

1 Introduction

This Element is unusual in its scope and range. The topic of Eastern philosophy of religion is potentially so expansive that the task of addressing it within a small Element such as this one could be compared to the task of doing the same with the topic of Western civilization! The reader should be warned that an attempt such as this can only be intrepid, and that what is presented here is the author's selective view on which philosophical ideas and debates have decisively shaped Asian spiritual traditions. As the reader will quickly notice, the most significant authorial choice was to emphasize Buddhist philosophy in its multiple forms as the thread that weaves together the otherwise very different Vedic and Sinitic thought worlds. This metaphor is apt because texts from all the traditions considered here are called *sūtras*, which literally means 'thread'.¹ The Vedic and Sinitic intellectual worlds were drawn progressively closer together by the continuous passing back and forth of important Buddhist *sūtras*. This explains the prominence of Buddhist philosophy in this Element relative to the other traditions covered.

By employing Buddhist thought, as it evolved first in India and then in China, as a pathway through a dense network of ideas, this Element introduces the major strands of Eastern philosophy of religion.² Philosophical systems, like Buddhism, that originated in the ancient world and matured over many centuries require careful articulation and introduction, for they are at home in thought-worlds that, in many fundamental respects, differ dramatically from our own. Despite the cultural and historical gap between the original contexts within which the philosophies considered in this Element developed and the probable cultural context of its readers, this Element will show that many of the key questions at the core of the philosophical traditions of Asia remain relevant to people today. This relevance is assured because these questions concern the self, the ultimate nature of reality, and the relation between the two: topics which typically interest reflective people from all times and cultures.

Readers of this Element should also be aware that the systems of thought introduced here are vastly complex and intertwined with continuously developing combinations of theory and practice. They also have important ethical, moral, and practical implications for the daily lives of those who actively practise the spiritual traditions to which the ideas discussed in this Element are intimately attached. Acknowledging this complexity, this Element seeks to

¹ 'Sūtras' is an anglicized pluralization of *sūtra*.

² This Element uses the terms 'India' and 'China' imprecisely as terms of convenience. The actual borders of both countries have expanded and contracted dramatically over the historical period covered by this Element.

elucidate the abstract philosophical assumptions and arguments that continue to inform living traditions of commitment and spiritual practice.

1.1 Outline

This section explains how the term ‘Eastern Philosophy’ is used and outlines what is included under the heading ‘Eastern Philosophy of Religion’. It also briefly explains why the term ‘religion’ is problematic in the context of Asian traditions, suggesting that we need to broaden the typical Western understanding of religion if we are to appreciate the religious character of the philosophical debates that form the core of philosophy of religion in Asia.

Section 2 focuses on questions concerning the nature of the self within the early Sanskrit and Pāli intellectual traditions. Section 3 extends the debates introduced in Section 2 to cover broader issues, such as what it means to exist, and how being and non-being are related. Sections 2 and 3 are focused on Indian philosophy, although a discussion of Chinese Buddhism at the end of Section 3 leads into a focus on Chinese philosophy in Section 4. Section 5 introduces another important Indian philosophical tradition, Jainism, and explains why this tradition is especially relevant for the growing movement of global philosophy of religion that is the subject of the closing remarks in Section 6.

1.2 The Scope of Eastern Philosophy of Religion

The term ‘Eastern Philosophy’ can be used, somewhat imprecisely, to refer to the various philosophical traditions that developed in South and East Asia. These philosophical traditions fall into two main categories: those that emerged on the Indian subcontinent and those that developed on the other side of the Himalayas, in the region now known as China. The philosophical traditions of India and those of China are very different. They emerged independently, each drawing on a distinctive range of cultural resources and developing their own textual traditions (Halbfass 1988). Their trajectories of development only began to intersect with the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, which began just prior to the Common Era and picked up momentum over the following several centuries. Our knowledge of this early period of interaction between Indian Buddhism and Chinese thought is incomplete, and exciting new discoveries are still being made which sometimes change our understanding of this period. Nonetheless, we do know that Indian Buddhist philosophy took root in China and was transformed, under the influence of Daoist thought and practice, into the distinctive traditions of Chinese Buddhism. These new forms of Buddhism would later instigate dramatic developments within Confucian philosophy (see Section 4.12), but they had a more immediate impact

on Buddhism in India. The meeting of Chinese and Indian Buddhism initiated a new and highly creative phase of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy in India (King 1997).

This complex history of the multiple transmissions of ideas across geographical barriers, times, and cultures – and the complex networks of influence involved – makes it difficult to reach a deep understanding of any one of the philosophical or religious traditions of Asia in isolation from an understanding of the others. This difficulty can itself become a barrier to readers approaching these traditions for the first time. One way to make this barrier less formidable is to focus on the subjects that interested philosophers in the ancient traditions of India and China. Many of these subjects are familiar to us today, such as ethics, logic, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion, although ancient philosophers did not make the sharp distinctions between these subject areas that many of us now take for granted.

Another characteristic of Eastern philosophies that can be confusing at first is that ancient thinkers did not distinguish the domains of philosophy and religion in the way modern thinkers tend to do. Nonetheless, looking back with our modern way of thinking in place, we can see that religious, or spiritual, questions and concerns were at the forefront of many of the early philosophical developments in Asia. For complex historical and cultural reasons, religious philosophy quickly assumed far greater prominence in India than it did in traditional Chinese, Japanese (De Bary et al. 2001), or Korean (Lee & De Bary 1997) thought. On the Indian subcontinent, philosophers were concerned with religious questions to a degree not found elsewhere in Asia. This explains why this Element focuses more on Indian than on Chinese philosophy.

1.3 What Do We Mean by Eastern Philosophy of Religion?

The term ‘Eastern Philosophy of Religion’ inevitably implies a contrast with its Western counterpart. Conceptually, this contrast makes sense, for Western philosophy of religion refers to philosophy concerned with Western religions (defined as Abrahamic religions), while Eastern philosophy of religion is philosophy targeted on the philosophical dimensions of the religions of Asia. In Section 1.5, however, we will see that the contrast between supposedly ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ philosophy of religion may be on the way to becoming obsolete.

There are many short introductions to Western philosophy of religion available. Most of these introductions canvas a predictable range of themes: the existence and nature of God, evil, faith, and so on. The contents of such books are predictable because the philosophical questions addressed are all generated

from reflection on the central concept of Western theism: ‘God’. By contrast, short introductions to Eastern philosophy of religion – in distinction to the broader subject of Eastern philosophy – are rare. This short Element may even be the first! One reason for this is that religions in Asia are generally not perceived to be sufficiently like one another to merit common treatment. They do not seem to be organized around a single shared central concept, in the way that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are organized around the concept of God (even though in reality a cluster of concepts of God is at stake). In fact, it is increasingly acknowledged that the philosophical and religious traditions of India are more akin to those of the Far West (i.e., Europe) than they are to those of the Far East (McEvelley 2002). Consequently, an introduction to Eastern philosophy of religion cannot draw on an established range of themes, the discussion of which would serve as an effective introduction to the breadth of the philosophies of religion found in Asia.

In response to this problem, it is tempting to resort to presenting an introduction to the philosophy of religion in Hinduism, then in Buddhism, then in Daoism, and so on, through all the main traditions of India and China (and Japan and Korea). To do so, however, would inevitably result in a loss of philosophical depth in a short work such as this one. The alternative strategy, which I have chosen for this Element, is to focus on a small number of important topics, debate about which reveals the key trajectories of the evolution of philosophy of religion in India and China.

Section 2 begins the investigation of Eastern philosophy of religion by introducing a debate about the nature of the self. This debate began in India over two and a half thousand years ago and is still ongoing (Kuznetsova et al. 2012). The different positions that emerged within this debate came to define Buddhism in contrast to the Brahmanical tradition. The Brahmanical tradition was to become what people much later came to refer to as Hinduism (Flood 1996). This ancient debate about the nature of the self provided the impetus for the next key debate, considered in Sections 3 and 4, which concerned how to understand being and becoming. This second debate continued for many centuries, and it crossed back and forth between India and China. Rival positions were advanced by different schools of Buddhist philosophy in both regions. Non-Buddhist Chinese (Daoist) and Indian (Hindu) philosophers were also drawn into this debate, as eventually, as we will see in Section 4, were Confucian philosophers. Section 5 introduces a method of analysis first developed in ancient India by Jain philosophers. The method has been characterized as a form of epistemological pluralism, for it aims to show how apparently contradictory views – such as those advanced by other philosophers about the self – could, at least in principle, all be correct. Through exploration of this set

of themes, this Element demonstrates that the religious philosophies of Asia, while not focused on a common concept, such as the concept of God, have several overlapping concerns. These concerns focus on understanding the relation between being and non-being (or ‘emptiness’, to use later Buddhist terminology) and on articulating the implications of how we think about this relation for our conception of becoming.

A concern with being, non-being, and becoming (or ‘arising’, as Buddhist terminology has it) is evident within Buddhist philosophy from its earliest appearance (Gowans 2003; Carpenter 2014). Indeed, it is no accident that Buddhist philosophy plays a central role in this introduction to Eastern philosophy of religion. Buddhist ideas and texts dealing with these issues crossed back and forth over many centuries across the trade routes which connected India and China. Consequently, the non-Buddhist philosophies and religions of India, such as Advaita Vedānta (King 1997), and those of China evolved in tandem with a Buddhism that was itself, as mentioned earlier, transformed by its encounter with Sinitic styles of thought (Liu 2006).

1.4 Problematizing ‘Religion’

The meaning of the term ‘religion’ in the context of Asian traditions requires some clarification. Outside Asia, religion is often taken to have something to do with beliefs and practices directed towards God. This understanding is not too far off the mark with respect to the Abrahamic religions that are common in the West. However, this way of thinking about religion is too limited to cover religion in India and China. Buddhism is the obvious example of a religion that does not give a central role to supernatural beings, at least not in its earliest forms. The other two main traditions of China, namely, Daoism (Moeller 2004; Miller 2005) and Confucianism (Taylor 1990), also fall outside the standard Western understanding of religion. Nonetheless, adopting what has been termed a ‘family resemblance approach’ to religion, we can note that all the traditions mentioned in this paragraph share features that allow us to categorize them as religions (Harrison 2006). One such feature is the ubiquitous use of ritual along with the designation of specific places for its implementation, such as temples, shrines, churches, mosques, and monasteries. The traditions of Asia also share a concern for the spiritual or moral improvement of human beings, which is widely regarded as a core feature of religions.

1.5 The Future of Eastern and Western Philosophy of Religion

The philosophy of religion is now an academic subject with a global presence. One consequence, as noted in Section 6, is that the distinction between Eastern

and Western philosophy of religion has begun to seem anachronistic to many people. Philosophers now often draw on ideas and arguments shaped by earlier philosophical work done both within and outside Asia (see Priest (2002) and Ganeri (2012), for example). Buddhist philosophy has become particularly well integrated into some ongoing philosophical debates (see Siderits (2004) and Garfield (2015), for instance). The sections of this Element introduce some of the most globally influential philosophies of Asia. The focus is on those aspects of Asian philosophical traditions that are of most relevance to religious thought and that are likely to be of interest to the new generation of philosophers of religion who work in an intercultural register (see Baldwin and McNabb (2019), for an example).

2 Self

The period between approximately 800 and 300 BCE saw a transition in religious and philosophical thought in the developing urban centres of the Indian subcontinent. The intellectual revolution that occurred during this period fed into the Sanskrit intellectual tradition in all its later forms. During this time, which is known as the Upaniṣadic period (see Section 2.3), several distinct philosophies became recognizable that were eventually to have an impact on human culture on a global scale. Buddhism was one such. At the core of early Buddhist philosophy, we find a set of arguments against an understanding of the self as non-material, unchanging, and eternal. (See Gowans (2003) and Siderits (2007) for detailed expositions of these arguments.) The eternalist account of the self that the early Buddhists rejected was widely held at the time by those in the Brahmanical tradition. Prior to the rise of Buddhism, it must have seemed to many a natural accompaniment to the widespread belief in rebirth.

In the Brahmanical worldview that Buddhism emerged in conversation with, the belief, which was later to become so important in the lands to the west of India, that there existed an omnipotent and benevolent God with consciousness and personality who cared about the fate of individual humans, was not to be found. Also absent was the belief that a God, or other supernatural being, judges individual humans and thus arbitrates over their post-mortem state. Without these beliefs, the spiritual life of people in early Brahmanical culture evolved in response to different concerns. Reflective people in the Brahmanical world forged an understanding of the spiritual significance of human life in relation to the universe as a whole. Their understanding was codified in the oral traditions that eventually became the texts of the four Vedas, which are the most important pre-Buddhist texts of the region and are still the foundational texts of Hinduism (Jamison & Brereton 2014). In addition to memorized oral traditions, ritual

practices transmitted this received understanding and guided people through their current life towards a transition to their next rebirth. Spiritual life and religious practices were both premised on an understanding of the self and its connection to the whole (Ivanhoe et al. 2018). This explains why the questions asked about the self, and the various answers given, are not merely of anthropological or historical interest, but constitute the core of philosophy of religion in Indian traditions.

Philosophical debate about the self retained its importance within Indian philosophical traditions into the modern era. It became as central to philosophy of religion in India as arguments about the existence and nature of God did in the Western tradition. Over time, even within Buddhism, a plethora of rival views emerged, and the Brahmanical tradition itself gave rise to widely diverse perspectives. As we shall see in Section 5, Jains entered the debate with a rival theory, while also proposing a meta-theory that sought to integrate the many available views into a comprehensive understanding.

2.1 Outline

This section investigates a Buddhist view of the self as it developed in response to widely held beliefs in reincarnation. The section introduces what, for convenience, I will call the ‘early Buddhist’ position. The term ‘early Buddhism’ must be treated with caution though, for in the centuries after the death of the historical Buddha in approximately 405 BCE, many different forms of Buddhist philosophy emerged that all claimed to be based on his teachings (see Carpenter (2014) for an account of the main varieties of early Buddhist philosophy). Some of these forms of early Buddhist philosophy, moreover, had opposing views on central philosophical matters, such as whether impermanent objects were composed of micro-entities whose existence was permanent or not. This section presents the early Buddhist view in the form that became widely accepted in the later tradition of Indian Buddhism, the tradition that is now commonly, if anachronistically, known as that of Theravāda Buddhism (the Tradition of the Elders). In Section 3, other forms of Buddhist philosophy are introduced. These forms, which are collectively labelled as Mahāyāna Buddhism (Greater Vehicle), came to prominence in the Common Era and have been especially successful in China, Japan, and Korea (Williams 1989).

Section 2.2 explains the origins of Buddhism and related philosophical traditions, while Section 2.3 introduces the main texts to be discussed.

2.2 Origins

The details of Buddhism’s origin during the post-Vedic, Upaniṣadic period (circa 800 BCE–300 BCE) are still contested, the main point of contention