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Where We Do Stand

The Convocation Address to Begin the 187th Year

by Janet Gyatso

Where do I stand as a scholar of Buddhism? Where do I stand as an American woman scholar of Buddhism—born in Philadelphia; mother born in Russia; father’s family from Lithuania; raised Jewish; deep affinity with Tibet; years of friendships with and indebtednesses to Tibetan Buddhist masters; and all with a Philadelphia cocksure, sarcastic skepticism about most everything? What is my stance when I am trying to be closest to the artistic impulses that I originally wanted to follow vocationally, when I am trying to write passionately, which is how I feel I must write even while constrained by a highly conservative and critical field of professional “Buddhology”—not to mention a hesitancy to impose personal feelings upon a foreign culture to which I do not belong? Where do I stand, and what is my stance, when I try to think in a way in which my field has not yet conceived of thinking, a way that I myself do not yet know, but toward which I feel myself surely propelled—that is, a way of inspiration? What is my stance when I teach students?

Questions like this have long obsessed me in my life, but they are questions that I have taught myself—perhaps out of necessity—to like, to think are good questions. As I enter into the space of thinking now not only about the stance of an individual, but also about an institution and, most of all, about the stance of a scholarly vocation, I find myself more determined than ever to make good on the radical Buddhist injunction to take my stand in emptiness. By this, Buddhists have always meant not pure nothingness but rather a self-conscious recognition of infinite changeability, of openness, and a place where the daunting feat of mustering confidence within what is provisional can be attempted. For some reason I have long been compelled by the idea that a solid stance on a ground of flux is the best place from which to contemplate fundamental matters.

And so it is Buddhist sentiment that has led me to begin my meditation today with the place where we are standing. And now I’m talking, literally, about the physical ground itself, I will start optimistically with the multiple possibilities that this fortuitous site of our convocation this year embodies—with the airiness and porousness of this tent, a structure that is flexible and easily movable (impermanent, if you will); and with the very rawness of the ground on which the tent is pitched. There is really a wonderful undecidability of this ground and this tent, and an openness, unmarked, open to the breeze, open to interpretation. Yet at the same time this place is the most real place in the world. It is our present, where we are now, our first and foremost starting point from which everything will follow. I want to juxtapose this image with another level of our concrete situation, the institutional level, which is the convocation of our cooperative venture at Harvard Divinity School this year. This our coming together, our being called together, to begin our vocation, our calling. And so I want to think about the ground on which we stand, and the orientation of our stance, when we face our common calling, the study religion.

It is appropriate to remark first upon the particular circumstances that have led us to this ground and tent this year, for it is the first time in living memory that the Divinity School has held its Convocation here. For many years prior to this, our Convocation was held in Memorial Church, in Harvard Yard, the church of Harvard University. But in response to a feeling on the part of some members of this community that Memorial Church, by virtue of its Christian identity, excluded non-Christians from the ceremony, it was decided this year that it would be better to hold the Divinity School’s convocation in a neutral setting.

I don’t know the details of how this dissatisfaction with Memorial Church dawned upon us. I was not part of the conversation or the decision itself. And to be sure, one could imagine lots of reasons to respond that indeed the Divinity School Convocation has been extremely inclusive in past years, that the very clear self-understanding of Memorial Church is that it invites the participation of all, and that the Christian symbols in the church do not in fact function to exclude. (The very fact that I, a Jewish professor of Buddhist studies, was asked to give the convocation address, and was asked a long time before the issue of venue emerged, is testimony to that inclusiveness.) But I really want to talk about the situation where we have landed rather than about what led up to it.

Actually, not unlike the malleable ground itself, there are a plethora of ways that this situation could be construed. There is a case for arguing that this is a good development, that our move out of a specifically Christian space represents our willingness to accommodate and validate the growing diversity of our student body, the growing diversity of our faculty, and the growing diversity of our curriculum itself. (Another illustration of this is the fact that in a few weeks from now, there will be another temporary structure on this ground, albeit for a very different purpose, the celebration of Succot.) But there is also a case to make that this development is something to mourn, a break with a venerable tradition at the Divinity School; that it might signal an intolerance for other people’s religious expression, or at least a comfort anywhere except a neutral, faceless place, and that this neutrality and facelessness threatens to cast us out into a desert devoid of meaning altogether. In fact it appears that not only has our convocation been moved out of the church; there has also been a decision to make the service altogether nonreligious, whatever that means. Whatever it does mean, the decision goes significantly further than merely avoiding sectarian affiliation. So we need to think, too, about the distinction between neutralizing sectarian affiliation and eliminating “religion” altogether.

Whatever we might think about it, this is the situation in which we find ourselves now. So if we decide to imagine the salutary effects of reducing our grand convocation to a bare ritual on the lawn, how far can we go? In particular, what if we decide to take this very bareness as an icon of openness and newness? At the minimum, we could say that this is a chance to build into our working habits a recourse to freshness, a habit of frequent refreshment from square one—the bare ground.

It can hardly be entirely coincidental that the year of re-establishing its opening ritual to this bare ground is also a year in which Harvard Divinity School is in the process of re-conceiving itself, not only through its curriculum but also through the vision of its entire mission. Many of you here may not be aware that the faculty and administration have had a series of retreats over the last few years in which some quite groundbreaking questions have been raised and debated. I think we have begun to come to a consensus about some of the changes we want to usher through, although let me add right away
that what I will say now is only my partic-
ular take on where we are. In any event, we
are still very much in the process of
thinking through—and debating—the
many interesting issues involved.

But it is not only to invite especially
disciplinary thinking in this process of
collective self-reflection that I have
decided to air some of these matters
here today. It is also to encourage us all
to think together about the study of reli-
gion at any time and place, and about the
kind of work we are doing, and will do,
into the future. In this, I want also to
stress that the basic questions we are de-
bating now about the nature of the aca-
demic study of religion at the Divinity
School—and our stance toward what we
study—are richly complex issues that do
not lend themselves to final resolution;
ev! And that is a good thing. It should
be part of the excitement of every open-
ning of the school year, and the welcom-
ing of a new class, to remind ourselves of
the fundamentally nondecidable issues
that are part of the very definition of the
class, in fact, to build it into our way of writing,
thinking, and reading—and teaching. In
particular, as a teacher I aspire to model
for students my own accommodation of
debateability, my own continual rethink-
ning and fostering of a way to think to-
gether toward that end of improvement,
as being at the very heart of where we stand
when we study religion. I think such principles as continual
rethinking and learning how to think to-
gether, mutually, are especially germane for
the kind of work we are doing, and the
questions we are asking, about more than
one religion. A key aspect of
what we have been pondering together
lately directly parallels the matter of our
change in Convocation venue. One cen-
tral issue before us at the moment is, in-
deed, the place of religious traditions
other than Christianity in the HDS cur-
riculum. For the last 20 years our basic
curriculum has been divided into three
sections, or areas: Area I focuses on the
nature and interpretation of scripture, the
Bible; Area II has courses in theolo-
gy, ethics, and the sociology and history
of Christianity; and Area III studies the
religions of the world other than Chris-
tianity. Now to have Area III, which at
present covers Judaism, Hinduism, Islam,
Buddhism, and Meso-American religions,
in the curriculum at all has been
a bold move on the School’s part,
but of late there has been an increasing
sense that we need to look again at what
creating such a curricular area actually
signifies. Think about it: What are we
saying when we have one area that focus-
es on Christianity, and another that
brings to bear upon to confront the source and status of
truth, the impact of multi-personal-
listic, the threat of nihilism, and the possi-
bility of meaningfulness. In short, I think
it is only in a world in which we fully rec-
ognize that there are many religious
stances, even some noble human ones
that have no religious affiliation at all,
that we really are put face to face with—
and really have the means to explore—
the kinds of questions we have been
raising about the study of religion more
generically. And if what I just said is true,
this means in turn that our quest to study
religion well should have impact upon all
of higher education at the university, for
again, similar questions about truth, per-
spectivalism, nihilism, and meaning
plague every humanities discipline, and
every science, especially when they are being
done well.

One of the first questions that we
may encounter when we study more
than one religion is that of how we
maintain in our school’s mission the
productive tension between critical ob-
tervism and committed subjectivity. But it gives us a special opportunity, for
we are positioned right at the edge—
though not at the same time, of course—
of some of the most challenging sets of issues con-
fronting not only the field of religion, but also many other academic fields
strugg-
ing with the relationship between the personal researcher’s identity and bias
and the personal commitment to one (anthropology is another such field; so
is physics; so are literature and history).

What I want to explore is not the
frustration or the apparent tension, but
rather the promise of such complexity. It
is precisely the intellectual hybridity of Harvard Divinity School that puts it in
an especially propitious position to ex-
plor

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equally well, if differently, by studying Buddhist ethics and Jewish ethics, for example. That could be saying in turn that neither of those is absolutely true, and it smacks of a relativism—Buddhist ethics is only for those who are Buddhists, Jewish ethics are for Jews, and both ethics are merely temporary, particlarly historical and cultural circumstances. That might bring the scholar to take a stand outside of all of them, to say that ethics is a historical artifact, but it never touches a truth for all times or peoples.

That’s the way that relativism, at least the pernicious sort, turns into nihilism and also an essentialism (i.e., to insist that Buddhist ethics is only for Buddhists, to esentialize it means to “be” a Buddhist), but I would like to suggest that there are other ways to view the liberal and pluralistic place in which our diversified curriculum is leading us to stand. Another way is, indeed, to recognize that every particular ethical system is relative to its time and place, but that ethical thinking wherever it arises is a lastingly rich and compelling activity in human experience, and that the more I am exposed to ethics in all its varieties, the more nuanced and multiply ethical I am led to be. Using the same logic, then, let us say that religion is a lastingly rich and compelling activity in human experience, and that the more I know about it in all of its varieties the more religious I am inspired to be about the homologies drawn in many religious traditions between romantic, or even sexual, love, and love and devotion for God. Or perhaps we might just like it to be that the Divinity School is a place that theologically encourages—in fact abides in comfort with—passion in one’s academic work. Or perhaps—and this is to move from being the critical historian to being the philosopher of religion—one might think that every religious or metaphysical position is at the bottom of many existential concerns that give rise to religion. I have in mind, as an example, Martin Heidegger’s meditation on the nature of thinking and his brilliant and provocative realization that to think is synonymous with having gratitude—that, inspired by the etymological connections between “think” and “thank,” he led to ponder what it is that calls upon us to think, how what is thought-provoking is a gift, how both thinking and thanking are rooted in the fact that we are held in the world and that keeping in mind, in concentration, and, in the end, in a kind of devoted abiding with. And this idea that the act of thinking is in its very nature akin to a devotional gratitude for its being points to a provocative affinity between a most basic human capacity and one of the most basic sentiments of religiosity. I would like to use such a discovery of pious gratitude at the heart of all thinking as a model to explain to myself (surely a bundle of contradictions religiously if there ever was one) why, while I don’t believe in a deity who is looking down upon me, or can make anything happen for or against me, why I still pray, fiercely, when I am hoping for something, maybe most in those moments when I am wanting it beyond my power to effect and, in fact, is most likely ever to be fulfilled. An example would be when, in a Buddhist key, I pray that all people around the world be removed from their terrible suffering in war and plague, or when I pray that all the animals of our world be freed from their suffering, or that all torture could be relieved of their agony. I wonder about this stance of prayer, which seems to have nothing to do with any ontological propositions. I think of the Divinity School as a place where I can wonder, professionally, about that stance. And finally, we might imagine what the theologian-to-be, or even the minister-to-be, will take from this academic environment that will relate to her vocation.

For one end of that spectrum—the one that might speak to your own, the most important part of what I hope that our Divinity School will give us is a certain entitlement to be passionate about what we study and write. And I don’t mean to say that passion is the privileged domain of religion, but simply that the study of religion has special resources to contribute. I want to go further than that, however. What is it about religion that inspires passion? Perhaps we could talk about the homologies drawn in many religious traditions between romantic, or even sexual, love, and love and devotion for God. Or perhaps we might just like it to be that the Divinity School is a place that theologically encourages—in fact abides in comfort with—passion in one’s academic work. When I first came to HDS two years ago I harbored some question about what a Buddhologist would be doing in a divinity school, and even why the endowment of my chair had been accepted in the first place. Although I was aware of the very liberal and pluralistic orientation of HDS, it was still not clear to me how what I would be teaching would actually fit into a curriculum that, as just described, seemed almost entirely centered.

The answer of course was Area III, but that only moved the question from “why Buddhist studies?” to “why a whole area of the curriculum devoted to non-Christian religion?” As I poked around for an answer, one of the main things I heard was that “areas” of the other religions of the world were thought to be particularly necessary for our ministerial training program. In this day and age, with our globalizing society, it is essential for a minister in any denomination and in any neighborhood to have a good idea of the religious backgrounds and heritage of all people around—so as best to comfort the sick, give solace to the grieving, to avoid insult or insensitivity to anyone, and to present one’s message in ways that will be understandable to as many people as possible. I am very happy to be in the position of educating Christian ministers in as much as they wish to learn about Buddhist ideas, customs, and literature. It is an honor to be in a position to explore that which in the past has seemed so other to me. My own vision of Area III at HDS is epitomized rather by a striking testimony I heard from a MDiv graduate of the School who is now the full-time minister at a Lutheran church. Tim Stein, pastor at Faith Lutheran, related how he learned during a recent panel here that the single most influential course that he took when he was a student at HDS was a class in Buddhist ethics. He didn’t elaborate, but I know enough about his illness to understand that the experience Stein has been deeply moved by what he learned from Buddhism during that semester. And notice I say “learned from” Buddhism, rather than “learned about,” a key distinction for which we are indebted to Charles Hallisey. I know so sorely for some of us who have been Buddhists that we did not shake his commitment as a Lutheran or tempt him to convert. Rather, he simply learned some things from the way of compassion that touched him, and that perhaps affected his understanding of himself and his ability to be empathetic with others, insights that would continue to inform his full Lutheran ministry.

It is probably our growing interest in this sort of cross-ferilization, the profound effects of learning “from” many forms of religion beyond the one with which we identify, that is the main reason for having Area III in our curricular system. While the “other” religions of the world are thought to be particularly necessary for our ministerial training program. In this day and age, with our globalizing society, it is essential for a minister in any denomination and in any neighborhood to have a good idea of the religious backgrounds and heritage of all people around—so as best to comfort the sick, give solace to the grieving, to avoid insult or insensitivity to anyone, and to present one’s message in ways that will be understandable to as many people as possible. I am very happy to be in the position of educating Christian ministers in as much as they wish to learn about Buddhist ideas, customs, and literature. It is an honor to be in a position to explore that which in the past has seemed so other to me. My own vision of Area III at HDS is epitomized rather by a striking testimony I heard from a MDiv graduate of the School who is now the full-time minister at a Lutheran church. Tim Stein, pastor at Faith Lutheran, related how he learned during a recent panel here that the single most influential course that he took when he was a student at HDS was a class in Buddhist ethics. He didn’t elaborate, but I know enough about his illness to understand that the experience Stein has been deeply moved by what he learned from Buddhism during that semester. And notice I say “learned from” Buddhism, rather than “learned about,” a key distinction for which we are indebted to Charles Hallisey. I know so sorely for some of us who have been Buddhists that we did not shake his commitment as a Lutheran or tempt him to convert.

This shift is indeed a sea change. Not only for what will surely still be our Christian majority here, but just as much for those of us working in the other faiths, and the other traditions.

The best example I can give you of that again draws on my own field and experience, an interesting reading group in which faculty and doctoral students in Buddhism from across the board at Harvard participated last year. We chose for our last reading for the year an anthology of essays entitled Buddhist Theology, and we asked ourselves what the editors were trying to do with that collection, and what the provocative title could mean.

In fact the American field of Buddhist Studies has been suffering from the lack anywhere in the United States of something like a divinity school, or even a theology department, to promote Buddhist theological thinking. With the exception of a couple of small Buddhist seminaries in the United States, Buddhism has virtually always been taught in the United States in liberal-arts religious studies programs. And here the curious irony obtains that while there is frequently a desire on the part of departmental administrators to hire committed Buddhists to teach Buddhism, it is also widely felt that, in terms of teaching and writing, there is no room for confessional or normative Buddhist studies in the academy.

Something like Buddhist theology would not only help fill the gap of Buddhism from the inside, and this has a host of problems. Most crucially, the large majority of Buddhistologists in the United States represent themselves as m members of Buddhism, and the few that are Buddhists in practice have a very different Buddhist theology without a community from which one comes and for whom one speaks does not make much sense. Actually there is indeed a growing American Buddhist community, but it is largely unconnected to academia, and it sorely needs the resources of the academy. One of the major issues it needs to address is the slew of difficult issues facing contemporary religion.
The likely place that community could turn to, academic Buddhism, suffers under a strong sense of its limitations, of being restricted to studying Buddhism “objectively.” Indeed many of—us—and I can attest there was some trace of this in my own case—feel considerable apprehension, especially with respect to getting tenure, that being a committed Buddhist would actually undermine our standing in the field.

Now this should make little sense in a world in which virtually all of academia has already rejected the ideal of objectivity—the idea that we should eliminate subjectivity from academic work. That is now agreed to be impossible. Nonetheless in Buddhist studies the ideal of doing just that, eliminating all subjectivity in one’s work, still exerts a powerful force, such that in both the United States and Europe, people in Buddhist studies are trained to speak only about what the tradition “itself” says, what a text “itself” says—as if we could ever get at that free of our own framings, as if the tradition itself knew exactly what it was saying and was consistent all the time, as if the text itself was fully self-conscious in every word it recorded. I think that such expectations have left my field bankrupt of ideas, frightened to learn anything “from” the wealth of materials that we study, too intimidated to appropriate anything whatsoever for fear of sounding like a new-age entrepreneur, and too removed from the spirit and vitality of the traditions we study to venture anything original about intentions or mentalities or tensions whatsoever, save to jump at a chance to prove a Buddhist wrong, to expose myths, or simply and safely to edit a new text. And even that, I can tell you, is not safe.

I think you know what I am going to say. I am hoping that Buddhist studies, and indeed the study of all of the Area III religions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediate place to stand, between extreme philological conservatism and extreme new-agey fundamentalism. A place where this field can find room for voice and originality in its scholarship. A place for a Western Buddhist to stand when assessing Buddhist tradition from a critical—for example, a feminist—perspective. Such places have been cleared for Christian scholars and intellectuals across the board in the United States, and members of our faculty here have contributed critically in that clearing; Buddhistologists can learn from them.

We also need a place from which to write—and perhaps this idea is closest to my own heart—in ways that will be exciting and inspiring not only to other Buddhistologists but also to scholars of English literature, historians of medieval Christianity, historians of the subaltern collective in South Asia, scholars of American religion. A place where we can begin not only to talk about Buddhism not only as a set of unique, historically specific traditions, but also to recognize that we are often exploring issues about institutions, and writing practices, and disciplines, and ethics that are not uniquely Buddhist at all, and have as much to say to scholars of European religion as Foucault has to say to scholars of Buddhism.

Finally I want HDS to be a place where Buddhism theology—what ever that might come to mean—is informed closely by historical scholarship but also is brilliant in a thousand ways on how Buddhist intellectual and literary history can contribute to real-life pastoral contexts. And that leads me to my last point, about the still-veiled place of ministerial studies at HDS.

Just as scholars should get guidance and ideas on how to do critical Buddhist feminist and critical Buddhist theology at HDS, the School should also be an ideal place for training Buddhist ministers. As in the case of the many Christian denominations served here, of course such Buddhist ministers in training—and I have in my mind some of the young, vital leaders of the Zen centers around San Francisco—would probably need extra training in the specifics of their tradition, from their own sectarian resources. But the more critical point is this: So many of the situations and issues they will face as leaders in those Zen communities are not unique to Buddhism at all, and are really quite the same as those faced by liberal Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities across the country.

A budding Zen priest would learn enormously from Peter Gomes on how to preach with wit and passion, would know so much more about how to guide a New American Buddhism by studying the urban religion of Italian Americans with Robert Orsi, would have insights about how Zen developed in East Asia by studying the syncretic origins of Gnosticism with Karen King, would acquire a new intelligence about the basis of contemplation by taking with Sarah Coakley’s course on Christian spirituality and mysticism, would get ideas about how to encourage a feminist revamping of Zen institutions through an education in the history of feminist biblical interpretations from Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, would learn about the art of self-revelation from Leila Ahmed.

I think the reason a Zen master in America would be such a better Zen master in America if she had a Master of Divinity degree from HDS is that Zen Buddhism in America is in many ways more about the America part than the Zen Buddhist part. And I say this not only from a recognition that Buddhism in modernity is a new Buddhism, and not only in light of a post-Orientalist critique of Western projections of Buddhism, which are so far from what Buddhism was historically. I say it also from the perspective of the very conditions for religion today in the Zen center and the Reform Synagogue and the progressive Episcopalian Church. We are all looking at the status of celibacy, the role of women, and the nature of gender in religion in America; we are all affected by the need for racial and economic justice; we are all facing the problem of faith in the nuclear age. As Peter Stein has suggested forcefully in his blunt new book, A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America, if a religion fails to respond with intelligence and ingenuity to the axial shifts in culture going on today, it is going to die a fast death. More than anything else, I think, what we, as scholars of Buddhism, can do is to show the way that Buddhism can be a part of this intellectual and practical activity.

We also need a place from which to jump at a chance to prove a Buddhist wrong. This lecture was given on May 1, 2003, in the Sperry Room, Andover Hall.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

My lecture title may sound somewhat strange, but I chose it on purpose. I believe that we are, at the present moment, at the cusp of the new-agey fundamentalism. A place where philological conservatism and extreme new-agey will be newly freed to find some intermediate place to stand to feel at home.

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More than anything else, I think, what we, as scholars of Buddhism, can do is to show the way that Buddhism can be a part of this intellectual and practical activity. So, I speak about “in the beginning was consciousness.” In fact, the title I had thought up for my lecture was “In the Beginning Is Consciousness”—because “in the beginning” does not simply refer to a past time; it involves a principal reality here and now. Let me begin by quoting from several of the sacred scriptures of the world. In the Rig Veda, the oldest of all Hindu sacred scriptures, we read, “When alone is the dawn beamng over all this, it is the one that severally becomes all this.” The one is Sat, Chit, and Ananda—that is, the three states of being, bliss, and, of course, consciousness, Chit.

Notes
3 It was Hallisey’s Buddhist Ethics class that Tim Stein was referring to. Hallisey has elaborated his distinction between “learning about” and “learning from” further in his essay “In Defense of Rather Fragile and Local Achievement: Some Reflections on the Work of Guru-lugomu,” in Religion and Practical Reason, edited by David Tracy and Frank Reynolds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 121-162, regarding the difference between treating something as an object for analysis, and adopting it as a tool of analysis (p. 136).

In the Beginning of Creation Was Consciousness

The Dulciani Lecture for 2002-03

by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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