

## SECULAR POSTMODERNITY AND BUDDHIST MODERNISATION: AUSTRALIA AND THAILAND

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### Introduction

In this paper, I will examine two intellectual traditions which are preserved in literature. The traditions I will examine are encoded in the writings of Jean Baudrillard, a French metaphysicist, and the teachings of the Buddha preserved within the Ti-Pitaka, or Pali Canon. These are two of the intellectual traditions that have become popular in Australia in the 1990s and their respective emergence raises important questions for me about the relationship between religion and contemporary thinking.

This paper focuses on the concurrence between Baudrillard's and the Buddha's thoughts and even though Baudrillard's writings are not 'religious' per se, I read them as going beyond the bounds of the secular. A Buddhist scholar by the name of Peter Jackson (1988) makes a useful suggestion about the examination of spiritual texts. He says that when discussing such a text, one should use the word orthodoxy and, in distinction, when one is talking about, religious practices, one should use the word orthopraxy. I am employing his notion of orthodoxy in this paper.<sup>1</sup>

The impetus for this idea crystallised at the beginning of this year when I was struck by the similarities of the outcomes in the writings of Baudrillard and of Buddhism. The ways of thinking about the world suggested by Baudrillard bore a resemblance, in my mind, to the knowledge preserved in the Ti-Pitaka. Is it possible that a strong and influential intellectual trend in the first world, has, in the processes of its journey, arrived at some of the intellectual terrain encoded in the Buddhist discourses which have been preserved in countries such as Thailand?

There is a new book that has explored this trend within a secular and Christian framework, Phillipa Berry's and Andrew Wernick's *Shadow of the Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (1992). Although

my subject matter is distinct, in its examination of postmodernity and Buddhism, this paper is in accord with their collection in its recognition of the "fascination with the sacred in much contemporary thinking". Jean Baudrillard is widely regarded as a postmodernist.<sup>2</sup> He discusses this label in an interesting way by drawing on a concept of Nietzsche's. He says that he takes up the Nietzschean idea of 'pure distance' and, that by using this device, modernity itself appears in a new light. He says in an interview with Guy Bellavance (1983, p.53):

There is nothing to predict except that in the vicissitudes of modernity, in its turning back on itself, it relaunches a dimension that is metaphysical. But this metaphysical is the same thing. It does not come from elsewhere.

Thus, Baudrillard draws the connection between modernity and the notion of metaphysics by way of the device of 'pure distance'. With this device, the metaphysical becomes visible. He claims, from the all-encompassing viewpoint of 'pure distance', that the collapse of modernity is a disintegration of categories. At the same time, he claims that this has always been so but that it only now can begin to be seen for what it truly is. Good and evil have become indistinguishable. He says that such a collapse of the 'event' of modernity can be seen from two levels of diagnosis. He says in *The Transparency of Evil* (1993, p.100):

All events described here are susceptible to two kinds of diagnosis: physical and metaphysical...from the physical point of view, we are apparently dealing with a massive phase transition in a human system of disequilibrium.

This discussion of the metaphysical is a significant shift in the thinking of Baudrillard. In the past, he has been more comfortable making the physical diagnosis. Now, as a metaphysician, he struggles with the brick wall of nihilism, earlier constructed by Nietzsche. In Baudrillard's metaphysical diagnosis though we pick through words such as joy, terror, panic and giddiness and find there a loss of things permanent and in any way satisfying or subject to a self. This is the language of a different realm, the language of the transcendental, the realm of the mystics of all the world religions. At this point, though, he turns away from the joyful giddiness, the terror and the fear that this engenders and forecloses against the knowledge of the dissolution of all that exists.<sup>3</sup> Even though he shys away from this, there is also a fascination with it. In an interview with Henric and Scarpetta (1993,

p.133), Baudrillard says:

To look ahead [to the end of things] requires a somewhat metaphysical and a somewhat transcendental curiosity. People have spoken so often about the end of things that I'd like to be able to see what goes on the other side of the end, in a sort of hyperspace and transfinity.

This is striking in its similarity with the Buddha's expositions and it is to this set of knowledges that I would now like to turn.

### Buddha's Suttapitaka: a Therevada perspective

The oral teachings of the Buddha are preserved in a collection called the *Ti-Pitaka* or the *Three Baskets*.<sup>4</sup> I will be focussing on the *suttapitaka*,<sup>5</sup> or the *Basket of Discourses*, for this paper because this is the part of the text that is a literal recording of the words of the Buddha and as such can be examined as an orthodoxic, textual record of his thoughts in the same way that Baudrillard's writings can.

The Buddha instructed that the mundane realm could be looked at of itself and in a transcendent way. He said that if the mundane world was simply analysed of itself then it could be understood by way of an examination of the Four Noble Truths or ariya-sacca. In this part of the paper, I will focus only on the first of the ariya-sacca, the Truth about Suffering. This truth contains within it the teaching that the whole of existence, also called the five groups of existence or khandha, has three characteristics: that everything is dissatisfactory, is impermanent and is without self (*Buddhist Dictionary* 1982, p.13, p.21). In metaphysical terms, everything is simply arising and ceasing across infinite time, consciousness and space. Life is on a wheel, closed for most, which endlessly goes through cycles of birth and death. The wheel is called the wheel of samsara in Buddhist terminology. It literally means 'perpetual wandering' (Nyanatiloka 1980, p.188).<sup>6</sup> What becomes significant in a deeper study of Buddhist orthodoxy is that transcendence is different from the metaphysical and is possible to apprehend through the practices that strengthen pañña (wisdom), sila (morality) and samadhi (concentration). The mind has to be trained to look purely at mundane existence or it will veer off under the strength of the delusion of the physical and metaphysical realms and will never

have the insight that transcendence is possible.<sup>7</sup> It is to the concurrence of the orthodoxies of Baudrillard and the Buddha that I now turn.

### The concurrence of the texts

Obviously, the thoughts of the Buddha and of Baudrillard have evolved from different temporal and spatial zones but it struck me that there is a surprising concurrence in the outcome of these thoughts. Both describe the possibility of transcending the limitations of the physical and metaphysical realms. Baudrillard does this by looking at the physical realm from a new perspective. It is a re-viewing of that which has always been. This 'pure distance' is, in itself, the metaphysical. Buddha similarly uses the device of looking at a familiar thing with a different understanding. He describes the conditions that cause the physical realm to arise and points to a transcendental path that releases one from the samsaric wheel. Both are looking at the physical realm empirically, talking of things as they really are. Both talk about events arising and ceasing, and in endless repetition. Both talk about time, space, the infinity of consciousness and the notions of joy, of giddiness and of the terror and panic that this examination of the physical realm engenders. The idea of a self is challenged by both systems of thought and individuality is found to be a construction, an illusion.

The most stark orthodox divergence is in how the transcendent path is described. Baudrillard is tentatively approaching the idea that there is a next stage after the infinity of time and space. The intellectual tradition of the first world has rejected the religious notion of transcendence towards God found in the writings of Christian mystics such as St. John of the Cross and Saint Theresa de Avila and has claimed that Enlightenment can be found in the physical realm without reference to the external transcendent. Recent thinkers, such as Baudrillard, are questioning the certainties of the modern Enlightenment project but seem unsure of the relationship between the transcendent and the metaphysical.

The Buddha says there is only so far you can go with thinking alone. In the practices of the mind contained in the *suttapitaka*,<sup>8</sup> the pathway is clearly laid. It is recorded that in the contemplation of impermanence, dissatisfactoriness and no-self that joy, terror and panic do arise. The *suttapitaka* describes these states but says that they can

only be gone beyond when the heart consciousness understands that everything is empty of independent existence. The Buddhist practices and trainings of the heart and of the consciousness, called the meditative absorptions or *jhanas*, give opportunity for the contemplation of the truths of existence and, what is more important, give one the opportunity to experience them with no filters.

Baudrillard, in trying to think his way beyond the end, is left trying to re-energise Nietzschean nihilism with the poses of both indifference and of seduction. But the analysis, seductive as it is, is still bound by this physical and metaphysical realm. It is only a glimpse of the transcendent that we catch in his writings, or is it merely a play of the light that dissolves the subject in complete giddiness and joy?

## Conclusion

The implications of this concurrence are important for an examination of the cross-cultural interaction of Australia and Thailand in the 1990's. In Australia, the voices of moral authority are uncertain and postmodern literatures reflect this uncertainty. In Thailand, the processes of modernisation are causing a radical review of the orthopractic religious practices which derive from the Buddhist literatures. It is too early in the research project for me to describe the outcomes of these interrelationships. I have limited the scope of this paper to a discussion of the importance of literature in preserving metaphysical and transcendent thought which have increasingly become available to us in this globalised world.

Is what Baudrillard is asking any different from that which was rejected and forgotten in the pursuit of first world rational enlightenment? Modern societies such as Australia tend to reject the reminder, embedded in their own religious orthodoxies, that the physical world is an illusion. Secular intellectual literatures, in their search for knowledge, now face the challenge posed by those such as Baudrillard who seem to be saying a similar thing. If the boundary is breached between the mundane and the sacred, possibly we must concern ourselves with more than simply describing the illusionary world. What is the transcendent? What will happen if we take up the 'pure distance' looking device held out to us by Baudrillard or if we reorientate our view of the world to the Buddha's ideas of no-self, impermanence and dissatisfaction?

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#### REFERENCES

1. In Australia, there has been a move intellectually to what, in the secular knowledge systems, is called postmodern, post-colonial thinking in art, architecture, literature and now even in the scientific disciplines. There is concurrently a significant increase of interest about Buddhism in Australia in the 1990's. In Thailand, traditionally a Theravada Buddhist country, there are different orthopractic intellectual pressures. Thailand is focussing on its economic development and is negotiating a modernisation process. Its religious institutions are under pressure to engage in contemporary social issues hitherto outside its sphere of influence.
2. For this short presentation, I am drawing on his recent works available in English called The Transparency of Evil (1993) and a book of selected interviews edited by Mike Gane (1992).
3. See for example the fascinating discussion with Sylvere Lotringer (1987) pp.99-127.
4. These Three Baskets are called the Basket of Discipline or vinayapitaka, the Basket of Discourses or suttapitaka and the Basket of Philosophy abidhammapitaka (From Nyanatiloka, 1980).
5. The suttapitaka is a profound system of thought that I cannot possibly expound completely in this paper. I will simply discuss the general direction of this teaching.
6. An extensive teaching called paticca samuppada or dependent origination is used to explain the workings of this samsaric realm. Nyanatiloka says of this teaching that, "Though the subject has been frequently treated by Western authors, by far most of them have completely misunderstood the true meaning and purpose of the doctrine of dependent origination" (1980, p.151).
7. The meaning of mind in this teaching is brain and heart, without false dichotomies.
8. See also the Vissudhimagga (Nanamoli, p.1988).

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