Mindsets and Commentarial Conventions among Indian Buddhists

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This article is in five sections. After a brief introduction, I examine Johannes Bronkhorst’s hypothesis that postulation of a commentarial “mindset” may help to account for the persistence of errors that occur in medieval Indian root texts and in commentaries on those texts. Although aspects of Bronkhorst’s account are tenable, I argue that its overall conclusion is unhelpful and should be reassessed in light of the data provided in Buddhist commentaries and commentarial guides. In the article’s third and fourth sections, I explore two instances of commentary that call into question the explanatory power of the commentarial mindset as sketched by Bronkhorst. The fifth section of the article suggests some previously overlooked resources for recovery of the conventions that governed the composition of commentaries among Indian Buddhists.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES in the study of religion, we have learned to understand religious traditions as, among other things,
historically situated discourses that facilitate and constrain the transmission of knowledge. They mediate access to what is known, and do so in part by influencing what their adherents are prepared to count as knowable and worth knowing. The vectors through which this mediation is managed are multiple, and in the case of the traditions of premodern South Asia, they are still not yet well understood. This point has recently been made forcefully by Sheldon Pollock, who, in the introduction to his edited volume on forms of knowledge in early modern Asia, laments “how thoroughly the question of the medium of intellectual discourse in early modern India has been ignored in scholarship” (2011: 20).¹ What is needed, as Pollock rightly notes, is acknowledgment of how little we really know about the specific ways in which Indian intellectuals sought to express and justify their ideas. This is especially true for the early modern period, but it is also true for earlier periods—and for material that has already received a fair amount of scholarly attention.

For better or worse, the tattered trope of the “wisdom of the East” has historically served to increase interest in the study of Indian religions and their texts, and thus our ignorance regarding premodern Indian religious traditions is less pronounced than our ignorance regarding other aspects of Indian intellectual life. We know that much (though not all) premodern Indian intellectual discourse was exegetically motivated. We also know that many (though again, not all) of the texts on which exegesis was performed were religious texts—that is, that they were authored by and intended for exponents of religious traditions. Yet we have just begun to investigate the explicit and implicit norms that informed Indian exegesis—religious or otherwise. The community of Buddhist studies scholars has for a long time now been finding ways to avoid facing the uncomfortable fact that we know almost nothing about an enormous corpus of scriptural commentaries extant in the Tibetan and Chinese canons—a corpus that appears to have been important to Indian Buddhists, but that we have for the most

¹Pollock’s accurate assessment of our ignorance regarding premodern South Asia is unfortunately coupled with a tendency to begrudge the study of religion and the contributions it might make to the project he recommends. To complain acridly that the work he favors is being ignored while “the comparative religion industry, in the United States at least, continues to claim an ever larger market share in the academy” does no one any favors—and it would likely come as news to those departments of religion across the country that have recently faced threats of closure. His stance vis-à-vis the study of religion is particularly disappointing inasmuch as his own work demonstrates vividly how much one can learn about the contours of Indian intellectual life by investigating texts that are unabashedly—and religiously—apologetic. The Mimāmsaka thinkers on whom Pollock often focuses in his analyses were clearly concerned with defending orthodoxy in the face of what they perceived as forms of linguistic degeneration. The positions they take on such issues are religiously motivated—informed by a deep commitment to the authority of the Vedas and to the immaculacy of Vedic language.
part chosen to ignore. Reasons for ignoring this material are not difficult to generate; good reasons are, however, hard to come by. I suspect that few scholars working today would endorse the view that attention to commentaries is problematic simply on the grounds of being focused on texts (as opposed to, say, archeological or art-historical data); fewer still would wish to endorse the view that commentaries do no more than repeat (or erroneously construe) claims made in their root texts, and so can be dispensed with in favor of focusing on the root texts directly.²

There are, however, subtler ways of attempting to justify inattention to commentaries. One of these is to presume that we already have a good general idea of the sort of work that traditional commentators are up to, and thus to presume that intellectual payoff for the considerable time and effort we might spend poring over commentaries is likely to be low. We have not earned the right to this presumption. Unearned confidence in our own understanding is arguably one of the greatest enemies to productive research, as it serves to discourage close and constant attention to what the texts and thinkers we study actually say. In the spirit of encouraging renewed attention to the exegetical literature of classical India, I want in this article to take up an idea floated by the eminent Indologist Johannes Bronkhorst in his essay “Commentaries and the History of Science in India” (2006). The idea is that of a commentarial mindset—an observed tendency among commentators to acquiesce to traditional authority. This idea, I argue, is pernicious. It is pernicious not because it is false (indeed, I think that Bronkhorst is on to something), but because it appears to possess a degree of explanatory power that it does not in fact possess. In reinforcing certain hoary and unquestioned assumptions regarding traditionalist modes of discourse, it may serve to discourage further research into the very body of literature that it is meant to help us understand. I do not wish to claim that Bronkhorst himself wishes to discourage close attention to commentaries. Rather, I wish to call attention to the fact that his claims can be marshalled in the service of rationalizing an ongoing tendency to neglect commentarial literature. This would be regrettable. In the study of Indian Buddhism, attention to commentary needs to be encouraged, not discouraged; if we are to gain insight into how Buddhist doctrines transformed over the centuries in India (as they very clearly did), it is nothing short of necessary.

²Lawrence McCrea and Parimal Patil are surely right to note that “we must move away from the approach to commentaries and quasi-commentarial literature that treats them either as exegetically reliable and therefore philosophically uncreative guides to the real meaning of the root text, or as exegetically wrong and therefore of limited interest” (2006: 358).
Although I will at times be critical of Bronkhorst’s hypotheses, Bronkhorst himself is admirably cautious in expressing them. The claims made here are likewise intended as provisional. They are meant to provoke further thought on an issue Bronkhorst has raised—one among his many valuable contributions to the study of India over the course of a long and fruitful career. It is to be hoped that the conversation will continue.

**SETTING THE STAGE**

The discussion to follow focuses on short portions of three Buddhist commentaries: one on a treatise (śāstra); one on a scriptural text (sūtra); and one on a ritual manual (tantra). I have opted to look at commentaries on these different categories of text not to highlight the differences between them, but rather to make a case for the general applicability of my points. Close consideration of all three passages together will, I hope, help us to avoid a tempting, but overly facile, misreading of what a commentarial mindset might be—and what appeal to such a mindset can help us to explain. Before approaching these passages, however, some stage-setting needs to be performed.

We can begin by briefly summarizing how Bronkhorst arrives at his notion of a commentarial mindset, and sketching the explanatory work that he understands this notion to perform. Bronkhorst opens his article by posing a general question about the indebtedness of forms of knowledge to forms of expression. He is concerned with something that he labels “science,” and he wants to know “whether the history of science is to some extent determined by the form of expression used by its representatives” (Bronkhorst 2006: 773). Unfortunately, he does not take the time to define what he means by “science.” This is a significant lapse, not least because, as Pollock has noted, “the English word science points to no natural kind but is a worrisomely pliable signifier, indeed almost a talisman” (2011: 21). Bronkhorst may wish to index the range of discursive practices traditionally denoted by the Sanskrit term vidyā—a term that is routinely translated by the English “science.” Yet vidyā is also traditionally applied to forms of knowledge that fall well beyond those now counted as the natural and social sciences. It is therefore not entirely clear whether Bronkhorst takes the points he raises to apply only to the forms of knowledge that we would be prepared to call scientific (or proto-scientific).

Regarding the “forms of expression” he proposes to investigate, Bronkhorst is much more specific. As an Indologist, he is concerned to understand a particular discursive milieu: that of classical India, where the favored forms of expression—forms that dominated Sanskrit intellectual
life for centuries—were commentarial. And so one might ask: What assumptions informed the composition of Indian commentaries? Did these assumptions shape the rate at which (or forms through which) science developed in India? If so, how? And what, if anything, do the answers to these site-specific questions suggest about the broader question regarding science’s indebtedness to particular modes of human expression?

These are large questions, as Bronkhorst acknowledges. But the assumptions he wishes to associate with the practice of commentary are clear: they concern authority, where it should be located, and what role commentaries should play in extending it. These assumptions are voiced in a passage that Bronkhorst cites at the outset of his article, one that he borrows from a subcommentary by the great seventh-century Mimāmsaka exegete Kumārila. The passage, in Madhav Deshpande’s translation, reads: “Whatever is found in the commentaries and in the Vārttikas is already (inherent) in the Sūtras. The Sūtra is the origin of all meanings, and therefore everything is founded on the Sūtra” (1998: 22). In other words: the content of a proper commentary is either explicitly or implicitly present in the root text on which it comments. Transposed into a normative key, the passage suggests that when composing a commentary, an author should not contest (what he understands to be) the content of his root text.

Bronkhorst’s ensuing discussion focuses on two texts concerning astronomy and mathematics, adduced as supporting evidence for a hypothesis about commentaries more generally. Both of these texts take up another work, the Āryabhatīya—a famous late fifth-century treatise by Āryabhaṭa. One of the texts—the Āryabhaṭiyabhāṣya, composed by Bhāskara—is a commentary. The other—the Brahmasphuṭasiddhānta, composed by Brahmagupta—is not. These two works were composed in roughly the same place at nearly the same time (628–629 CE). Though similar in certain respects, they take a very different approach to the Āryabhaṭīya. To speak very roughly, the commentary is pro-Āryabhaṭa, while the noncommentary is not. Whereas Bhāskara tends to endorse Āryabhaṭa’s findings, Brahmagupta routinely chastises Āryabhaṭa for errors in calculation and, more generally, for diverging from established tradition.

3For general remarks on the rhetoric of commentary and presuppositions of commentarial practice, see Foucault (1972), Griffiths (1999), and Nance (2012).

4Tantravārttika ad Mimāmsāsūtra 2.3.16. It is perhaps worth noting that the view voiced here is presented as a pūrvapaksa in Kumārila’s text—i.e., that it does not appear to represent Kumārila’s own view.

5The Sanskrit is sūtreva eva hi tat sarvaṃ yad vṛttau ya ca vārttike / sarvam yonir ihārthānām sarvam sūre pratiṣṭhitam //.

6Here and below, the use of the masculine pronoun is meant to mark the fact that the authors of śāstras, sūtras, and tantras in classical India appear to have been overwhelmingly male.
The specifics of Brahmagupta’s critique need not concern us here. The salient point is that unlike Brahmagupta, Bhāskara—the author of the commentary—does not seem to notice the errors present in the Āryabhatīya, and repeats those errors in his commentary. Noting this, Bronkhorst writes:

What we have, then, is two authors—Bhāskara and Brahmagupta—who write at exactly the same time works that deal with the same subjects, among them geometry. One of these works contains a patent mistake, the other doesn’t. The work with the mistake is a commentary, which repeats the mistake that it found in the work it comments upon. The question is inevitable: Is Bhāskara less critical, less acute as a mathematician, because he is a commentator? (2006: 784)

Bronkhorst admits that this is a difficult question to answer, but he sees the data provided by Bhāskara and Brahmagupta to be “suggestive,” and he concludes his essay by expressing hope that other scholars will seek out additional data that might help to resolve the question he has raised:

The fact that Bhāskara and Brahmagupta were exact contemporaries who wrote about exactly the same things strongly suggests that their differences had little to do with the time in which they lived, or with the branch of knowledge in which they were active, but all the more with the genre of text they wrote. It creates the impression that writing a commentary implied more than choosing one out of a number of available literary genres. Rather, it appears to have meant choosing a literary genre, and along with it a certain mindset. . . .

One swallow does not make summer. One pair of scientists—of which one, the commentator Bhāskara, perpetuates an incorrect theorem, whereas the other, the independent author Brahmagupta, formulates the correct one—does not yet prove that writing commentaries has a dulling effect on the mind. It is however suggestive and, one hopes, it may encourage others to look for further evidence, both in India and elsewhere, that may bring clarity into this matter. (2006: 784, emphasis added)

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7For the relevant portion of the root text and Bhāskara’s commentary thereon, see Keller (2006, 1: 30–31; and 2: 27–28). Keller’s lengthy introduction is also very useful in situating Bhāskara and Āryabhaṭa.

8Though the point will not be particularly salient here, it is perhaps worth pausing over Bronkhorst’s suggestion that there is a thing such as “a”—i.e., one—commentarial genre. Given the large number of divergent terms invoked in the titles of these texts (e.g., bhāṣya, vṛtti, pañjikā, tīkā, and so on), and given the heterogeneity of the root texts on which commentarial works were composed (sūtras, śāstras, tantras, works in prose, works in verse, works that target various audiences, and so on), perhaps we should speak instead here of a loosely connected family of genres.
The answer that Bronkhorst posits to the question, “why do mistakes in reasoning tend to remain uncorrected over time in classical India?” is, then, that certain thinkers there are possessed of a commentarial mindset. Note again the italicized portion of the passage quoted above. Whatever Bronkhorst may mean by a mindset, it is something that is supplemental to the rhetorical protocols that define a commentarial genre or genres: to acquire a commentarial mindset is not, on Bronkhorst’s reading, to acquiesce to generic demands. Note, too, that the commentarial mindset is invoked to serve a particular explanatory purpose: Bronkhorst appeals to it in order to explain the persistence of error across texts. His point, presumably, is not that errors occur more often in commentarial texts than in noncommentarial ones, but rather that errors made by the authors of root texts tend to persist across subsequent commentaries on those texts: one finds the same mistakes repeated over and over again. The existence of a commentarial mindset is supposed to go some distance toward explaining why this should be so.

In order to serve this explanatory role, a commentarial mindset needs to be compatible with two rather different responses to a text, either of which can, on its own, serve as a plausible explanation for the transmission of error. On the one hand, a commentator might not notice an error as an error, and thus see no problem in repeating or paraphrasing the error in his commentary. On the other hand, a commentator might notice an error, but consciously avoid correcting it. If a commentarial mindset lurks behind both of these explanations, the mindset will need to be compatible both with inattention to what a root text is saying and with self-abnegation in the face of traditional authority.

One assumption compatible with both of these responses to a text is a general presumption that one’s predecessors got things largely right. An author who has this view of his predecessors might see his task in composing a commentary as a task involving interpretation, but not contestation. When, it might be asked, does interpretation unambiguously shade into contestation? The answer may not always be clear. Surely, however, central cases are clear: whatever else a commentator might do, he will not offer a full-voiced rejection of claims made in the text on which he is commenting.

A reviewer of this manuscript for the JAAR has suggested that the passages from Bronkhorst cited above are most plausibly read as acknowledging only the first of these two options (i.e., that of failing to notice an error as an error). This may be so; it would certainly be in keeping with Bronkhorst’s quip regarding “a certain dulling of the mind.” I would, however, like to leave open the second possibility as well, insofar as it more adequately tracks another of the points that Bronkhorst, on my reading, is working to make: that the generic demands of commentary may overrule an individual commentator’s assessment of the truth or falsity of points raised in a root text.
Yet such full-voiced rejections are not completely unheard of in the literature. A case in point is provided by the eminent sixth-century Buddhist commentator Sthiramati. The relevant passage occurs in Sthiramati’s commentary (Sūtramāravṛttibhāṣya) on another commentary (Sūtramāravavyākhyā, whose author may or may not be Vasubandhu) on the Mahāyānasūtramālākāra, a text that is thought to date from the fourth century and is traditionally attributed to Maitreyan/Aṣanga. In order to make explicit the contrast between Sthiramati and his commentarial predecessor, the three texts will be taken up here in the order in which they were composed.

We begin, then, with a passage from the Mahāyānasūtramālākāra itself—a verse that offers the following rather compressed account of reality:

Reality (tattva) is that which is always free from duality, is the ground of error, and is absolutely inexpressible, naturally unfabricated. It is considered to be what should be known, what should be abandoned, and also what should be purified, (even though) naturally immaculate. Its purification from affliction is considered to resemble space, gold, and water.10

The verse offers several successive claims about reality, each of which has a tripartite structure. Noticing this, the author of the Sūtramāravavyākhyā attempts to read these claims as compatible with another tripartite Buddhist doctrine—one according to which phenomena possess three “natures” (svabhāva) or “characteristics” (laksana): constructed, dependent, and perfected.11 He writes:

The reality which is always free from duality is the constructed nature, because it is completely non-existent in terms of the characteristic of grasper and grasped. The ground of error is the dependent (nature), because of the construction of that. The inexpressible, naturally


unfabricated (reality) is the perfected nature. And among those, the first reality is to be known (pariṇjeya ≈ jñeya), the second is to be abandoned (praheya ≈ heya), and the third is to be purified (viśodhya).12

Buddhist three-nature theory is rather daunting, but fortunately we do not need to enter very far into its tangle of conceptual intricacies in order to appreciate what the commentator is working to accomplish. The three natures are presented here in the order (constructed/dependent/perfected) in which they would be familiar to a Buddhist intellectual who is well versed in the relevant doctrine, and the commentary asks us to understand this order to track the order in which the actions of knowing, abandoning, and purifying are delineated in the root text. Thus, the commentator will read what is to be known as the first (constructed) nature, what is to be abandoned as the second (dependent) nature, and what is to be purified as the third (perfected) nature.

When we turn to Sthiramati’s subcommentary on this passage, however, we find him distinctly uncomfortable with the claim that the second nature is to be abandoned. He writes: “As for ‘abandoned’: the second (reality/nature—i.e., the dependent characteristic) should not be abandoned, since it is the taint of grasper and grasped that exists in the dependent (nature) that must be purified.”13

The point that Sthiramati is working to make here is rather technical. What is to be abandoned, he tells us, is not the second nature per se, but rather the subject/object duality that we mistakenly presume that nature to possess (a duality that is traditionally presumed to characterize the first, constructed nature). My interest here is not, however, in the doctrinal content of Sthiramati’s claim; rather, I am interested in its form. Sthiramati flatly rejects his predecessor’s interpretation of the Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra. The rejection could hardly be more straightforward.

Sthiramati’s rhetoric here does not conform to what we might expect of someone possessed of a commentarial mindset. Of course, it is always

12Sanskrit (Lévi 1907: 58): satatam dvayena rahitam tattvam parikalpitah svabhāvo grahyagráhakalaksanatāntam asattvā / bhirānteh samnirāyah parantantra tatparikalpanāt / anabhilāpyam aprapāncaśmakam ca parinispahhah svabhāvah / tatra prathamam tattvam pariṇāyam dvitiyam praheyaṃ triṭiyam viśodhyaṃ. Tibetan (D sems tsam phi 168a3–168a5): de kho na nyid rtag tu gnyis dang bral ba ni kun btags pa’i ngo ro bo nyid yin te/ gzung ba dang ’dzin pa’i mtshan nyid du gtan me dpa’i phyir ro / / ’khrul pa’i rten ni gshen gyi dbang ste / des der kun tu rtog pa’i phyir ro / brjod du med cing spros pa med pa’i bdag nyid ni yongs su grub pa’i ngo bo nyid do / /de la de kho na nyid dang po ni yongs su shes par bya ba yin no/ /gnyis pa ni spangs bar bya ba yin no gsum pa ni . . . rnam par sbyang bar bya ba yin.

13This text is not extant in Sanskrit. D sems tsam mi 174a4–174a5: spangs pa zhes bya ba la/ gnyis pa gshen dbang gi mtshan nyid ni spang bar bya ba ma yin te/ gshen dbang la yod pa’i gzung ’dzin gyi dri ma sphyang dgos pa’i phyir ro.
possible to explain away a putative counterexample like this by insisting
that all it shows is that Sthiramati was not possessed of a commentarial
mindset—and thus that he failed in some crucial way to understand the
nature of the commentarial task in which he was engaged. But I think it is
more plausible to presume that passages like this one have something to
teach us about what the task of commentary was held by Indian
Buddhists to be. If such passages reveal a failure to understand the com-
plexities of commentary, I would suggest that the failure lies with us, and
not with the authors of the texts we are endeavoring to understand.

Sthiramati’s straightforward rejection of a predecessor’s claims is by no
means typical of commentarial procedure, but it suggests that certain
moves attested in Buddhist commentarial literature are not easily explained
by appealing to Bronkhorst’s idea of a commentarial mindset. These moves
are in fact more common than is usually acknowledged. When we look
more closely at the claims that commentators are actually making, we start
to see numerous places where they appear to ignore or contest claims made
in their root texts. If we take these passages seriously—if we see them to be
compatible with Indian Buddhist notions of what a good commentary
ought to do—we are forced to acknowledge that we do not, as yet, have
anything like a firm grasp of what these notions in fact were. The idea of a
“commentarial mindset” turns out to be little more than a placeholder for
our own lack of understanding.

TWO FURTHER PASSAGES DRAWN FROM BUDDHIST
COMMENTARIES

I now investigate two further passages that seem to me to raise signifi-
cant questions regarding the explanatory utility of the commentarial
mindset as characterized by Bronkhorst. The first is drawn from a com-
mentary (ṭīkā) on a Buddhist sūtra—the Aksāyamatīrdeśa. The second is
a short excerpt drawn from the Vimalaprabhā—a well-known eleventh-
century commentary attributed to Puṇḍarīka on a Buddhist tantra: the
Laghukālacakraṭantraṇāja (hereafter Kālacakra).

The Aksāyamatīrdeśasūtraṭīkā

Like the Sūtramākāraṇavākyā, the Aksāyamatīrdeśasūtraṭīkā is at-
tributed—perhaps spuriously—to Vasubandhu. The work may have been
authored by Sthiramati; it has been provisionally dated to the sixth
century or a bit later.14 The Sanskrit for this commentary is no longer

extant, and no Chinese translation of the text exists. We do, however, have an anonymous Tibetan translation preserved across various editions of the Tibetan canon. A corresponding title also shows up in the lHan dkar ma catalogue, suggesting that the text was one of the early works to have been translated into Tibetan during the initial propagation of Buddhism in Tibet (Herrmann-Pfandt 2008: 305).

The commentarial passage on which I focus here unpacks a section of the root text that elaborates on something called the “discrimination of dharma” (dharmapratisamvid). This is a technical term, used to denote one of a set of four discriminations that are traditionally presented as conjointly acquired once a bodhisattva reaches a very high state of spiritual advancement—the ninth bodhisattva level. Their possession marks the bodhisattva as a perfected preacher and teacher. A representative gloss on the discrimination of dharma is provided in the Samdhinirmocanasūtra, where it is defined in terms of the objects on which it bears. These objects are specifically linguistic: they comprise names, phrases, and syllables, considered separately or together:

Maitreya, the discrimination of dharma is of five kinds: name, phrase, syllable, [these taken] individually, and [these taken] together. What is a name? It is that which nominally designates the specific nature and characteristic of afflicted and purified dharmas. What is a phrase? It is that which is based upon a collection of those very names that are its basis and support, in order to speak conventionally of things that are afflicted and purified. What is a syllable? It is a phoneme: the basis for both [names and phrases]. What is the discrimination [that] takes them separately? [It is] discrimination by way of mental activity directed toward the unmixed. What is the discrimination [that] takes them together? [It is] a discrimination by way of mental activity directed toward the mixed. All these together, as one, are called “the discrimination of dharma”; such is the discrimination of dharma.¹⁶

¹⁵This passage is also discussed in Nance (2012: 73–75).
¹⁶Tibetan (Lamotte 1935: 98): byams pa rnam pa lngas [chos] so sor yang dag par rig pa yin te / ming dang tshig dang yi ge dang so so ba dang bs dus pas so / ming gang zhe na / kun nas nyon mongs pa dang / rnam par byang ba’i chos rnam s la ngo bo nyid dang / bye brag gi ming du bya bar btags pa gang yin pa’o / tshig gang zhe na / kun nas nyon mongs pa dang / rnam par byang ba’i don rjes su tha snyad gdags pa’i phyir gnas dang rten ming de dag nyid kyi tshogs la grtan pa gang yin pa’o / yi ge gang zhe na / de gnyis ka’i gnas kyi yig ’bru gang yin pa’o / de dag so so las so so yang dag par rig pa gang zhe na / ma ’dres pa la dmigs pa’i yid la byed pas so so yang dag par rig pa gang yin pa’o / bs dus pa las so so yang dag par rig pa gang zhe na / ’dres pa la dmigs pa’i yid la byed pas so so yang dag par rig pa gang yin pa’o / de dag thams cad geig tu bs dus na chos so so yang dag par rig pa zhes bya ste / de ltar na chos so so yang dag par rig pa yin no.
The text goes on to contrast the discrimination of dharma with another type of discrimination: the discrimination of things (arthapratisamvīd). This discrimination is again defined in terms of the objects on which it bears. These objects include a subject to be known, what is to be known about it, the knowledge itself, the attainment of the result of that knowledge, and its demonstration. Thus, exploiting the rich ambiguities of the Sanskrit term artha, the discrimination of things is presented as bearing on both the content of Buddhist teaching and the teaching’s rationale—a connotational range shared by the English term “sense.” When understood in this way, the opposition the text draws between dharma and artha closely tracks another opposition routinely encountered in Indian Buddhist literature: an opposition between a teaching’s vyāñjana, or phrasing, and its artha, or meaning. The discrimination of dharma is understood to bear on the former; the discrimination of artha, on the latter. A bodhisattva who acquires both thereby acquires mastery over both the form and the content of Buddhist teaching, thereby becoming a perfected preacher and teacher.

To judge from the extant texts, this view of the discriminations was standard. Against this backdrop of consensus, however, one occasionally glimpses a dissenting account. Consider, for example, the following, drawn from the Aksāyamatiridēsa:

Now, what is the discrimination of dharma? [It is] knowledge that penetrates into all dharmas (chos thams cad la rjes su 'jug pa): those that are virtuous and those that are not virtuous, those possessing evil and those lacking evil, those possessing corruption and those lacking corruption, those that are compounded and those that are uncompounded, those that are mundane and those that are supermundane, the beautiful and the vile.

Here, the discrimination of dharma is held to afford a bodhisattva penetration into (i.e., understanding of) all dharmas. The passage goes on to mull over the members of this class, characterizing some of them positively, others negatively. This interpretation of the discrimination of dharma does not fit all comfortably with the standard view. On the standard view, dharma is presumed to index the linguistic components of Buddhist teaching. To square the view offered here with the standard

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17On this opposition, see Nance (2012: 24ff).
18For a list of sources in which a recognizable version of this view is articulated, see Nance (2012: 229).
19The account is lengthy; only its opening section is cited here. For the Tibetan, see Braarvig (1993: 111).
view, we would need to understand the sūtra to be claiming that adjectives like evil, corrupt, vile, and so on apply to some of the names, phrases, and syllables invoked in the teachings of Buddhas. Even for one accustomed to finding surprising claims in Buddhist texts, this reading stretches credulity; it is hard to conceive of a Buddhist who would rest comfortably with this characterization of a Buddha’s utterances.

The account of the discrimination of dharma preserved in the Aksayamatinirdeśa thus looks to be idiosyncratic. When we turn to the Aksayamatinirdeśasūtraṅkā to see what is made of the passage, however, we discover something even more surprising. The commentary offers three different glosses, each of which contrasts dharmapratisamvid with arthapratisamvid. In each, the idiosyncrasies of the sūtra’s account of the discrimination are ignored in favor of the standard view:

An artha should be thought of as an object that is taught and comprehended. The dharma (chos) is that which teaches; think of it as what brings about comprehension.

Alternatively, the dharma occurs in successive phrases, by way of terms such as compounded and uncompounded; the artha is the real object (de nyid don) that one investigates and analyses.

Alternatively, arthapratisamvid is the comprehension of the distinguishing characteristic of all dharmas in a non-erroneous way; dharmapratisamvid is the knowledge of which terms are [correlated with] which dharmas.20

All three of these glosses clearly aim to associate the dharma of dharmapratisamvid with the words and phrases of Buddhist teaching (or knowledge thereof). The first reads the term to denote the signifiers of the teaching, as opposed to that which they signify. The second sees dharma to be exemplified by phrases such as “compounded and uncompounded.”21 And the third specifies that the discrimination of dharma marks knowledge of how

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20Aksayamatinirdeśasūtraṅkā (D mdo ’grel ci, 209a5–209a6): don ni bstan cing rtogs pa’i yul lta bur rig par bya’o / chos ni ston cing rtog par byed pa lta bur rig par bya’o / yang na chos ni ’dus byas dang ’dus ma byas la sogs pa’i ming gi’ og nas smos pa rnam la bya’o / don ni de nyid don yongs su dpyod cing bye brag tu dbye ba la bya’o / yang na chos thams cad kyi mtshan nyid phyin ci ma log par rtogs pa ni don so so yang dag par rig pa’o / chos de dang de dag gi ming gang dang yin pa shes pa ni chos so so yang dag par rig pa’o.

21Note the hermeneutic ingenuity at work here: in order to hang on to the idea that the discrimination of dharma bears on the linguistic components of Buddhist teaching, the commentator reads terms like evil and vile not as descriptive adjectives characterizing the speech of Buddhas, but instead as terms invoked by Buddhas to characterize phenomena more generally.
to apply certain words correctly. The commentary thus downplays implications of the root text in favor of reading it to articulate a view that our limited evidence suggests may have been more widely shared.

Is this way of handling a root text compatible with a commentarial mindset? Recall that Bronkhorst invokes the mindset in order to explain the persistence of errors across root texts and commentaries. In this case, however, the claim made in the root text—erroneous or not—is not being repeated. Nor is it being explicitly rejected by the commentator (a move that we have seen Sthiramati make in the passage from the Sūtrālāmākāravyākhyā discussed above). Instead, the claim simply seems to have fallen on deaf ears: what the sūtra says is simply ignored. The commentator clearly presumes that the Aksayamatinirdeśa is authoritative: we can safely say, I think, that it is one text among many that he takes to be constitutive of the tradition out of which, and in the name of which, he speaks. But at the same time, the commentator appears to be denying a place for the text as a shaper of that tradition—at least with respect to this particular doctrinal concept.

The Vimalaprabhā

A contrasting case is provided by Śrī Puṇḍarīka’s Vimalaprabhā—a famous commentary on the Kālacakra. Here, the root text is not a sūtra or śāstra, but a tantra. Just what difference this may have made to Puṇḍarīka is not entirely clear. It remains an open question whether and to what extent Indian Buddhist commentators—as opposed to Tibetan Buddhist commentators—generally presumed there to be a sharp distinction between these bodies of literature.22

The opening chapter of the Kālacakra offers a description of the cosmos. The description is precise, and as Puṇḍarīka himself acknowledges, it is also atypical, insofar as it diverges considerably from the cosmology delineated in Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośabhāṣya (Dwārikādās Śāstrī 1998: 1998).

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22The Indian Buddhist work that is usually referred to when arguing in favor of a distinct approach to tantric exegesis is Candrakirti’s commentary on the Guhyasamājā, the Pradīpodītyotanatīkā, which in its opening portion sets out a well-known set of six “alternatives” or “parameters” (koṭī) and four “modes of explication” (caturvidhām ākhyānam, bshad pa rnam pa bzhis), shared with the Vajraijñānasamuccayatantra. But the components of the former list—nītartha vs. neyārtha, sandhyā vs. nāsandhyā bhāṣītam, and yathārūta vs. aruta—are found scattered across nontantric works as well, as Steinkellner has pointed out (1978: 451). There’s a better case for seeing the four modes of explication—aksarārtha (tshig gi don), samastāṅga (spyi’i don), garbhīn (sbas pa), and kolika (mthar thug pa)—as distinctively tantric, but what is unclear at present—at least to me—is the extent to which the four modes were understood by Indian tantric commentators to be generalizable approaches to tantric exegesis, as opposed to locally applicable strategies for interpreting the Guhyasamājā corpus. On the four modes and the uses made of them by later Tibetan scholastic thinkers, see Arènes (1998).
The differences are numerous, and they are not minor: the two texts disagree over such things as the measurements for the various foundation mandalas, the height, shape, and coloration of Mount Meru, the depth of the hell realms, the lifespan of beings born within those realms, and so on.

Punḍarīka acknowledges these differences, but he downplays their importance—so much so that the later Tibetan commentator Mkhas grub nor bzang rgya mtsho (1423–1513) will suggest that both accounts ought to be taken literally. According to him, they are both sgra ji bzhi pa, a phrase elsewhere adopted to translate the Sanskrit yathārūta (Gyatso 2004: 150).23 Both of the accounts mean what they say, and both accounts are equally acceptable when properly understood. How, then, should they be understood? Punḍarīka advises his readers that:

here, measurements of the cosmos are taught, and appear, to sentient beings according to worldly convention (lokasaṃvṛtā), in accordance with the dispositions of sentient beings having various inclinations. Ultimately (paramārthato), it is not possible for the cosmos to have measure and altitude, owing to the force of sentient beings’ merits and evils.24

Punḍarīka here invokes the familiar two truths schema—a truth of worldly convention (lokasaṃvṛti) vs. ultimate (paramārtha) truth—as something like an interpretive escape hatch. Rather than choose between the accounts, he argues in favor of both. Both are equally valid conventionally; neither is a description of how things ultimately are. The accounts are relativized in a particular way: they describe not the measurements of the universe, but how things seem to specific sentient beings bearing diverse dispositions and inclinations.25 To say of an account that it is conventionally true is thus just to say that it adequately represents how things appear, or perhaps how things should appear, to a particular being (or perhaps to particular groups of beings).26 To ask after the height of Meru is then tantamount to asking

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24Translation slightly modified from Newman (1987). Original text in Upādhyāya (1986: 66): iha lokasaṃvṛtyā nānādhimukti sattvāsvayamasena mānām sattvāvādinaṃ desitam pratibhāsate lokadhatoh / paramārthato mānāmānām lokadhātah na sambhavati sattvānāṃ punyāpāpaśāsd iiti. See also Drgyud śri 59b5–59b6: dir ’jig rten gyi kun rdzob tu mos pa sna tshogs pa’i sans can gyi bsam pa’i dbang gis ’jig rten gyi kham kyi tshad sans can rnam la gsungs shing rab tu snang ngo / don dam par ni ’jig rten gyi kham la tshad dang dbangs med de sans can rnam kyi bsod nams dang sdig pa’i dbang gis so.

25Such a reading is arguably consonant with Pundarika’s presentation of the two truths elsewhere in the first chapter of the Vimalaprabhā. See Upādhyāya (1986: 42).

26It is not clear just how idiosyncratic this account of conventional truth is, though it appears to diverge from the account championed by Candrakīrti. As Candrakīrti points out, it is possible to have damaged faculties, and thus be blocked from seeing the world aright, even in conventional terms. It
how high Meru seems—or should seem—to beings like us, given our current dispositions and inclinations. Texts that give incompatible answers to this question should be understood as texts composed by or for those who do not share our dispositions and inclinations.

One could be forgiven for thinking that Puṇḍarīka is hoping to evade certain real difficulties here. To be sure, the Buddhist cosmos is vast enough to accommodate different ways for things to seem. On a Buddhist view, beings are (or at least take to themselves to be) born into different realms, and these realms are distinguished, in part, by how things seem to those born into them. The hell realms seem deeply unpleasant; the heavenly realms, blissful. It would be an error, however, to presume that the cosmos amounts to no more than a collection of diverse seemings, since the prior existence of the cosmos is sometimes construed as something very close to a condition of possibility for things to appear any way at all. Elsewhere in the Vimalaprabhā, Puṇḍarīka himself seems to construe the cosmos in precisely this way. Early on in his commentary, in an attempt to explain why the chapters of his root text are ordered in the way they are (with the discussion of the cosmos placed prior to the discussion of sentient beings), Puṇḍarīka notes that this order makes sense because sentient beings have the cosmos as a prior condition.27 This claim is not, of course, incompatible with the claim that the cosmos can appear differently to different sentient beings. But it does seem to require that we not collapse all claims regarding the universe into claims regarding how things seem. Certain conditions need to be met in order for things to so much as seem—and these conditions are occasionally marked in cosmic terms.

More could be written on this point, but rather than become distracted by worries over transcendental conditions of possibility, let us return to the question of whether the rhetorical moves that Puṇḍarīka makes here are compatible with Bronkhorst’s characterization of a commentarial mindset. On one way of describing what is going on in this section of the Vimalaprabhā, Puṇḍarīka’s traditionalism looms very large—so large that it ends up generating quandaries that are not implied by anything explicitly stated in the Kālacakra itself. The root text does not note the way in which its cosmology diverges from the account propounded in the

would seem, then, that a conventional truth may fail to capture how the world presently strikes me (see Madhyamakāvatāra VI.23–VI.25; La Vallée Poussin 1912: 102–105). What is less clear is whether either Candrakīrti or Puṇḍarīka would allow for the possibility of a conventional truth that fails to capture how the world presently strikes us.

27That is, they are lokadhātu-parvāngamāh sattvāh (Upādhyāya 1986: 12). See Drgyud śī 9b6: ‘jig rten gyi khams sngon du ’gro ba ni sems can rnam s so.
Abhidharmakośabhāṣya, and so Puṇḍarīka is not compelled by the text to explain these discrepancies. Yet he knows the alternative system, and feels obliged to acknowledge it in his commentary (perhaps presuming that his readers will know it as well). This effectively backs him against an interpretive wall, forcing him either to choose between the accounts or to find a way of arguing for their compatibility. He takes the latter route: the cosmology of the tantra and the cosmology of the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya are both correct, whatever their differences may be. And so the deliverances of tradition are affirmed: Puṇḍarīka views his predecessors as having gotten things right. That sounds very much like the commentarial mindset at work.

But a closer look reveals that things are not quite so straightforward. In order to argue for the compatibility—and simultaneous validity—of the two accounts, Puṇḍarīka ends up radically transforming what they describe. The claims about the cosmos made in both the Abhidharmakośabhāṣya and the Kalacakra do not appear to concern ways for things to seem, but rather ways for things to be. By relativizing these accounts to the realm of appearances, Puṇḍarīka resolves a cosmological clash by changing the subject: what may seem to be rival cosmologies turn out, in the end, to be perfectly compatible group psychologies. Far from being repeated, the root text’s claims are being radically transformed.

ADDRESSING THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE PASSAGES

What do these passages from the Aksayamatinirdeśasūtraṭikā and Vimalaprabhā have to teach us about the assumptions that informed the practice of commentary among Indian Buddhists? The authors of both these texts clearly see tradition as bearing a certain kind of authority, and in that sense at least they as assume that their predecessors—at least some of them—got things largely right. Yet the approaches they take to tradition end up undermining the explanatory utility of Bronkhorst’s notion of a commentarial mindset. In the passage we have explored from the Aksayamatinirdeśasūtraṭikā, the implications of claims made in the root text are ignored or downplayed in favor of a preunderstanding drawn from elsewhere. This is arguably a traditionalist move—but now traditionalism is being invoked to explain not a uniformity or persistence of doctrines between root texts and commentaries, but rather something like the opposite: a case of interpretive divergence.

The situation in the Vimalaprabhā is more complicated. Unlike the author of the Aksayamatinirdeśasūtraṭikā, Puṇḍarīka does not end up ignoring the claims made in his root text in favor of an alternative account: he wants to affirm the cosmology articulated in the Kalacakra. This looks
compatible with the sort of traditionalism that Bronkhorst wants to associate with the commentarial mindset. But Puṇḍarīka’s traditionalism does not prompt him simply to repeat claims made in his root text. Nor does it prompt him to ignore claims made in his root text. Instead, it prompts him to reinterpret what his root text says in the name of doctrinal continuity.

A view that one’s predecessors got things largely right thus would appear to be compatible not only with allowing errors to persist across texts, but also with ignoring claims made in those texts, with radically redescribing what those texts say, and—not least—with carefully and systematically analyzing their grammar and semantic content. In other words, the commentarial mindset, in the thin form sketched here, is compatible with many diverse ways of treating a root text—and so ends up explaining very little.

Having stated this, I think that it is important to acknowledge the real contribution that Bronkhorst’s essay makes to our understanding of commentarial practice in India. Bronkhorst correctly directs our attention to the fact that the practice of composing commentaries in India was normatively structured: Indian Buddhist authors approached the task of commentary with fairly precise ideas about what was worth saying and how best to say it. To this extent at least, we can hang on to Bronkhorst’s notion that they possessed a certain mindset, though I would want to avoid thinking of this mindset as something above and beyond awareness of and attention to specific, historically embedded rhetorical protocols. Where Bronkhorst goes astray is in presenting an account of that mindset that is less attentive than it could be to the particulars of those protocols. If we think of commentarial practice along the lines sketched by Bronkhorst, we will be tempted to overlook some features of this practice that deserve greater attention than they have received to date.

EXEMPLIFYING COMMENTARY: THE VYĀKHYĀYUKTI

Some of these features are outlined in an influential but still underappreciated text by Vasubandhu—the Vyākhyāyukti (rnam par bshad pa’i rigs pa).28 This work, whose title might be rendered into English as

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28It, or the account it presents, appears to have been known to many of the great Indian Buddhist commentators (among them Bhāviveka, Kamalaśīla, and Haribhadra). Sometimes, they cite passages from it directly; at other times, their indebtedness to the text is revealed in the formal structure of their commentaries and in the claims that they make about that structure. On the influence of the Vyākhyāyukti upon subsequent commentarial literature, see Schoening (1995: 38–43), Skilling (2000: 330–334), and Nance (2012).
“Logic of Explication” or “Principles of Commentary,” is one of a small number of extant texts that appear to have been self-consciously crafted by their authors as guides to commentary—in this case, sūtra commentary. Vasubandhu notes at the work’s outset that he has composed it as a brief instruction “to benefit those of lesser learning who desire to expound the sūtras.” This description may make it sound as though Vasubandhu is concerned with what we would call hermeneutics—that he is aiming to supply his readers with a toolbox of strategies for interpreting Buddhist texts, or for sorting interpretations into categories. Such tools are hardly in short supply in the tradition. Some are very well known today; among them, the distinction between definitive and provisional meaning and the fourfold list of reliances into which that distinction is sometimes embedded. Some are less well known—for example, the four modes of explication discussed in the Pradīpodyotanaṭīkā, or the fourteen approaches to explication mentioned in the Abhidharmasamuccaya and discussed at some length in its bhāṣya.

Strikingly, however, the Vyākhyaṇyukti pays almost no attention to these tools. A few structural guidelines are provided: Vasubandhu notes that a well-composed commentary should delineate the purpose of the sūtra on which it comments, supply a summary reading of the sūtra’s meaning, unpack the meaning of its phrases, draw connections between what it says and other doctrinal points, and consider objections and respond to them. But instead of offering readers a systematic account of general hermeneutic principles, the work imparts its lessons in commentary by supplying a lavish array of examples for how one should proceed. Vasubandhu usually eschews generalities in favor of attention to what look to be paradigm cases—snippets of sūtra for which he supplies exemplar instances of commentary. The art of commentary appears in his view to be one that is best learned by imitation.

In the section of the Vyākhyaṇyukti that is explicitly devoted to delineating how one should unpack the meaning of phrases, Vasubandhu adduces more than one hundred short passages of sūtra and furnishes the reader with a short commentary on each. A lot is packed into these paradigm cases. They manifest certain features of Vasubandhu’s style—a tendency toward laconic displays of erudition and the use of technical terms—that conspire to make them rather forbidding (if not completely bewildering) to the contemporary reader. Consider, for example, the following:

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The sūtra fragment “childish, confused, unclear, and ignorant.” Regarding that, “childish” is the teaching; the remainder is explication. [Beings are described this way] because they possess ignorance, doubt, and mistaken knowledge. Ignorance is awareness regarding that which is incorrect. Another account, in two parts: (1) [Beings are] “childish” because of faulty thinking and so on. [Those who are] “confused,” “unclear,” and “ignorant” lack the discriminating insight arising from hearing, reflection, and meditative cultivation, in that order. (2) The phrases from “childish” up through “ignorant” refer to the absence of discriminating insight that is coemergent (lhan cig skyes pa, sahaja), as well as [forms of] discriminating insight that arise from hearing, reflection, and meditative cultivation. (Tibetan in Lee [2001: 65])

This passage consists of two parts. It begins with an elliptical citation of a brief scriptural fragment, one that comprises a succession of four terms: “childish,” “confused,” “unclear,” and “ignorant.” Vasubandhu often opts to reference scriptural passages in this elliptical way. Instead of providing a passage in toto, he will offer only one or two short phrases, and leave it to his readers to fill in the blanks. The latter task is aided immeasurably by two additional works: Gunamati’s commentary on the Vyākhyāyukti (the Vyākhyāyuktiṭīkā), which sometimes supplies fuller citations, and a compilation of Vasubandhu’s cited fragments entitled “The Hundred Sūtra Fragments of the Vyākhyāyukti” (Vyākhyāyuktiśūtrakhaṇḍaśata). Typically, consultation of these two texts can provide greater understanding of the specific sūtra passage that Vasubandhu is invoking. Occasionally, however, neither the commentary nor the compilation has much to say, and the reader is left in the dark. Such is the case with respect to this fragment; we do not know the specific text from which this fragment has been wrenched.

In the remaining portion of the passage cited above, Vasubandhu glosses the terms of the fragment in the order in which they are given. He begins this task by subdividing the fragment into two sections. The first, comprising only the first term in the list, he identifies as the teaching (bstan pa). The second, comprising the remaining terms, is explication (bshad pa). The underlying Sanskrit is not clear, since each of the terms invoked in the extant Tibetan translation is attested as a translation equivalent for a large range of Sanskrit terms.31 What Vasubandhu seems to be

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31 Terms for which the Tibetan bstan pa is attested include *deśanā, nirdeśa, śāsana, etc. Bshad pa is used by Tibetan translators to render *ākhyā, *bhāṣya, and forms that overlap with those marked also as bstan pa (e.g., *nirdeśa, *deśanā). The variety is already acknowledged in the Mahāvyutpatti (Mitsuhara et al. [2000]); Negi’s Tibetan-Sanskrit dictionary offers a sense of the full range of options. For bstan pa, see Negi (1993–2005, 5: 1934–1937). Negi’s entry on bshad pa can be found in volume 15 (6990–6994).
marking is something like a distinction between a root teaching and an explication on that teaching. The move to distinguish bstan pa from bshad pa is made several times in the Vyākhyāyukti, and each time it is made, the reference is to a scriptural passage whose initial terms are identified as bstan pa and whose ensuing portion is identified as bshad pa. This is precisely the order we would expect to find of passages whose stipulated relation is that of a core teaching and explication thereon.

Vasubandhu is thus concerned not only to provide commentary on the fragment, but also to read the fragment as itself, in part, a commentary—a move suggesting that he understands the speech of Buddhas to be partly commentarial. (If Buddhas provide commentaries on their own teachings, then Buddhist commentators are in very good company.) Vasubandhu’s gloss here suggests that to speak as a commentator is not only to speak for Buddhas: it is to speak as Buddhas do. And this in turn suggests if we want to know more about the rhetorical protocols that Indian Buddhist authors understood to govern commentary, we should not restrict ourselves to looking at texts that are explicitly acknowledged to be commentaries by the tradition. We may be able to learn a lot by looking at sūtra texts themselves, and how Buddhas model right speech in them.

This point should not be overemphasized, however, since Vasubandhu’s approach to this passage also suggests that reading Buddhist sūtra texts will not teach us everything about the commentarial task as it was traditionally conceived. When speaking, Buddhas do not typically signal a shift from teaching to explication; the distinction between teaching and explication is left unmarked in the scriptural passage itself. Yet Vasubandhu appears to think that this shift is worth marking explicitly, and that the ability to recognize and identify it is one that ought to be acquired by those who aspire to comment on sūtra texts. This suggests that he understands the autocommentarial practice of a Buddha to diverge in certain respects from the commentarial practice subsequently undertaken by exponents of Buddhist tradition.

The portion of the scriptural fragment that Vasubandhu identifies as “explication” comprises multiple terms, and in his own commentary on the fragment, Vasubandhu provides multiple glosses of these terms. Once again, this is not an isolated occurrence; alternative glosses for individual terms proliferate across the second book of the Vyākhyāyukti. What is going on here? More specifically, how would Vasubandhu understand what is going on here?32

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32In moving so quickly from the former question to the latter, I do not wish to be read as advocating the view that emic terms of analysis are necessarily more useful than etic. My view is rather that we do not have a clear view on what the emic terms of analysis in fact are. Nor do we have
One way of understanding the proliferation of alternative glosses is to see Vasubandhu as performatively acknowledging an idea that comes in for extended discussion elsewhere in the *Vyākhya-yukti*: the idea that, as Vasubandhu puts it, “in some instances, a single [phrase] may possess multiple [meanings]” (Lee 2001: 13). Vasubandhu recognizes that this polysemy can generate difficulties for would-be exegetes, and his discussion in the *Vyākhya-yukti* focuses on two separable issues. The first issue pertains to interpretive latitude: to the question of what a commentator is entitled to conclude from a particular scriptural claim. The second pertains to an apparent instance of conflict between sutra passages. These two issues are broached in the process of Vasubandhu’s unpacking of three scriptural passages, all of which concern the interrelation of mind and desire (here, as in other sections of his text, Vasubandhu eschews articulating general interpretive guidelines in favor of attending to the implications of particular cases). In the first such passage, we find reference made to a mind “encumbered by desire (‘dod chags dang ldan pa’i sems, *sarāgacitta*).” Vasubandhu pauses over this turn of phrase to pose a question: should we presume that the phrase describes a mind in which desire is presently occurring (‘dod chags dang mtshungs pa dang ladan pa’i sems, *sarāgasamprayuktacitta*), or should we presume instead that the mind it describes is the one in which desire is not presently actual, but possible? Vasubandhu then juxtaposes the two remaining scriptural passages to call attention to an impasse that they seem to generate when read together. The first passage characterizes a purified mind (*sems shin tu sbyangs pa*, *praśrabdhacitta*) as a mind that lacks desire, hatred, and delusion. The second notes that those whose minds are pure (i.e., Buddhas) possess the ability to know other minds, just as they are—even if those minds possess desire, hatred, and delusion. But how, one might wonder, can the purified mind of a Buddha know—fully and accurately—that which it definitionally lacks?

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33D sems tsam shi 33a3–33a6: de yang kha cig ni geig la du ma ’byung ba dang.

34The separation is mine; Vasubandhu does not tease these issues apart explicitly. Portions of this discussion parallel a section of the seventh book of the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (see the commentary on *Abhidharmakośa* 7.11). The relevant section of the *Vyākhya-yukti* is translated in Nance (2012: Appendix A).
These questions are clear enough; Vasubandhu’s answer to each of them is, however, not immediately obvious even to a careful reader, because he chooses to address the questions by engaging in a very complex rhetorical dance. Positions are taken up, modified, and swiftly abandoned, and they are distributed across what seem to be numerous rhetorical voices. It is thus difficult to determine which of the views on offer represents Vasubandhu’s own considered position, and which of the views he is concerned to reject.

It is very easy to get lost in the text’s polemics here and lose sight of its point. Vasubandhu is providing a paradigm case of exegetical elaboration to which aspiring commentators might appeal when they encounter a single phrase that they take to possess multiple meanings. He does not tell his readers which of the features of this paradigm case they ought to understand as salient. Nor does he tell his readers how to go about applying these features to other cases of commentary. But one way to read what he is saying here is this: if you are an aspiring commentator, and you encounter a text that you understand to be interpretable in more than one way, an appropriate move is to acknowledge the multiplicity of readings by rendering them explicit, distributing them across multiple rhetorical voices, and placing these voices in dialogue with one another. This alternation of voices will be familiar to anyone who has worked on Indian commentarial literature—Buddhist or otherwise. It is something one finds over and over again, and it diverges considerably from the tendencies of the commentarial mindset as characterized by Bronkhorst. On Vasubandhu’s model, pace Bronkhorst, commentators are tasked not simply to repeat claims made in their root texts, but to elaborate on those claims and to trace out their implications in several different directions, if those directions suggest themselves to be worth following.

Vasubandhu gives no indication that he is interested in interpretive multiplicity for its own sake. He does not insist that commentators are to avoid assessing the different readings they sketch; nor does he insist that all readings be granted equal weight. But the alternative readings that he invokes in the paradigm cases of the Vyākhyāyukti suggest that his own mindset is rather far removed from the commentarial mindset sketched by Bronkhorst. Vasubandhu’s approach is undoubtedly traditionalist, but his traditionalism is one in which root texts are seen not as transparent windows on what the Buddha said (or meant), but as occasions for—and manifestations of—interpretive work that may take more than one form, or extend in more than one direction. Far from being a task that encourages a dulling of the mind, the work of commentary is presented here as a high-wire act requiring consummate skill, whose practitioners must find
some way of balancing the fact of multiplicity with the often repeated idea that the Buddha’s teaching possesses a single taste (ekarasa).

This is no easy task, and the fact that we do not know more about the ways that Buddhist commentators have historically undertaken it is lamentable. But it is also a cause for celebration, since it suggests that there is a lot of work that remains for us to do. I hope that the points raised in this article will help to convince readers that it is work well worth doing.

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