Furthermore, if, according to Buddhists, all existing things are impermanent, how can impermanence—which as a quality is abstract and static—itself be impermanent? If it is not, it is a phantasm, an illusion, or a mental superimposition—but it is not real. Thus, meditation on impermanence entails concentration on a non-existent object and has no connection with real objects. It thus cannot be knowledge producing.

Vācaspatimiśra's *Nyāyakaṇika* admits, however, that impermanence and impermanent objects are not wholly unrelated. He notes that the Buddhist may counter that their relationship is like the inference of fire from smoke. Just as the inferential understanding of fire based on seeing smoke has a robust relationship to actual fire, so too does the inference of things' impermanence relate to actual impermanent objects. Impermanence, therefore, has as robust a relationship with reality as the inference of fire. The reader, however, may be able to anticipate why this is not a satisfying comparison. Dharmakīrti seems to couch yogic perception as generating a hallucination of impermanence. Even if we grant impermanence is real, the hallucination of a real object does not vitiate its being a mere hallucination. Intuitively, we would think there is a difference between hallucinating about an existing object—which only has a happenstance connection to reality—and *actually* seeing it. Vācaspatimiśra (1978) argues as much in response to his imagined Buddhist interlocutor.

¹⁴ The *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* is one of the earliest records of this idea: "The [four] truths are distinctive, since they are unique in being unfathomable, etc. / Their unique quality is fixed upon [in meditation] for sixteen moments." *acintyādviśeṣeṇa viśiṣṭāḥ satyagocarāḥ / viśeṣalaksanām śadbhirdaśabhisōditam kṣaṇāḥ* // (Asaṅga 1977, v. 4.23).



But how does the fact one can establish the presence of fire through inference guarantee the authenticity of the vivid cognition of fire in mediation? If you reply yes, [meditation on fire is epistemically valid], you would have to say that while someone was ascending a mountain, the apprehension of its clarity in meditation would equally correspond [with the object] as actual sensory contact with that fire, and this is absurd. (pp. 105-6).

Vācaspatimiśra gives an excellent retort. The Buddhist interlocutor claims that yogic perception on impermanence—though like a hallucination—has an inferential relationship with impermanent objects. But Vācaspatimiśra rightly asks why a hallucination of an inferred object would undermine it as a hallucination. If there were no difference between the hallucination of an object and actually perceiving it, then vivid meditation on a fire merely inferred from smoke would absurdly be the same as seeing it directly, even when one’s line of sight is blocked by a hill. Although that meditation produces the apparition of an object that actually exists, it does not directly represent that object in the manner seeing it would, and so it cannot be valid.

Jñānaśrīmitra was aware of Vācaspatimiśra’s text and directly quotes it at several points in his *Yoginimayapraṅkaraṇa*, a text solely devoted to fleshing out the Buddhist interpretation of yogic perception. There, he offers a retort to Vācaspatimiśra’s critique and attempts to recover the continuity between yogic perception and its object in a more explicit manner than afforded by Dharmakīrti. As we will see, he builds off Dharmakīrti’s unique understanding of correspondence to explain how the appearance cultivated in yogic perception corresponds with a real object. Jñānaśrīmitra essentially understands Vācaspatimiśra to have charged the Buddhists with violating parsimony. That is, if yogic perception is valid despite being generated like a hallucination, it would then have to be categorically different from normal perception.

Jñānaśrīmitra (1987) counters that Vācaspatimiśra has failed to account for how we practically confirm that correct inference has occurred. In contrast to the inference of spiritual truths, “the inference of fire merely establishes the capacity to burn and cook.” But this inference does not correspond *prima facie*, but only pragmatically “when one approaches the place [where that fire is]” and encounters *actual* burning and cooking. Otherwise, “cultivation [of that inference] is in vain if that place remains out of reach” (p. 323). In other words, Jñānaśrīmitra deconstructs what it means to validly correspond with an object. When we infer the presence of an object, we do so with a certain goal and purpose. In the case of the fire, we expect that it will be able to cook and burn, and it is to the degree that these expectations are met that we can say our original inference of fire was correct. This can only be fulfilled once one “approaches the place” of that burning and confirms their expectations.

Meditation is the same, Jñānaśrīmitra argues. Just as the inference of fire is only valid if it fulfils the intention of cooking and burning, so too is a meditation valid only if it leads to spiritual liberation. Furthermore, “before the meditation is complete, its appearance is mistaken with reference to that object” (p. 323). Only when the meditation culminates in realization is its epistemicity validated. There is no test for correspondence other than this. In light of this criterion, Vācaspatimiśra has made a false comparison when he argues that if the object of yogic perception legitimately corresponds, then the vivid meditative appearance of fire would be no different from its perception. Why? Because the appearance of fire *in meditation* cannot cook and burn, and thus does not fulfill purposeful intention. The vivid appearance of the Four Noble Truths in mediation, however, *does* fulfill the intention for liberation. Thus, just as our inference of fire is confirmed only “when one approaches that place” and finds a fire that can cook and burn, the inference of the Four Noble

Truths is confirmed through yogic perception's ability to produce liberation via meditation. There is no "absurdum of there being a different type of perception" specific to yogic perception (p. 323).

More than this, Jñānaśrīmitra even concedes that meditation "is mistaken with regard to that object" before this intention is achieved. But this is not the specific fault of meditation, but general to the process of inference. Because Dharmakīrti argues that all inference involves conceptual processes that obscure reality, all intentional inferential cognition begins in error.¹⁵ Jñānaśrīmitra and Dharmakīrti therefore both argue that the initial inference upon which one bases their intentional action—whether that is further meditation or walking toward smoke—entails an error (*bhrānti*). In both cases, however, once that inferentially motivated action is brought to completion, the validity of that inference is confirmed, either by the encounter with actual burning or actual spiritual advancement away from suffering. Thus, they reject correspondence *simpliciter* as the criterion for ontological continuity between a conceptual representation and its object. Rather, correspondence is confirmed pragmatically as the degree to which an inference can fulfill intention, which is idiosyncratic to the intentional object. Dharmakīrti thus says "a valid cognition corresponds (*avisamvādi*) in the sense that it engenders causally effective (*arthakriyā*) knowledge."¹⁶

This pragmatism¹⁷ differs significantly from Mīmāṃsā realism, which argues that successful completion of intentions does not sufficiently establish the validity of an initial cognition. For example, after losing my keys, I may have a dream in which I remember I left them at a friend's house. Even though I may come to find those keys at my friend's house later, it seems counterintuitive to say that therefore my dream of my keys was effectively a *perception* of my keys. But Buddhist of Dharmakīrti and Jñānaśrīmitra's ilk insist that such realist intuitions—which suggest correspondence must be more robust than pragmatic fulfillment of goals—are flawed, and so their framework here is consistent with their larger idealist project. In some ways, therefore, the exchange between Jñānaśrīmitra and Vācaspatiśrīma reveals a talking past one another, each holding different ontological assumptions that inform their epistemological lines of argumentation—one realist, the other idealist.

Is Meditation Redundant?

The previous debate concerned whether meditation is a valid form of knowledge given its tenuous relationship with real objects. The line of attack in Sucaritaśrīma's *Kāśīka* is slightly different. He argues that even if we grant that the appearance of an object in meditation cogently corresponds to a real object, we must wonder whether this appearance affords us any new information. Dharmakīrti himself argues, "An understanding (*sāmvṛta*) that apprehends that which has already been apprehended is not accepted [as a valid cognition]. Instrumental thinking is primarily to engage with [deciphering anew] what objects are to be avoided or acquired."¹⁸ In line with his pragmatist paradigm, Dharmakīrti stipulates that any robust knowledge producing instrument (*pramāṇa*) must afford new information about how to stay away from what we do not want or obtain what we do. If it merely tells us something we already know, like a memory, then it is not an epistemic instrument.

¹⁵ "When concepts superimpose a linguistic sign, which is another object [from the percept proper], there is a cause for error, since it never accords with perception." *samketasamśrayānyarthasamāropavikalpane / na pratyaśānanirvṛtītvāt kadācid bhrāntīkāraṇam* // (Dharmakīrti, 1968, p. 186 v. 290).

¹⁶ *pramāṇamavisamvādi jñānamarthakriyāsthūh* // (Dharmakīrti 1972, v. 2.1).

¹⁷ There are tempting parallels here with William James's pragmatism into which I will not digress in this paper.

¹⁸ *grhītagrahaṇān neṣṭam sāmvṛtaṃ dhīpramāṇata / pravṛttestatpradhānavād heyopadeyavastuni* // (Dharmakīrti 1972, v. 2.3).



If meditation does not afford new information of this sort, then yogic perception cannot be an epistemic instrument in the manner Buddhists claim. It is this potential weakness that Sucaritamīśra (1929) exploits.

The strength of one's meditation is said to be the cause that produces the yogi's knowledge. But that [knowledge] cannot come from meditation on an object that was already conceived, nor is it an understanding that arises accidentally [with no cause at all]. All things that are produced have a cause. Thus, why does that which is already understood through a different valid epistemic instrument have to be cultivated through meditation?

As Sucaritamīśra points out, meditation cannot simply rehash what is already known: it cannot be meditation on something that is already conceived. Otherwise, per Dharmakīrti, it is not knowledge producing. Nor can meditation arise *ex nihilo*. As Jñānaśrīmitra identified, it is motivated from purposeful intention. But if meditation is simply a process of familiarizing oneself with an intentional object that “is already understood through a different valid epistemic instrument”—and it must be, since if prior to meditation that meditative object is not verified through such an instrument, then the meditator is merely self-inducing a false hallucination—then meditation would seem by Dharmakīrti's own definition to “apprehend that which has already been apprehended,” and thus not be epistemically warranted. Sucaritamīśra continues:

And what even is that epistemic instrument? It is not inference. There is no earlier comprehension of what is dharma and what is not [...] Only an object that is something to avoid or acquire is the thing that is desired to be known. And thus, if that object is already established, then meditation is useless. Even the Compassionate One [the Buddha] should [be able to] explain his scriptural dharma diligently for the sake of his students. He should not have to exhaust [himself] with the experience of meditation. (p. 217).

In other words, how could pre-meditative verification of the meditative object be possible? Buddhists argue that yogic perception is uniquely a perception of the meditative object. Thus, there must be a pre-meditative inference. But this cannot be the case, since spiritual truth (*dharmā*) and what is untrue (*adharma*) is exactly *what is to be discovered* in yogic perception. If inference has already determined dharma and adharma, then yogic perception is redundant. Sucaritamīśra uses Dharmakīrti's own reasoning against the Buddhist: if inference has already determined what “to avoid or acquire,” since this is the criterion of validity, “then meditation is useless,” since it adds nothing to that determination.

Ratnakīrti, Jñānaśrīmitra's student, provides the Buddhist response to Sucaritamīśra's argument against meditation *qua* redundancy. Like Sucaritamīśra, Ratnakīrti (1957) also tries to overturn his opponent's argument on its own terms. That is, he attempts to show why the Mīmāṃsā rejection of meditation's validity would be problematic for its own system. Ratnakīrti asks, “What do you even mean by the words ‘dharma’ and ‘adharma?’” He gives two possibilities of what Sucaritamīśra could mean: (1) the Mīmāṃsā understanding of spiritual truths like the existence of heaven, or (2) the Buddhist understanding of reality as momentary. If Sucaritamīśra is criticizing Buddhist conceptions of meditation as incapable of establishing (1), then he has failed to evaluate Buddhism on its own terms, since this is not the concern of Buddhist praxis. Ratnakīrti explains that Buddhism, by contrast, is concerned with *practical* omniscience. “Practical omniscience is established by the *direct* knowledge of samsara and nirvana and all that attends it,” namely, the Four Noble Truths. As Ratnakīrti explains, only *direct*—that is non-inferential—knowledge is sufficient for achieving one's spiritual goals. A mere inference of the truth will not suffice.

The question, then, is whether this perception of the truth at the culmination of meditation is preceded by perception or inference. There must be some epistemic instrument that obtains the meditative object *before* meditation, else there is nothing to meditate upon. And Ratnakīrti concurs, “Indeed, [the Four Noble Truths] must be apprehended either by perception or inference, since there is no other type of epistemic instrument that exists.” Furthermore, “For those [developing their] fixation on momentariness, etc., it is not perception.” If the perception of the object occurred before meditation, mediation *would* be redundant indeed. It must, therefore, first, be grasped by inference. However, Ratnakīrti takes issue with Sucaritamīśra’s assumption that this object’s inference is tantamount to its perception, rendering no need for meditation. The perceptual experience afforded by meditation is qualitatively different “because inference does not come in contact with the true object” (pp. 18-9).

Ratnakīrti argues that inference of this meditative object *before* meditation is not equivalent to its direct perception *in* meditation, and thus, meditation cannot be redundant. This is because, as Dharmakīrti argued, inferential understanding of spiritual truth obscures that truth by virtue of being conceptual. The superior perceptual clarity of the object culminated in mediation affords liberation in a manner that conceptuality cannot. This reiterates Buddhist pragmatism over realism: while on a realist understanding of epistemology the fact that the vivid object in mediation and the pre-meditative inference upon which it is based represent the same object should make them epistemically identical, Buddhist pragmatism forgoes correspondence and only asks what cognitions *do*. The added liberative value of yogic perception *vis-à-vis* its exceptionally clear meditative object warrants its distinction from inference, within which that object is still seen through a glass darkly.

Lastly, Ratnakīrti’s juxtaposition of two possible meanings of “dharma” uses Sucaritamīśra’s position against him. If he means (1), then Sucaritamīśra has effectively undercut his own school’s position, arguing that the Mīmāṃsa view on dharma has no epistemic warrant. But even if he means (2), by arguing the Buddhist has no epistemic resource to substantiate dharma, he has effectively evacuated any such resource for the Mīmāṃsa to substantiate their own claims about dharma. He has shot himself in the foot.

Conclusion

While the debate here concerns elite meditative practices, we should not, therefore, assume that its ramifications are only for the spiritually elite. Max Weber (1946) made a similar insight concerning science in the modern age, arguing that while most people may not be elite scientists, scientific rationalization has a profound effect on culture writ large. The culture of the scientific age is disenchanted, Weber argued, but not because we know everything—or even know more than those who have come before this age—and have thereby, somehow, exterminated the unknown. Rather, it is because science promises the potential that everything *could* be known with enough experimental effort, a metaphysics in which all objects are in essence *knowable*. This erodes the presence of mystery, since there are no longer ineffable and inherently inaccessible truths. Only the as-of-yet discovered.

Similarly, I argue that Buddhist dissent against the Vedas resulted in a similar disenchantment, dissolving the notion that the justification for these scriptural prescriptions was beyond human understanding and impenetrably mysterious. With the advent of meditative technology, Buddhists and other *śramaṇists* dissolved an authoritative power predicated on the unknowable, such that, like the promise of scientific rationalism, these types of spiritual truths *could* be known directly. Though *this* potential does not disenchant in the Weberian sense of draining meaning from the world, it does undermine the power structures that rely on maintaining mystery, namely the religious sects that insist



a spiritual life can only be led vicariously through the dictates of the Vedas, much in the same way that science, Weber argues, has deflated religion of its influence—a process that came to be coined “secularization.”

Later theorists, notably Peter Berger (1967), argued, however, that the secularization that arose with the rise of science was not as detached from its religious roots as it may appear. In fact, secular disenchantment may be a natural outgrowth of a culture founded on Protestant values, which made spiritual matters a personal rather than collective concern. This truncates God into a purely subjective phenomenon, which evacuates the role of the sacred in the world, in the vacuum of which secular concerns take precedent (p. 111). This description undeniably resonates with Geleuze and Guattari’s analysis of deterritorialization, in which the “face-off” between God and the prophet forms a covenant, despite each one’s turning away from the other. For Berger, we have all individually become prophets, at ends with a far-off God, the distance from whom is irrecoverable. But that distance created is not a departure, for it informs the subjectivity of the now “secularized” individual, an individual formed through the Protestant insistence on a personal relationship with God, which, counterintuitively, makes God more removed and the resulting deterritorialized subjectivity more prominent. God is also transformed: just as Christ is removed from the Protestant cross, just as the Protestant rejects the worship of Mary as the mother to an immanent, living God, so too does the divine become further transcendentalized, further removed, further Othered. Thus, the otherness of God—which *à la* Weber (1946) manifests in the secular age as the pursuit of “infinite progress” (p. 139)—is ironically intimately connected to the secularized subject, a relationship that is in fact ongoing and maintains this individualized, deterritorialized subjectivity.

Our analysis of Buddhist dissent against the Vedas reveals a similar mutual re-forming. Just as the Protestant approach toward God lead to her Othering, it was not until the Buddhist argued that spiritual truth was accessible by any ardent seeker that the Mīmāṃsā came into being to double down on that truth’s inaccessibility. Originally, the Vedic attitude toward mediation was likely nebulous; the meditative practices of the Upaniṣads, for example, were seen as perfectly continuous with Vedic authority. It was only when meditation was used as an epistemological tool by Buddhists to question that authority did allegiance to the Vedas entail, at least from a Mīmāṃsā point of view, a rejection of mediation’s value full stop. But as the history traced in this paper reveals, the growing sophistication of each opponent’s epistemology occurred in their tandem, each reacting to each other in an ever-increasing arms race of well-developed arguments. As Geleuze and Guattari suggest, this face-off was thus never a separation, but indicative of an at least millennium-long relationship, demonstrating that dissent is rarely a singular moment connoting a split, but an ongoing process of interaction that binds as firmly as it separates.

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