



Philosophical justification for scriptural authority

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

In ancient India, Buddhists were engaged in debates with members of other schools of Buddhism and also with followers of Hinduism, Jainism and other non-Buddhist Indian belief systems. In the course of such debates, they were sometimes tempted to cite their scriptures in order to validate their arguments, and this was problematic when the opponent in the debate did not accept those scriptures as authoritative. As a result, generations of Buddhist scholars looked into the question of what makes scripture authoritative. Dignaga and Dharmakirti, two leading Indian scholars, identified a set of three criteria that any authoritative scripture needs to fulfil.¹

1. A scripture is valid if its statements are not contradicted empirically by direct perception and observation.
2. A scripture is valid if its statements are not contradicted by correct logical inference.
3. A scripture is valid if it does not contain internal contradictions regarding trans-empirical matters.

In Buddhism, scripture is not regarded as authoritative if it defies empirical experience based on everyday observation, or if it goes against inferences used in correct logical reasoning. Scriptural texts therefore lend themselves to investigation on both these counts, and this is why the foundations of Buddhism are held to be rational and empirical, in a similar way to the foundations of modern science. According to Dharmakirti, basic teachings of Buddhism like the Four Noble Truths can be validated by reference to either perception or inference so they are eminently accessible to ordinary people.

There is, however, a category of topics that is classified as trans-empirical and that eludes both reason and sense perception. Buddhism distinguishes three types of phenomena: those that can be perceived by the senses, those whose existence can be inferred through logic, and those that are trans-empirical and to which neither perception nor inference apply. For example, billowing smoke is a phenomenon that can be seen by the eyes and maybe also smelled by the nose. On the basis of seeing smoke one might infer that fire is present even though one cannot perceive 'fire' as such (let's say the smoke is some distance away). In this case, fire would be a phenomenon that can be inferred through reasoning. Examples of trans-empirical phenomena are karma, rebirth and enlightenment. Why should we trust a scripture that teaches subjects such as these?

Buddhist scholars identify two main arguments that can be put forward to assert that this type of content is reliable. The first argument is that a text is reliable when the source of that text is considered trustworthy. The second argument is that the text is not of human origin so its validity is somehow inherent in it. Most Buddhists follow the former option and many other religions follow the second option.



In the case of the sutras, then, any trans-empirical content would be validated by the belief that the Buddha is a trustworthy source of knowledge. So the next question is: what qualities does a person need to have to be considered a trustworthy source of knowledge? There are four.

- The person must be motivated by genuine compassion for the well-being of all. This is the safeguard against teaching with the intention of manipulating the audience or pushing one's own agenda. Out of compassion he teaches what is best for his listeners.
- The person must be knowledgeable and thus able to speak and explain the truth.
- He or she not only teaches that truth but explains the methods that others can use to realise it themselves.
- The person makes every effort to teach so that others will truly benefit.

If the source of a scripture meets these criteria, then the text can be accepted as authoritative. It follows that even if some teachings are obscure and trans-empirical, one can have confidence in their reliability because other topics which are readily understandable have proven to be true. The idea is that one develops trust on the basis of what one *can* understand, and one can then accept the more difficult points on trust.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that the mere fact that some of what is said proves to be true (either through perception or through inference) is no guarantee that everything that is said is true. Inconsistencies could be possible. It is at most grounds for thinking that the scripture in question is worthy and reliable as far as we can judge. If we do choose to accept the scripture in this case, we do so because we want to, or because we need to do so for our spiritual goals. The three criteria set out above do not therefore compel anyone to accept a scripture's authority on radically inaccessible, trans-empirical matters. Such matters lie beyond the cognitive scope of the ordinary mind and can only be apprehended in states that are free of the Three Poisons. Their acceptance therefore requires not so much trust in a particular scripture but rather trust in the Buddhist path and in the very possibility of enlightenment.

Discussion

What makes any text authoritative in your view?



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ⁱ See Tom Tillemans, *Scripture, Logic and Language*, Wisdom, Boston, 1999, pp.27-51; John Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakirti's Philosophy*, pp.231-245; and David Karma Choephel, *Establishing Validity*, KTD Publications, Woodstock, NY, 2016.