

How to make sense of sixth-century Buddhist philosophy? On discontinuities and (moderate) externalism in the history of Indian philosophy

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Sixth-century Buddhist literature witnesses the rise of two phenomena that would come to dominate, or at least deeply influence, the Buddhist intellectual landscape until the demise of Buddhism in India: Buddhist esotericism (otherwise known as tantrism) and Buddhist epistemology. The historiography of the two currents has hitherto been almost exclusively committed to an incrementalist paradigm (generally of a *Problemgeschichte* sort), according to which both phenomena *gradually* developed out of earlier prototypes (“proto-tantrism”; “Buddhist dialectical tradition”). Despite the differences in their explicative models, R. Davidson and A. Sanderson have shown that the rise of Buddhist tantrism in the 6th to 7th centuries cannot be considered the mature product of a purely internal evolution. The same, I would argue, holds true of Buddhist epistemology: in spite of Frauwallner’s ingenuous attempts at identifying its seeds, there is hardly anything in earlier eristic-dialectical works that might account for the sudden and massive epistemological shift spawned by Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. Moreover, Buddhist esotericism and epistemology have significant features in common. Both of them are inclusivist in that they attempt to transcend sectarian affiliations and to promote a super-sectarian identity (*bauddha, saugata, śākya*). Both are strongly committed to apologetics and “heresiology” in that they aim at defending *Buddhism* against external hostility and defeating non-Buddhist contemporaries through subjugation myths and philosophical arguments. Interestingly enough, the rise of these two movements coincides with a strong decline in Abhidharmic creativity and inter-sectarian polemics (note that Abhidharmic treatises *never* make use of super-sectarian denominations). As a careful analysis of sixth-century Buddhist apocalypticism shows, Buddhists of that period were becoming more sensitive to the general political instability, the growth of Śaivism, and to the hostility of outsiders. The collapse of the Gupta dynasty was followed by a period of political instability, a period, as has been recently addressed by A. Sanderson, in which Śaivism gained more and more political and aesthetic appeal. The hostility towards Buddhism can be seen in the contemporaneous reorientation of the Brahmanical understanding of the *kaliyuga*. In other words, sixth-century Buddhist communities faced entirely new circumstances during the crumbling of the “Middle Period” of Indian Buddhism, a period of “status quo at almost any cost” (G. Schopen): a loss of political and economical footing, monastic concentration, Brahmanical hostility, Śaivite threats, etc. In this paper, I shall argue that the concomitant rise of Buddhist esotericism and epistemology is not to be accounted for in terms of internal and linear evolution, but these were two responses of the Buddhist communities to unprecedented challenges of a political, social, economical and religious character.