

The Buddha via the Bible

HOW WESTERN BUDDHISTS READ THE PALI CANON

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Western culture learned how to read spiritual texts by reading the Bible. Not that we all read it the same way – quite the contrary. We’ve fought long, bloody wars over the issue. But most of the differences in our readings lie within a fairly tight constellation of ideas about authority and obligation, meaning and mystery, and the purpose of history and time. And even though those ideas grew from the peculiarities of the Bible and of Western history, we regard them as perfectly natural, and in some cases, even better than natural: modern. They’re so implicit in our mindset that when people rebel against the Bible’s authority, their notions of rebellion and authority often derive from the tradition they’re trying to reject.

So it’s only to be expected that when we encounter spiritual texts from other traditions, we approach them as we would the Bible. And because this tendency is so ingrained, we rarely realize what we’ve done.

For example, the way we read the Pali Canon has largely been influenced by modern attitudes toward the Bible that date back to the German Romantics and the American Transcendentalists – primarily Ralph Waldo Emerson. Even though we seldom read these thinkers outside of literature or history classes, their ideas permeate our culture through their influence on humanistic psychology, liberal spirituality, and the study of comparative religion: portals through which many of us first encounter the religions of other cultures. The question is, Do these ideas do justice to the Pali Canon? Are we getting the most out of the Canon if we read it this way? We rarely ask these questions because our reading habits are invisible to us. We need fresh eyes to see how odd those habits are. And a good way to freshen our eyes is to look historically at the particulars of where these habits come from, and the unspoken assumptions behind them.

The Romantics and Transcendentalists formulated their ideas about reading the Bible in response to developments in linguistics, psychology, and historical scholarship in the 17th to 19th centuries. This is what makes them modern. They were addressing a culture that had grown skeptical toward organized religion and had embraced intellectual principles capable of challenging the Bible’s authority. Thus, to be taken seriously, they had to speak the language of universal historical and psychological laws. However, the actual content of those

laws drew on ideas dating back through the Middle Ages to the patristic period – the time of the Church Fathers – and even further, to the Bible itself: doctrines such as Paul’s dictum that the invisible things of God are clearly seen through the visible things He made; Augustine’s teaching on Christ the Inner Teacher, illuminating the mind; and John Cassian’s instructions on how to read the Bible metaphorically. So even though the Romantic/Transcendentalist view is modern and universal in its form, its actual substance is largely ancient and specific to the West.

This is especially clear when we look at the five basic assumptions underlying the Romantic/Transcendentalist attitude toward the Bible: 1) The Bible was inspired by God, but both the message and the form of the inspiration were tailored to a particular time and place. 2) Not only do times and places change, but so does God. Therefore His message for us may be different from his message for those in biblical times. In other words, new times require new spiritual truths; and different individuals, different personal messages. 3) Because the form of the Bible is ancient, its words have to be read metaphorically rather than literally, so as to speak to modern needs. 4) Human beings are fallible, and so there may be errors both in the recording and copying of God’s message. 5) At the same time, there may be errors in our own understanding of that message, but fortunately God still inspires us through His active presence in nature and in the deep recesses of the human mind. Thus we can trust that divine inspiration will help us to correctly interpret and put to use the Bible’s message for our lives.

Many of these assumptions we regard as modern; and the assumption that different people can legitimately find different messages in the Bible, even post-modern. But all of these assumptions can actually be traced back to the early centuries of the Common Era, when Christians were bringing the Gospel into the Roman world. And the reasons for making these assumptions can be traced to issues in the Bible itself. For instance, the doctrine that God’s message can change over time derives from the clear differences between the Old Law and New in the Old and New Testaments. As many early Christians believed, if God could change his mind in the past, there is nothing to prevent him from changing it again in the future. Thus many of them hoped to become conduits for whatever new changes might come. As a result, the early church hierarchy spent a great deal of time and energy in trying to dispel what it saw as the heresies developing from this view. The irony here is that as Saint Paul and the Church Fathers were trying to formulate a standardized Christian message in terms intelligible for the Mediterranean world, they were taking Christian doctrine into some radically new directions.

This, in fact, is how the seeds were laid in the fourth and fifth centuries for two of the beliefs that were central to the Romantic/Transcendentalist approach to reading the Bible: that the Bible should be read metaphorically and that one should look for divine inspiration from nature and from within the mind while

reading. These ideas were originally articulated when non-believers with a background in Greek philosophy and Roman rhetoric looked into the Bible and found it wanting. In order to defend the Bible from their criticisms, Christian apologists drew from the same Greek and Roman background to create a sophisticated theory about (1) the nature of biblical language and (2) how to understand the mind's own process of trying to understand the Bible. These ideas have shaped the way the Bible has been read ever since, so they're worth investigating in some detail to see not only their sources but also the twists and turns they took on their path to the modern West.

In the area of biblical language, John Cassian (ca. 369-ca. 453) – one of the founders of Western monasticism – came to the conclusion that the Bible was best read metaphorically. His primary reason for asserting this came from Stoic ethics. The Old Testament portrays God as wrathful, impulsive, and petulant, but for the Stoics, each of these traits is a vice. It would be hard for anyone with a Stoic background – and this included most of the educated Roman Empire at the time – to respect a divinity of this sort. Thus one must assume that things like “wrath” can be attributed to God only in a metaphorical way, appropriate to his divinity. Human language is too limited to encompass the Deity, and so should always be read with this limitation in mind.

However, John Cassian also argued for the richness of the Bible's language, stating that it could carry up to four levels of meaning: one literal or historical, and three metaphorical. Here Cassian was again following the example of the Stoics, who – to advance their monotheist view of a rational and benevolent God – had interpreted Homer's epics as allegories, identifying the virtuous actions of the classical gods as metaphors for God's virtue, and explaining away the gods' obvious vices. Applying a similar approach to the Bible, Cassian defined the three metaphorical levels as the *allegorical*, pertaining to Christ and the Church; the *tropological*, pertaining to the inner moral life of the soul; and the *anagogical*, pertaining to the future of the Church and the Second Coming. Although later commentators varied in how they named and interpreted these categories, they agreed that reading the Bible on multiple metaphorical levels helped make sense of its many puzzling and contradictory passages, gave access to its deepest lessons, and yielded the greatest practical lessons for life. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great – more famous for authorizing what we now know as the Gregorian calendar and Gregorian chants – argued against those who claimed that reading the Bible metaphorically in this way was an act of impiety. In Gregory's opinion, the Holy Spirit, in inspiring the authors of the Bible, actually planted the metaphorical meanings in the text, much as poets intentionally plant metaphorical meanings in their poetry for the reader to discover. In other words, reading the Bible metaphorically was not a creative act, but simply an act of discovery.

And already, Christian thinkers had come to the conclusion that God did not leave His readers to their own devices in trying to understand those discoveries.

He was actually at work in their minds as they read. This view of the psychology of reading the Bible was proposed by many thinkers, but most influentially by Augustine (354-430).

Augustine built on the belief that the God in the Bible – which he took as the Word of God – is also the God who created your mind. This was significant in two ways. To begin with, the Christ is acting within the minds of the saved as an Inner Teacher who guides them to the passages in the Bible appropriate to their needs, helps them intuit how to understand those passages, and inspires them to believe what they have learned. In other words, without His help, the Bible would remain a closed book, both literally and figuratively: One wouldn't be inclined to read it to begin with, and even if one did read it, its deeper meaning would remain obscure. This meant, in terms of Hellenistic philosophy, that Augustine saw the Christ as an inner light analogous to the inner light posited by the Neo-Platonists.

Second, the human mind itself is the part of nature closest to God. Therefore, as an example of God's handiwork, the mind's functions can be taken as analogies to help clarify, to a limited extent, the mysteries of God's nature and activity. Augustine's most creative use of this idea was to take the three functions of human psychology as defined by Cicero's rhetoric – memory, understanding, and will – and explore them as an analogy for understanding the Trinity. Just as all three mental functions interpenetrate – you remember what you understood and willed in the past; you understand your memory and will in the present; and you can will to remember and understand in the future – in a similar way, all three Persons of the Trinity interpenetrate and share the same substance. In fact, Augustine's masterpiece, the *Confessions*, can be read as an extended exploration of the lessons that Augustine learned about God by exploring these three functions in his own mind.

Later generations differed from Augustine in assigning the role of inner light to the Holy Spirit instead of the Christ, but otherwise his doctrine of the psychology of reading the Bible became the norm for patristic and early medieval Christianity. Not until the thirteenth century, when Aristotle's writings were recovered for the Latin West, was this doctrine seriously challenged. That was because Aristotle had argued that we get our knowledge of the universe solely through the senses. Thomas Aquinas, who advocated importing the insights of Aristotle's philosophy into Christian theology during this period, thus faced a dilemma. Had he followed Aristotle strictly on the topic of epistemology, he would have been forced to deny the possibility of the Divine inner light, and to hold that we could learn about God only by drawing analogies and inferences from nature. However, as Thomas showed in his two *Summae*, the lessons that can be learned about God in this way are severely limited. Nevertheless, he managed to find room in Aristotelian psychology for a possibility that would have left Aristotle surprised.

According to Aristotle, cognition happens in three stages: an impression is made on the senses; this impression is then received as an image by the passive intellect; then from this image the active intellect abstracts a concept – a word or a sentence – which it can use in assembling the principles of knowledge.

While Thomas followed the general outlines of this account, he added a new dimension: that the Holy Spirit, as an interior teacher analogous to a light shining from without, is the source of the active intellect. This means that God is the source of language and all conceptual knowledge – not that this knowledge is always infallible, for some people are more receptive to this light than others, and this receptivity can vary over time – but the source is always bright. In this way Thomas provided an opening in an Aristotelian psychology for God to plant ideas in the human mind – both in those who composed the Bible and in those who read it.

Because the active intellect is functioning not only when reading books but also when dealing with nature at large, Thomas' reading of human psychology meant that God could also enable one to read natural phenomena as signs of His nature and activity in the world. In support of this notion, Thomas frequently quoted Paul's dictum in Rom. 1:20 that "The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." And he further supported this principle with a citation from Hellenistic philosophy: the Neo-Platonic idea that effects reveal knowledge about their sources because they share something of their sources' nature. Like Augustine, Thomas freely admitted that this knowledge has its limitations – he also quoted Paul's words in I. Cor. 13:12: "And truly we see now as in a glass darkly, not yet face to face" – but he was confident that, despite the limitations on the phenomena of nature as signs of God, the earnest seeker, with God's help, could learn accurate lessons about Him both in His Book and in His creation.

The fact that Thomas saw God as functioning directly in the mind may explain why – although he wrote theoretically of the lessons about God that could be drawn from the natural universe as a whole – he ended up in practice following Augustine in drawing analogies to illustrate the mysteries of Christian faith not from external nature, but from the human mind. So it's one of the ironies of history that when Thomas was finally accepted as the guiding theologian of the Catholic Church during the Counter Reformation, the Church used his theory on how faith can be inspired through the senses as its philosophical rationale for embracing the glories of polyphonic music and the theatricality of Baroque art and architecture to draw wayward Protestants back to its fold.

Thus by the end of the medieval period, Christians in general had accepted the principle that the Bible was one of three sources of knowledge about God, the other two being nature and the human mind. The Bible was regarded as the most authoritative of the three, as its words were more articulate than nature, although the contradictions among those words when taken literally meant that

they were best read metaphorically. More importantly, those words were seen to be God's own Word, written in His language. The proper reading of the Bible thus provided contact with the Deity in two ways: through the inspiration He had placed in the words of the authors; and in the inspiration He radiated into the mind of the reader, illuminating His words in the text and the explanatory signs of Himself that He placed in nature.

There remained, of course, the question of who had the authority to determine which readings were divinely inspired, and which were not. The Catholic Church claimed absolute authority in this area, but throughout the patristic and medieval eras, countless heretics had claimed otherwise. As far as they could see, the light of God shined in their minds more brightly than in the Church. With the Protestant Reformation, Luther asserted this principle in his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. However, the fact that the Protestants no longer recognized the Church as a legitimate mediator between God and the faithful meant that, for them, each person was now his or her own interpreter of the text. As a result, the Protestants quickly multiplied into many conflicting sects. But still, there remained the consensus that to make the most sense out of the Bible, and to get the best use of it, one had to read it metaphorically; and, when properly conducted, the act of reading the Bible and finding signs of God in nature was doubly inspired.

The real break between medieval and modern approaches to the Bible came in the seventeenth century, when two challenges – more radical than Aristotle's – called into question this constellation of beliefs about how the Bible is to be read, one from natural science, and one from psychology and the encounter with new cultures.

In the area of natural science, Isaac Newton's discovery of the laws of motion presented a totally new picture of the universe. Nature was a like a wind-up clock, ruled by deterministic, mechanical laws. Although Newton saw divine inspiration in the beauty of the laws of physics, his mechanistic picture of the universe called into question the idea that nature – and human history within nature – had a purpose, that human beings had freedom of will, and that inspiration taken from the events of nature was anything but a pathetic fallacy – i.e., seeing meaning and purpose where they don't exist.

The challenge in the area of psychology came from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Writing under the influence of Europe's new encounters with cultures in South and East Asia – its first serious contact with cultures that did not derive from Abrahamic traditions – Locke tried to come to terms with the fact that God had not planted the same innate ideas in all people. His solution to this dilemma was to adopt a strictly empiricist psychology, which undercut from two sides the idea of divine inspiration. From one side, Locke asserted that the mind at birth is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, and receives all its ideas through the senses. It is simply a passive recipient, its ideas

being little more than reactions determined entirely by the sensory experiences to which it is exposed. Thus there is no room for divine inspiration from within the mind. From the other side, Locke asserted that language was just a sensory phenomenon. Words gained their meaning simply through “rational usage derived from sensory perception.” People used them as signs of ideas, not through any “natural connection, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas,” but only through “a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of an idea.”

This meant, in contradiction to Augustine and Aquinas, that if people used words to describe things outside of the range of the senses, they did not really know what they were talking about. Words were not gifts from God and they provided no genuine knowledge about Him. Their meanings were narrowly cultural, and acts of human communication were only approximations of experience, not signs of a higher knowledge of what lay behind experience.

Taken together, Locke’s psychology and Newton’s physics cast radical doubt on the reliability of the Bible and its claim to authority. Visions of God or messages from God would be, by Locke’s standards, hallucinations. Miracles, by Newton’s standards, would defy laws that God himself had devised.

The reaction to this challenge took two extremes, both for and against tradition. On the anti-traditionalist side, those who were convinced by Locke’s and Newton’s ideas instituted a new style of Biblical scholarship, which they called “Higher Criticism.” In their eyes, “Lower Criticism” was simply concerned with the meaning of the text, whereas Higher Criticism looked at the text as a product of a particular cultural milieu. The purpose of this criticism was not to learn the Word of God, but simply to learn about human life and beliefs in Biblical times, and to assess how accurate it was as a historical document.

The use of historical context to question parts of the Bible was not new with the Higher Critics. Medieval theologians had already used this method to question points in the Epistles of Paul, but these points were relatively minor, and did not call into question the divine inspiration of the Bible, or even of the Epistles as a whole. For the Higher Critics, however, the Bible was to be treated as a literary artifact of the ancient past, shaped by the culture and mores of its times, and not as a divinely inspired text. In their eyes, the Bible’s historical accounts were especially suspect. Reports of miracles, instead of being a sign of God’s purpose in history, were proof that the accounts defied God’s own natural laws and so had to be stripped away before the accounts could be taken seriously as historical facts.

Thus the Bible, instead of being an authority as to the meaning of history, was reduced to the status of a document within history. This was a direct challenge to the idea that history had a divine meaning – one of the Bible’s central themes. Although the Bible was not composed entirely of historical accounts – it also contained laws, poetry, and prophecy – the historical accounts gave meaning to all the rest by demonstrating God’s interest and interference in human life,

indicating that human history – and thus human activity – had a purpose ordained by its Creator. But by placing these accounts in a literary-historical context, the Higher Critics were not simply challenging the authority of the Bible. They were challenging the belief that history was meaningful in anything more than a mechanical law-driven way. Most Christians found this prospect abhorrent.

The extreme traditionalist response to the challenge posed by Locke's psychology, Newton's physics, and Higher Criticism was to dismiss them entirely and – in some cases – to become even more attached to the literal level of the Bible than had been the thinkers of the patristic and medieval periods.

It remained for less traditionalist Christians in the following two centuries to find a middle way between these two extremes. Because, in the Christian dispensation, the Old Law was out; and because the Higher Critics had done a thorough job of debunking the histories, thinkers searching for an intellectually respectable stance for finding inspiration in the Bible focused their attention on two of the other modes of the Bible's message: poetry and prophecy (this last meaning not only forecasting God's plan for the future, but also placing obligations on the listeners to drop their errant ways and return to that plan). In Cassian's terms, this meant turning away from the literal interpretation of the Bible and focusing on the tropological and anagogical: advice for one's inner life and directions on how to further God's plan for the world as a whole.

However, finding this middle way between the traditionalist and anti-traditionalist extremes required more than a simple splitting of the differences between the two, for Newton and Locke had defined the principles of physics and human psychology in a way that left no intellectually respectable middle ground. What was required was a new understanding of the laws of nature more amenable to the idea of divine inspiration. And toward the end of the eighteenth century, the first element in this new understanding came from an unlikely source: the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

Kant had been repelled by Locke's belief in the essential passivity of the human mind, for it denied moral freedom and responsibility. As he saw it, only if the mind is active and free does it merit the dignity of a responsible moral agent. If we can't grant it this dignity, there's no inherent worth to a human being, so tyrants can mistreat their fellow human beings with impunity. Thus Kant made it his goal to set in motion a revolution in European thought by refuting Locke's doctrine of the mind as a passive, blank slate.

Kant noted that the mind is actually active in trying to make sense of its "sensory intuitions," his term for the raw data of the senses. In doing so, it has to use ideas that are drawn not from the senses, but from its own internal need to make the universe intelligible. Because these ideas come from a source transcending the senses, and because they deal with the underlying structure of thought, he called them transcendent categories (this is where the

Transcendentalists took their name). These categories derived their force from the fact that they are absolutely necessary across the board, regardless of culture, to make sense of the totality of one's experience. Kant's categories were primarily rational – such things as the principle of causality, which he defined in line with Newton's laws, and the need for a First Cause.

In rejecting Locke's psychology but maintaining Newton's physics, Kant created a view of human experience that was bifurcated in two ways: between mind and nature, and within the mind itself. The outer bifurcation came from the need to regard the mind as free and spontaneous in its application of transcendent categories to experience (otherwise, they wouldn't really be transcendent) and in its adoption of a sense of moral duty. However, its transcendental categories require it to see the world as deterministic and mechanical, which would deny the principle of freedom. As for the inner bifurcation in the mind, the categories of understanding and morality were rationally necessary (for them to be universal), yet one's choice to adopt them had to be free (to maintain the mind's dignity and responsibility). Kant's main project in his "critical philosophy" was to try to find a higher synthesis that transcended these bifurcations, a synthesis he claimed to find in the creative act of the artist, primarily the poet. But aside from the exalted role of poet, which many Romantics in following generations accepted as gospel truth, Kant's synthesis was not universally accepted – it is currently the least-read part of his work – and his revolution was branded as incomplete.

It was Kant's student Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) who completed the revolution by throwing out not only Locke but also the Newtonian picture of the universe. In its place he – consciously or not – revived a vision of the universe that went back to the Stoics and Neo-Platonists. Instead of being composed of dead matter passively following mechanical, deterministic laws, the universe in his view was composed of vital forces in constant interaction. Minerals, plants, animals, human beings, and the human mind were all made up of vital forces operating purposefully and organically, as organized wholes, which in turn function as parts of larger organic wholes: For human beings, this included culture, society, and nature at large. The ultimate organizing force was God. Thus Herder's vitalism was also monistic: i.e., there was an ultimate unity in the seeming pluralities and dualities of the universe, for the forces within the mind are the same as those operating in nature, and all are governed by the single unifying force of God. In this way, Herder used ideas drawn from the science of biology to heal the split between physics and psychology.

But he also went beyond biology. In his eyes, these forces are not only organically interrelated, but also expressive: Each, in its own way, expresses something of God's will. The closer a particular force gets to God, the more expressive and articulate it is. Thus human speech in tune with the truths of God is the highest manifestation of God in nature.

Every substantial force according to its essence is an expression of the supreme power, wisdom, and goodness as it could exhibit and reveal itself in a particular place within the universe, that is, in relation to all other forces... each in its own way is not simply wise, good, and beautiful but rather is something complete, that is, a copy of the wisdom, goodness, and beauty such as can be made visible in this interconnection.

This understanding of the universe allowed Herder to heal the first bifurcation in Kant's philosophy, between nature and the mind, for the same vital forces are working in both. It also allowed him to erase the second bifurcation, between the necessity of accepting universal principles and the need to be free in choosing to do so, for it dropped the idea that any principles were truly universal: Each mind was free to the extent that it could express the forces that were operating within it, manifesting goodness and wisdom in a way particular to its time and place. Thus virtue, instead of being an issue of universal duties and restraint – as it had been for Kant – became an issue of authenticity and sincerity: the fidelity with which one expressed the particulars of one's own inner nature in one's actions. This shift in the definition of virtue has had an enormous impact on Western thought ever since.

In redefining freedom and virtue in this way, Herder redefined the essential human problem: For him, human misery is caused by being separated from the organic whole to which one properly belongs – from one's inner wholeness, from the wholeness of one's culture, and from the wholeness of God. This separation can be caused both by one's own waywardness and by the corrupting influence of society, but it can be overcome. Because the forces of the universe are interacting in ever-new ways, people in different cultures will develop different transcendent categories to make sense of experience in their particular place and time and to find healing unity in a way particular to their needs. Because these categories are expressions of God's ever-developing purpose for the universe, they are all more or less good. Thus there is no room for radical evil in Herder's universe – evil is simply an interaction of forces that do a poor job of expressing God's will, but there is something of God even there.

Seeing the universe in this way provides a metaphysical basis for cultural relativism and celebration of cultural diversity. As one scholar has noted, Herder was one of those rare thinkers who adored things for being what they are. For example, he wrote appreciatively about Shakespeare, folk poetry, and Hinduism at a time when these subjects were viewed with disdain because they did not meet the norms of what the eighteenth century considered to be high culture.

From a specifically Christian point of view, Herder's picture of the universe had the advantage of reinstating the principle that history had a divine purpose. It also reinstated the possibility that nature and forces within the mind could serve as sources of truly divine inspiration, both in the writing and reading of the Bible. The fact that the Bible was a product of a particular culture was no problem because that culture expressed, not just human predilections, but

something of God's will. This will is most directly expressed in aspects of language that are closest to nature, i.e., poetic symbols. In his book, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, Herder argued that poetry is the most divinely expressive part of the Bible. Even Biblical histories are to be read poetically – although not as mere poetry: Herder thought that debunking Biblical histories was an act of arrogance. In a world shaped by a changing Creator, he thought it thoroughly reasonable that the creative force might display miracles to people with no formal education. By “poetically,” Herder meant being sensitive to the range of feelings that the histories provoked. But by valuing the Bible's poetry above its historical accounts, Herder opened a way around the objections of Higher Criticism concerning the Bible's historical accuracy. The Bible was valuable primarily not for the accuracy of the facts it recorded, but for the depth of feeling it expressed.

Therefore, the ideal reading of the Bible, as with the ideal reading of any text, required sensitive appreciation of its home culture so as to intuit deeper feelings from which a particular expression derived. One of Herder's dictums was, “Outer expression is always directed toward inner feeling,” a statement that points in two directions: back to the inner feeling from which the expression came, and toward the creation of a similar inner feeling in the sensitive reader. To read the Bible properly thus required being creative. In addition to acquiring a thorough knowledge of the relevant languages and a sense of the culture and times during which it was composed, one had to take the imaginative leap to put oneself in the author's place, to sense what it felt like from within to be inspired to write those words. Herder himself illustrated this approach with a poetic interpretation of Genesis as a meditation on the meaning of dawn, with the events of the six days of creation reflected in six stages of growing light and activity as night turns to day. This illustrated his belief that nature expresses the meaning of the Bible visually, while the Bible expresses the meaning of nature in words.

The fact that God changes in the Bible was also no problem for Herder, because in his eyes God was not a static entity – Aristotle's unmoved mover – but an evolving force. Thus Herder taught that a humane, sensitive reading of the Bible would draw out “the thread of God's development according to times, life-styles, people, and morals.” In essence this force was the same at all times – always wise, good, and beautiful – but constantly evolving in its manifestations, the task of the reader being to appreciate the essential goodness, etc., of God in all its varied guises.

Herder thus reinstated, in a new form, the old constellation of forces that were traditionally seen to work in the act of reading the Bible: One was reading a text inspired by God, Who was also a force acting in nature around one and within one's own mind. To get the most out of the text, one had to read it for metaphor. Of course, putting this constellation of ideas together in a form acceptable to the modern mind required some major alterations. In terms of Cassian's categories, Herder's reading of the Bible was primarily tropological,

concerned first and foremost with the inner life of the soul. But the message was also different from what people had found in the Bible in patristic and medieval times. The inner light of the Holy Spirit, for Herder, was more a source of deep feeling than of verbal or intellectual understanding; and the message to be intuited in the Bible was less about one's fallen nature than about a deep sense of connectedness and belonging to a larger whole. So even though the more traditional framework for understanding the psychology and strategies of reading and interpreting the Bible was still in place, the outcome was different: a sense of unity rather than a particular understanding of doctrine.

Nevertheless, in reinstating the general framework in this way, Herder provided religion in general, and Christianity in particular, with a culturally sensitive reading of human history and literature to argue that religious texts in general, and the Bible in particular, carried an authority transcending the limits of reason alone.

Kant was exasperated by the fuzziness of Herder's thinking, and it's easy to imagine why: Unlike Newton's theories of motion, Herder's vitalism and monism cannot be tested empirically. Thus they are simply arbitrary ideas chosen more for their appeal than for their testable truth. His transcendent categories are not really transcendent, for they can be traced to particular cultural influences. Even worse, Herder had muddied the issue of freedom, which for Kant was central to human dignity. Herder had defined freedom as the freedom to express the dictates of one's nature. One's nature, however, is a combination of forces over which one has no control. Thus it is not actually free. Nevertheless, despite these weaknesses, the vitalism and monism of Herder's thought became two of the prime ingredients in the Romantic worldview.

Herder is regarded as a pre-romantic, but Romantic theologians followed in his wake. For instance, the most influential of these theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), agreed that the primary spiritual problem was that of separation, although in his eyes the root separation was that of the soul from the infinite. This problem was to be solved by intuiting the infinite in every finite sensory intuition. A vitalist and monist like Herder, Schleiermacher departed from Herder in focusing less on the expressive power of the highest vital force than on the infinity of its power. Thus he was even more radical than Herder in declaring religion's freedom from the dictates of reason and language. Religion dealt not with transcendent categories applied to experience, but to another part of Kant's picture of human psychology: the immediate sensory intuition of the forces of nature acting on the mind prior to thought. For Schleiermacher, each finite impulse of sensory intuition carried within it a hint of the infinite acting through it, and religion consisted of being sensitive to that hint.

[R]eligion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite.

All intuition proceeds from an influence of the intuited on the one who intuits, from an original and independent action of the former, which is then grasped, apprehended, and conceived by the latter according to one's own nature.... What you thus intuit and perceive is not the nature of things, but their action upon you.

The universe exists in uninterrupted activity and reveals itself to us every moment. Every form that it brings forth, every being to which it gives separate existence according to the fullness of life, every occurrence that spills forth from its rich, ever-fruitful womb, is an action of the same upon us. Thus to accept everything individual as a part of the whole and everything limited as a representation of the infinite is religion.

Because each intuition of infinity was complete within itself, there was no way to build legitimate systems of philosophy or theology from these intuitions, for that would involve stuffing the infinite into finite pigeonholes. Each religious intuition thus carried its own entire truth, which could not be measured against any other intuition. Raised as a Pietist, Schleiermacher had a particular fear of religious systems – after all, religious systems had been the justification for the horrors of the Thirty Years' War – so he argued that any attempt to capture religion in words chained it down.

Intuition is and always remains something individual, set apart, the immediate perception, nothing more. To bind it and to incorporate it into a whole is once more the business not of sense but of abstract thought. The same is true of religion: it stops with the immediate experiences of the existence and action of the universe, with the individual intuitions and feelings; each of these is a self-contained work without connections with others or dependence upon them; it knows nothing about derivation and connection, for among all things religion can encounter, that is what its nature most opposes. Not only an individual fact or deed that one could call original or first, but everything in religion is immediate and true for itself.

Schleiermacher thus turned Aquinas on his head: God is found, not in the active intellect, but in the pure sensory intuitions of a passive mind. However, in positing the infinite in finite intuitions, Schleiermacher was actually engaging in some active intellection himself, for the act of positing x in y is, in and of itself, an act of the intellect.

Schleiermacher also differed from Herder in his strong insistence that the religious experience had to be totally passive. Herder had taken a more moderate line in stating that one had to approach nature and the Bible with an attitude of childlike humility, but that one should bring all the elements of one's active, appreciative mind to bear on understanding God's message both verbally and intuitively. Schleiermacher, however – at least in his early writings – felt that the only way to experience the infinite was to put the mind in an open, receptive, pre-verbal, non-judging state.

Religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling. It wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity.

Neither Herder nor Schleiermacher formulated a theory of ethics. Both felt that ethical motivations would arise freely and naturally from the experience of connectedness and wholeness, so they saw no need to tell others how to translate that experience into social action. That task, however, was taken up by their contemporary, the poet/philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), who argued that there were two major obstacles to connectedness in human society: colonialism and the wage-labor system. Thus he established a link between the desire for connectedness and the theoretical need for structural social reform that would make the aspiration for connectedness a concrete reality. This link was to have a major impact on Romantic and post-Romantic social thought and action in the nineteenth century and beyond.

There are two major inconsistencies in Herder and Schleiermacher's thought. The first is that, although they argued for the cultural relativism of all thought, they never discussed whether their own thoughts on cultural relativism were culturally relative. Apparently they thought not, which means that they placed their thought above the conditions of all other human thought. This could have arrogant implications, which became clear in the thought of the later Romantics and the Transcendentalists. But in Herder and Schleiermacher this was a minor problem because they brought such a strong sense of humility and receptivity to their study of other cultures. Neither regarded the critical, negative role of analysis as the highest expression of intelligence. Instead, Herder in particular argued that the role of the sensitive intellect was to be appreciative of what's good in other cultures, of their particular genius in describing what one's own culture may not do so wisely or well. In addition, he said, one must keep in mind that, operating from a different culture, one can never fully appreciate the inwardness of what it is/was like to be an organic force within the organic forces of another culture at another place and time. Schleiermacher seconded these sentiments in his later years when he tried to develop a science of hermeneutics – rules for understanding ancient texts in general, and in particular for approaching as close as possible to the author's original inspiration.

The second major inconsistency in their thought is that both Herder and Schleiermacher, to free religion from the shackles of rationalist thought, were so focused on asserting the cultural relativism of all thought that they didn't realize that they were also providing arguments for rejecting the Bible as having absolute authority throughout time. In their eyes, all religions have something good, but Christianity has something better. Still, their basic theories provided no solid grounds for establishing why this should be so. In defending the possibility of divine inspiration in the Bible, they opened the possibility that other texts could be divinely inspired as well; in defending God's evolution in

the Bible, they opened the possibility that God's plan could continue to evolve in other cultures beyond the Bible's range.

Later generations took advantage of these openings. The Romantics, for instance, tended to refer to religion as a faculty of mind, an interior sensitivity whose progress they charted avidly, but they rarely tied it specifically to Christianity or any other set text or institution.

This tendency was reinforced by the work of a Biblical scholar who applied Herder's ideas of cultural relativism to the study of the gospels. In 1835, David Friedrich Strauss published his book, *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* and immediately took both Europe and America by storm. Practitioners of the Higher Criticism, to the extent that they tried to debunk the gospels, had focused primarily on questioning the accounts of Jesus' miracles. Strauss took the process much further by looking into the psychology of the authors of the texts. Building on one of Herder's insights—Herder had said that it was natural for the apostles to have been eager to show how Jesus' life fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies, but that didn't compromise the truth of their message—Strauss took this insight to a point where Herder was unwilling to go. With painstaking scholarship, he proved that all gospel accounts had obviously played loose with the facts in their eagerness to prove that Jesus was the promised messiah. Therefore their truth as historical documents was severely compromised and they had to be read simply as myths. Strauss himself was a Christian, and he still found inspiration in gospels, but that inspiration was of a more intuitive sort. The Bible, in his eyes, was purely a poetic and prophetic document. The Romantics, to the extent that they still found inspiration in the Bible, agreed.

These are the immediate sources from which the Transcendentalists derived their thoughts on the Bible, and on religion in general. There is a tendency among Americans to regard the Transcendentalists as our first quintessentially American thinkers: the ones who had proclaimed our intellectual independence from Europe. There is also a parallel tendency among American Buddhists, fostered by Rick Field's *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, to see the Transcendentalists as the first Americans influenced by Buddhist thought. But it turns out that, before the Transcendentalists learned about Buddhism and Hinduism—which they tended to conflate—they had been reading Kant and the German Romantics, and had already developed the basic tenets of their thought. In fact, many of their contemporaries saw their thought not as American, but as an unnatural German transplant on American soil. That these contemporaries were right is especially clear in the writings of Emerson, who—while not the most representative of the Transcendentalists—was easily the most famous.

In formulating what he called his “doctrine of perpetual revelation,” Emerson lifted many of his central ideas straight from Herder and Schleiermacher: The universe is composed of forces that are organic expressions of one overarching

force present in all things. This force is both purposeful and progressive – i.e., change is not always for the good, but as a general principle it is necessary to further the ever-developing purpose of the overarching force, which Emerson called the Over-soul.

The goal of life is to find oneness with this force and to further its progress. This force can to some extent be found in religious texts, which provide a secondhand glimpse of other people's intuitions; because these texts are expressed in the idiom of other times and places, they have to be read creatively in order to get at their innermost message. Thus, Emerson holds,

The idealism of Jesus... is a crude statement of the fact that all nature is the rapid efflux of goodness executing and organizing itself.

However, the Over-soul can best be found through intuition, the most direct means for developing this intuition being introspection and contact with nature. Emerson sided with Schleiermacher in holding that the best way to intuit the Over-soul was by opening the mind to nature in a pre-verbal, non-judging, purely receptive state.

Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

Where Emerson departed most sharply from Herder and Schleiermacher was in his belief that finding oneness with the Over-soul means that one's soul is the Over-soul. The organic unity of universal forces means organic identity:

The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable... the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly in endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one.

Thus the soul's creative work is identical with that of the Over-soul, and its intuitions can be implicitly trusted. This is true even when those intuitions conflict with the Bible, for the expressions of the Over-soul found in the Bible were appropriate for a more primitive time and culture, and not one's more advanced position in history. Instead of immersing oneself in the languages and cultures of the past to get closer to the human authors of the Bible, one should focus on one's intuitive sense of one's needs of the present, and to trust implicitly one's sense of whether the Bible speaks to those needs.

Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole. What is that abridgement and selection we observe in all spiritual activity, but itself the creative impulse? We

need not fear that we can lose any thing by the progress of the soul. The soul may be trusted to the end.

In the book I read, the good thought returns to me, as every truth will, the image of the whole soul. To the bad thought which I find in it, the same soul becomes a discerning, separating sword, and lops it away.

The saints and demigods whom history worships we are constrained to accept with a grain of allowance. Though in our lonely hours we draw a new strength out of their memory, yet, pressed on our attention, as they are by the thoughtless and customary, they fatigue and invade. The soul gives itself, alone, original, and pure, to the Lonely, Original, and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads, and speaks through it.

Emerson spoke strongly of the dangers of following old texts, for they smother the creative impulse of the soul in the present.

Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over-influence.

When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence.

The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps... If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fullness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence, then, this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul.

This should be plain enough. Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet hear God himself, unless he speak the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul. We shall not always set so great a price on a few texts, on a few lives. We are like children who repeat by rote the sentences of grandames and tutors... When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish.

Emerson also rejected the argument that the truth of the Bible is proven by the miracles it reports, for in his eyes there was nothing more miraculous than the present moment.

The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.

Emerson – like the Higher Critics – treated the Bible, not as The Book, but simply as one book among many. And in his eyes, the proper use for books is for times when the soul loses its contact with the Over-soul. Even then, though, one should read them not for specific information about history, but for a more poetic sense of inspiration. The goal is not to figure out what the texts mean, but to use them as kindling for one's own creative impulse.

Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must, – when the sun is hid and the stars withdraw their shining, – we repair to the flames which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is...

[One] must attain and maintain that lofty sight where poetry and annals are alike.

The Garden of Eden, the sun standing still in Gibeon, is poetry thenceforward to all nations. Who cares what the fact was, when we have made a constellation of it to hang in heaven as an immortal sign.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Emerson's thought is the principle that no person is in a position to judge the validity of another person's professed inspiration. Thus the eternal law is purely subjective. When Emerson was chided that, "these impulses might be from below, not above," he calmly replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." One's inner nature was a law that no one else could judge. It should come as no surprise, then, that Emerson's critics outside of the Transcendentalist fold focused on his arrogance as his most disturbing trait.

Even his fellow Transcendentalists were troubled by what one of them – Elizabeth Peabody – termed the egotheism of his thought. All religious sentiment, in his writings, revolves around the I, and denied the need for self-sacrificing service to others. Once, when chided that he should do more to help the poor, he responded, "Are they *my* poor?" This attitude was proof in the eyes of his fellow Transcendentalists that he was too focused on the purely poetic mode of reading the Bible, and not enough on the prophetic, which would oblige the soul to look outwards to further God's work in looking after others.

However, even though they criticized Emerson in theory for being too exclusively poetical in interpreting the Bible, his fellow Transcendentalists in practice also based their prophetic interpretation on a poetic and progressive reading of the Bible – aimed at ferreting out not its original message but a new message appropriate for modern needs.

This is especially clear in the Transcendentalists' appropriation of French Christian socialist ideas, and in particular the ideas of Pierre Leroux, who invented the term "socialism" in 1833. Critical of a culture of hyper-individualism that he saw as destroying the possibility of social harmony, Leroux argued for the need to drop artificial social divisions caused by the division of labor, wage labor, capitalist exploitation, external signs of status, etc., and to construct a new social system that allowed all members of society to celebrate their connections with humanity at large. Leroux claimed that this was the proper reading of the Christ's sharing of his blood and body at the Last Supper – this was the message that Jesus intended for our time, and that all true Christians were obliged to follow. (This perceived connection between socialism

and the practice of Communion is where communes and Communism got their names.) For anyone familiar with the history of Romanticism, however, it's easy to see that Leroux drew his original inspiration from Schiller and was using the Bible more as a justification than as a source for his ideas.

Among the Transcendentalists, Orestes Brownson was the first to be persuaded by Leroux's reading of the Bible, taking Leroux's prophetic message to heart to live what he called a "life by communion." And of the Transcendentalists, Brownson was most influential in pushing others to engage in social work that didn't end with mere charity, but sought to restructure society as a whole. His own work was on behalf of the working-class poor, but other Transcendentalists worked for reform in other areas: Margaret Fuller in prison and mental hospital reform, Elizabeth Peabody in educational reform, Theodore Parker in the abolition of slavery. Parker actually helped finance John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and escaped prison only through the formidable skills of his lawyers. In all cases, these more socially active Transcendentalists based their social work on the idea that the human soul is basically good, and if it is allowed to grow in a healthy society where it can realize its interconnections with its fellow souls, its goodness will flourish.

Emerson also spoke out on the evils of slavery, but otherwise his heart was unmoved by a prophetic reading of the Bible. This caused a rift and standoff within the Transcendentalist camp. When other Transcendentalists stated that the public sins of a corrupt society made a life of private morality impossible, he retorted that unless change came first from within, even the ideal social structure would be corrupted by the lack of inner contact with God. When they said that one could not be a true Christian without working for social reform, Emerson said that that was fine and good for them, but that their prophetic reading of the Bible shouldn't dictate moral obligations for others.

Although Emerson's espousal of extreme individuality was atypical among the Transcendentalists, his views ended up having the most influence in American culture at large. A popular speaker in his time – he was among the earliest of the many nineteenth-century writers who made lecture tours around the country – he outlived most of his fellow Transcendentalists, continuing to lecture after the Civil War and into the Industrial Age. His teaching that the shackles of past precedent needed to be broken, and that each person was a law to his or her own self, found an appreciative hearing – for better or worse – from all the rugged individualists of that period, ranging from the robber barons to John Muir.

Despite the rift between the purely poetic and poetic/prophetic ways in which the Transcendentalists read their Bible, they did bequeath an attitude that, in liberal Christian, reform Jewish, and New Age circles, has persisted to this day. For them, the Bible was to be read intuitively and creatively. Because it was a culturally conditioned text from the past, one had to engage in an act of

imagination to intuit how it might be applied to modern needs. To intuit this message, one should read it not as a scholar might, attempting to return to the original intention of the authors, but as one poet might read another poet, or one prophet another prophet: as a source of inspiration for creating the poetry and prophetic sense of moral obligation through which one advances the will of the vital spirit of the universe – in line with what one intuits that will to be. This intuition is best induced by going outside of the Bible: dissolving one's small sense of self and putting the mind in an open, receptive, pre-verbal state into which the Divine will can enter, granting inspiration for moral action and an absolutely trustworthy sense of right and wrong. In this way, the Transcendentalists took absolute authority away from the Bible and gave it to the mind's intuitions – their version of Augustine's divine light within.

To this general picture, Emerson added a warning note, citing two reasons for why the dangers of reading the Bible as an authoritative text were as great as – if not more than – the benefits. First, the reader always had to be wary not to have his or her own direct intuitions of the Over-soul stifled by the second-hand expressions contained in ancient texts. Second, because the Over-soul is constantly evolving in its purposes, the message of the Bible, while appropriate for people in the early, infant stages of history, might no longer be appropriate for our more advanced, mature age. Thus, in addition to the general Transcendentalist position that the Bible should be read creatively and intuitively, Emerson added that it should be read from a position of personal and cultural superiority.

As we have already noted, this view of how to read the Bible rests on a number of meta-cultural assumptions about human psychology and the nature of the universe. These assumptions can be summed up under the principle of monistic vitalism that the Transcendentalists inherited from Herder, as modified by Schleiermacher: The human mind is a creative, active force that gains some of its knowledge from the senses and some from its own internal necessity to make sense of the universe as a whole. This active force, though, is in no way separate from the forces of the universe, all of which are governed by a single, organizing force with a purpose for the course of human history – a purpose that is supremely good, true, and beautiful, but constantly evolving in the expression of its aims. The mind suffers when assuming itself to be separate from this force – just as a part of an organic whole suffers when separated from the whole – and finds its true meaning and purpose by sensing its unity with this force, so that its own spontaneous and creative activities become an expression of the evolving purpose of the whole. Because the actions of the overarching force are most immediately available to the mind in the raw intuitions of the senses, this unity can best be sensed by putting the mind in a pre-verbal state where it can be fully open and receptive to sensory input. Because the will of that spirit and its purpose is constantly evolving, each person's intuition may reveal new and unexpected aspects of that will which are appropriate for that person. Thus

individual freedom lies in being true, not to the duties imposed by universal principles, but to the dictates of one's own intuition – dictates that other people are in no position to judge.

Although the Transcendentalist view of how to read the Bible is based on a monistic view of the universe, it assumes a two-tiered theory of the psychology of language. On the lower tier there is the language of spiritual texts, which is primarily expressive and culture-bound. When the experience of inner unity results in words, those words express a mood or feeling: a sense of what unity feels like, how the universe appears from that perspective. Regardless of the validity of the original feeling, the words derived from it are limited by culture and the individual's verbal powers. This is why they are best read as poetry with a fluid rather than a fixed meaning, and also why the inspiration from the Bible is secondary to inspiration from the receptive contemplation of nature.

However, on the second, higher tier there is the language that states these principles of how the mind works. This language, rather than being expressive, is descriptive and explanatory. Its truths are not bound by culture and so are valid for all times and places. They establish universal rules for how spiritual texts are composed and how they are to be read, and thus must come prior to any truths expressed in those texts. Wherever the expressive, culture-bound truths of the texts conflict with these descriptive, explanatory principles, the truths of the texts must give way.

Some historians have stated that the Romantics and Transcendentalists differed from their Enlightenment forebears in that they rejected the principle of universal truths valid for all time, but this was not the case. Both groups learned from the Enlightenment that an intellectually respectable position has to be explained in terms of universal principles. Where they differed was that their principles, instead of dealing with abstract reasoning, were primarily psychological, dealing more with the processes of the mind than with the logic or content of its thoughts. Different people will find different reasons compelling or will experience inner unity in different ways – this is a matter of cultural conditioning and personal temperament – but the processes of conditioning and temperament, and why they lead to individual differences, can be explained in universal terms. This is why these psychological truths are meta-cultural and take precedence over any other form of expression.

This distinction in levels of language – and levels of authority – can be seen as a reaction to the issue of the Bible's authority. The Bible presents God's authority as absolute and arbitrary. His word is not always consistent – which means that it cannot be tested over time – even though His different messages are all claimed to come from the same source. At the same time, His word is often expressed in poetic imagery, expressive more of feelings than of abstract principles, lending itself to a wide variety of interpretations which, over history, have proven to be even more contradictory than what can be found in the Bible itself. In contrast to this, the Romantics and Transcendentalists viewed

psychological principles as clearly enunciated descriptions, consistent over time, even though – strictly speaking – they could not be tested through observation. Their universality is what gives them absolute authority, above and beyond that of the Bible – or of any other religious text.

Emerson was one of the first Americans to give an appreciative reading to Buddhist and Hindu teachings, which he tended to conflate, at the same time subjecting them to the same “discerning sword” of meta-cultural truths he had brought to the Bible. His readings of these religions tended to privilege teachings that conformed with the underlying monism and vitalism of his thought, while rejecting any that didn’t. This approach exerted a wide influence in the nineteenth century reception of Eastern religions in America, not only in popular culture but also in the academy. Most writers and scholars sympathetic to the East adopted the psychological principles of the Romantics and Transcendentalists in presenting what was of universal value in Eastern religions, a tendency that reached its apex in the work of William James. Through James’s influence, many of these principles ultimately found their way into humanistic psychology, where they have assumed the status of received scientific truths.

As a result, the Romantic/Transcendentalist view has become an established paradigm in Western culture for viewing the relative status of psychology and religious texts. And it should come as no surprise that, of the various paradigms currently available in the West for understanding the authority of the Bible, this would be the paradigm with the most appeal for people looking outside the Judeo-Christian tradition for their spiritual inspiration, for it frees them from having to give the Bible their ultimate and total allegiance.

This can be clearly seen in the way many Westerners approach the Pali Canon: from a position of superiority and in terms of humanistic psychology. This tendency is marked not only in Westerners new to Buddhism, but also in those who identify themselves as operating within the Buddhist tradition. Overall, there are at least eight specific ways in which Romantic/Transcendentalist principles inform statements that Western Buddhists have made about how to read the Pali Canon.

In the following discussion I’ve illustrated these principles, as applied to the Canon, with quotations from both lay and monastic teachers. The teachers are left unnamed because I want to focus, not on individuals, but on what historians call a cultural syndrome, in which both the teachers and their audiences share responsibility for influencing one another: the teachers, by how they try to explain and persuade; the audiences, by what they’re inclined to accept or reject. Some of the teachers quoted here embrace Romantic/Transcendentalist ideas more fully than others, but the tendency is present, at least to some extent, in them all.

1. The first principle is that the Canon, like all spiritual texts, takes interconnectedness – the experience of unity within and without – as its basic theme. On attaining this unity, one drops the identity of one’s small self and embraces a new identity with the universe at large.

The goal [of Dhamma practice] is integration, through love and acceptance, openness and receptivity, leading to a unified wholeness of experience without the artificial boundaries of separate selfhood.

It is the goal of spiritual life to open to the reality that exists beyond our small sense of self. Through the gate of oneness we awaken to the ocean within us, we come to know in yet another way that the seas we swim in are not separate from all that lives. When our identity expands to include everything, we find a peace with the dance of the world. It is all ours, and our heart is full and empty, large enough to embrace it all.

2. The Canon’s prime contribution to human spirituality is its insight into how interconnectedness can be cultivated through systematic training in mindfulness, defined as an open, receptive, pre-verbal awareness. This provides a practical technique for fostering the sort of transparent religious consciousness that Emerson extolled. One teacher, in fact, describes mindfulness as “sacred awareness.”

Mindfulness is presence of mind, attentiveness or awareness. Yet the kind of awareness involved in mindfulness differs profoundly from the kind of awareness at work in our usual mode of consciousness... The mind is deliberately kept at the level of bare attention, a detached observation of what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. In the practice of right mindfulness the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgements and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur, just registered and dropped. The task is simply to note whatever comes up just as it is occurring, riding the changes of events in the way a surfer rides the waves on the sea.

3. However, the Canon does not speak with final authority on how this receptive state should be used or how life should be led. This is because the nature of spiritual inspiration is purely individual and mysterious. Where the Transcendentalists spoke of following the soul, Western Buddhists speak of following the heart. As one teacher, who has suggested that following one’s heart might mean taking the path of psychotropic drugs, has said:

No one can define for us exactly what our path should be.

[A]ll the teachings of books, maps, and beliefs have little to do with wisdom or compassion. At best they are a signpost, a finger pointing at the moon, or the leftover dialogue from a time when someone received some true spiritual nourishment.... We must discover within ourselves our own way to become conscious, to live a life of the spirit.

Religion and philosophy have their value, but in the end all we can do is open to mystery.

4. The Canon's authority is also limited by the cultural circumstances in which it was composed. Several teachers, for example, have recommended dropping the Canon's teachings on kamma because they were simply borrowed from the cultural presuppositions of the Buddha's time:

Even the most creative, world-transforming individuals cannot stand on their own shoulders. They too remain dependent upon their cultural context, whether intellectual or spiritual – which is precisely what Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence and causal interdependence implies. The Buddha also expressed his new, liberating insight in the only way he could, using the religious categories that his culture could understand. Inevitably, then, his way of expressing the dharma was a blend of the truly new... and the conventional religious thought of his time. Although the new transcends the conventional... the new cannot immediately and completely escape the conventional wisdom it surpasses.

5. Another reason to restrict the Canon's authority is that its teachings can harm the sensitive psyche. Where Emerson warned against allowing the Bible to stifle the creativity of the soul, Western Buddhists warn that the Canon's talk of eliminating greed, aversion, and delusion ignores, in an unhealthy way, the realities of the human dimension.

If you go into ancient Indian philosophy, there is a great emphasis on perfection as the absolute, as the ideal. [But] is that archetype, is that ideal, what we actually experience?

The images we have been taught about perfection can be destructive to us. Instead of clinging to an inflated, superhuman view of perfection, we learn to allow ourselves the space of kindness.

6. Because the language of the Canon is archetypal, it should be read, not as descriptive, but as expressive and poetic. And that expression is best absorbed intuitively.

It's never a matter of trying to figure it all out, rather we pick up these phrases and chew them over, taste them, digest them and let them energize us by virtue of their own nature.

[E]ven these ostensibly literal maps may be better read as if they were a kind of poem, rich in possible meanings.

7. To read the Canon as poetry may yield new meanings unintended by the compilers, but that simply advances a process at work throughout Buddhist history. Some thinkers have explained this process as a form of vitalism, with Buddhism or the Dharma identified as the vital force. Sometimes the vitalism is explicit – as when one thinker defined Buddhism as “an inexpressible living force.” At other times, it is no less present for being implied:

The great strength of Buddhism throughout its history is that it has succeeded many times in reinventing itself according to the needs of its new host culture. What is happening today in the West is no different.

In each historical period, the Dharma finds new means to unfold its potential in ways precisely linked to that era's distinctive conditions. Our own era provides the appropriate stage for the transcendent truth of the Dharma to bend back upon the world and engage human suffering at multiple levels, not in mere contemplation but in effective, relief-granting action.

8. As this last quotation shows, some thinkers recommend reading the Canon not only poetically, but also prophetically as a source of moral imperatives for social action in our times. Because the Canon says little on the topic of social action, this requires a creative approach to the text.

We can root out thematically relevant Buddhist themes, texts, and archetypes and clarify them as core teachings for Buddhist based social change work.

Of the various themes found in the Pali Canon, dependent co-arising — interpreted as interconnectedness — is most commonly cited as a source for social obligation, paralleling the way the Transcendentalists saw interconnectedness as the source of all moral feeling.

Numerous thinkers have hailed this prophetic reading of the Canon as a new turning of the Dhamma wheel, in which the Dhamma grows by absorbing advances in modern Western culture. Many are the lessons, they say, that the Dhamma must learn from the West, among them: democracy, equality, Gandhian nonviolence, humanistic psychology, ecofeminism, sustainable economics, systems theory, deep ecology, new paradigm science, and the Christian and Jewish examples of religious social action. We are assured that these developments are positive because the deepest forces of reality — within and without — can be trusted to the end.

We must be open to a variety of responses toward social change that come from no particular "authority" but are grounded in the radical creativity that comes when concepts fall away.

There is an underlying unity to all things, and a wise heart knows this as it knows the in-and-out of the breath. They are all part of a sacred whole in which we exist, and in the deepest way they are completely trustworthy. We need not fear the energies of this world or any other.

Often the trustworthiness of the mind is justified with a teaching drawn from the Mahayana: the principle of Buddha-nature present in all. This principle has no basis in the Pali Canon, and so its adoption in Western Theravada is frequently attributed to the popularity of Mahayana in Western Buddhism at large. Only rarely is the question asked, Why do Westerners find the Mahayana attractive? Is it because the Mahayana teaches doctrines we're already predisposed to accept? Probably so — especially when you consider that although

the principle of Buddha-nature is interpreted in many ways within the Mahayana itself, here in the West it's primarily understood in the form closest to the Transcendentalist idea of innate goodness.

Compassion is our deepest nature. It arises from our interconnection with all things.

These eight principles for interpreting the Pali Canon are often presented as meta-cultural truths but, as we have seen, they developed in the specific context of the Western engagement with the Bible. In other words, they're historically conditioned. When we compare them to the Canon itself, we find that they directly contradict the Dhamma. At the same time, when teachers try to justify these principles on the basis of the Canon, we find that they're invariably misreading the text.

1. The idea that spiritual life is a search for unity depends on the assumption that the universe is an organic whole, and that the whole is essentially good. The Canon, however, consistently portrays the goal of the spiritual life as transcendence: The world – which is synonymous with the All (SN 35:23) – is a dangerous river over which one has to cross to safety on the other side. The state of oneness or non-duality is conditioned (AN 10:29): still immersed in the river, unsafe. In reaching nibbana, one is not returning to the source of things (MN 1), but reaching something never reached before (AN 5:77): a dimension beyond all space and time. And in attaining this dimension, one is not establishing a new identity, for all identities – even infinite ones (DN 15) – ultimately prevent that attainment, and so have to be dropped.

2. The Canon never defines mindfulness as an open, receptive, pre-verbal state. In fact, its standard definition for the faculty of mindfulness is the ability to keep things in mind. Thus, in the practice of right mindfulness, one is keeping one of four frames of reference in mind: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, remembering to stay with these things in and of themselves. And some of the more vivid analogies for the practice of mindfulness suggest anything but an open, receptive, non-judging state.

“Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, earnestness, mindfulness, and alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head; in the same way, the monk should put forth extra desire... mindfulness, and alertness for the abandoning of those evil, unskillful mental qualities.” – AN 10:51

“Suppose, monks, that a large crowd of people comes thronging together, saying, ‘The beauty queen! The beauty queen!’ And suppose that the beauty queen is highly accomplished at singing and dancing, so that an even greater crowd comes thronging, saying, ‘The beauty queen is singing! The beauty queen is dancing!’ Then a man comes along, desiring life and shrinking from

death, desiring pleasure and abhorring pain. They say to him, ‘Now look here, mister. You must take this bowl filled to the brim with oil and carry it on your head in between the great crowd and the beauty queen. A man with a raised sword will follow right behind you, and wherever you spill even a drop of oil, right there will he cut off your head.’ Now what do you think, monks? Will that man, not paying attention to the bowl of oil, let himself get distracted outside?”

“No, lord.”

“I have given you this parable to convey a meaning. The meaning is this: The bowl filled to the brim with oil stands for mindfulness immersed in the body.” – *SN 47:20*

There’s a tendency, even among serious scholars, to mine in the Canon for passages presenting a more spacious, receptive picture of mindfulness. But this tendency, in addition to ignoring the basic definition of mindfulness, denies the essential unity among the factors of the path – one such scholar, to make his case, had to define right mindfulness and right effort as two mutually exclusive forms of practice. This suggests that the tendency to define mindfulness as an open, receptive, non-judging state comes from a source other than the Canon. It’s possible to find Asian roots for this tendency, in the schools of meditation that define mindfulness as bare awareness or mere noting. But the way the West has morphed these concepts in the direction of acceptance and affirmation has less to do with Asian tradition, and more to do with our cultural tendency to exalt a pre-verbal receptivity as the source for true spiritual inspiration.

3. The Canon states clearly that there is only one path to nibbana (DN 16). Trying to find awakening in ways apart from the noble eightfold path is like trying to squeeze oil from gravel, or milking a cow by twisting its horn (MN 126). The Buddha’s knowledge of the way to awakening is like that of an expert gatekeeper who knows, after encircling the walls of a city, that there’s only one way into the city: the gate he guards (AN 10:95).

One of the tests for determining whether one has reached the first level of awakening is if, on reflection, one realizes that no one outside the Buddha’s teaching teaches the true, accurate, way to the goal (SN 48:53). Although individual people may have to focus on issues particular to their temperament, the basic outline of the path is the same for all.

4. Obviously the Buddha’s language and metaphors were culturally conditioned, but it’s hard to identify any of his essential teachings as limited in that way. He claimed a knowledge of the past that far outstrips ours (DN 29; DN1), and he’d often claim direct knowledge when stating that he was speaking for the past, present, and future when describing, for instance, how physical, verbal, and mental actions are to be purified (MN 61) and the highest emptiness that can be attained (MN 121). This is why the Dhamma is said to be timeless, and why the first level of awakening verifies that this is so.

At the same time, when people speak of essential Buddhist teachings that are limited by the cultural conventions of the Buddha's time, they're usually misinformed as to what those conventions were. For instance, with the doctrine of kamma: Even though the Buddha used the word *kamma* like his contemporaries, his conception of what kamma was and how it worked differed radically from theirs (AN 3:62; MN 101).

5. Similarly, people who describe the dangers of following a particular Buddhist teaching usually deal in caricatures. For instance, one teacher who warns of the dangers of the linear path to attainment describes that path as follows:

The linear path holds up an idealistic vision of the perfected human, a Buddha or saint or sage. In this vision, all greed, anger, fear, judgment, delusion, personal ego, and desire are uprooted forever, completely eliminated. What is left is an absolutely unwavering, radiant, pure human being who never experiences any difficulties, an illuminated sage who follows only the Tao or God's will and never his or her own.

Although this may be a possible vision of the linear path, it differs in many crucial details from the vision offered in the Canon. The Buddha certainly passed judgment on people and taught clear criteria for what are and are not valid grounds for judgment (AN 7:64; AN 4:192; MN 110). He experienced difficulties in setting up the monastic Sangha. But that does not invalidate the fact that his greed, aversion, and delusion were gone.

As MN 22 states, there are dangers in grasping the Dhamma wrongly. In the context of that discourse, the Buddha is referring to people who grasp the Dhamma for the sake of argument; at present we might point out the dangers in grasping the teachings neurotically. But there are even greater dangers in misrepresenting the teachings, or in dragging them down to our own level, rather than using them to lift ourselves up. As the Buddha said, people who claim that he said what he didn't say, or didn't say what he did, are slandering him (AN 2:23). In doing so, they blind themselves to the Dhamma.

6. Although the Canon contains a few passages where the Buddha and his awakened disciples speak poetically and expressively of their attainment, those passages are rare. Far more common are the descriptive passages, in which the Buddha tells explicitly how to get to awakening. As he said in a famous simile, the knowledge gained in his awakening was like the leaves in the forest; the knowledge he taught, like the leaves in his hand (SN 56:31). And he chose those particular leaves because they served a purpose, helping others develop the skills needed for release. This point is supported by the imagery and analogies employed throughout the Canon. Although some of the more poetic passages draw images from nature, they are greatly outnumbered by analogies drawn from physical skills – cooking, farming, archery, carpentry – making the point

that Dhamma practice is a skill that can be understood and mastered in ways similar to more ordinary skills.

The Buddha's descriptions of the path are phrased primarily in psychological terms – just like the meta-cultural principles of the Transcendentalists and Romantics. Obviously, the Canon's maps of mental processes differ from those proposed by Western psychology, but that doesn't invalidate them. They were drawn for a particular purpose – to help attain the end of suffering – and they have to be tested fairly, not against our preferences, but against their ability to perform their intended function.

The poetic approach to the Canon overlooks the care with which the Buddha tried to make his instructions specific and clear. As he once commented (AN 2:46), there are two types of assemblies: those trained in bombast, and those trained in cross-questioning. In the former, the students are taught “literary works – the works of poets, artful in sound, artful in expression, the work of outsiders” and are not encouraged to pin down what the meaning of those beautiful words might be. In the latter – and here the Buddha was describing his own method of teaching – the students are taught the Dhamma and “when they have mastered that Dhamma, they cross-question one another about it and dissect it: ‘How is this? What is the meaning of this?’ They make open what isn't open, make plain what isn't plain, dispel doubt on its various doubtful points.” To treat such teachings as poetry distorts how and why they were taught.

7. A vitalist interpretation of Buddhist history does a disservice both to the Buddha's teachings and to historical truth. To begin with, the Canon does not portray history as purposeful. Time moves in cycles, but those movements mean nothing. This is why the Buddha used the term *samsara* – “wandering-on” – to describe the course of beings through time. Only if we decide to end this wandering will our lives develop a purpose and direction. Otherwise, our course is aimless:

“Just as a stick thrown up in the air lands sometimes on its base, sometimes on its side, sometimes on its tip; in the same way, beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving, transmigrating and wandering on, sometimes go from this world to another world, sometimes come from another world to this.” – SN 15:9

Second, Buddhism does not have a will. It does not adapt; people adapt Buddhism to their various ends. And because the adapters are not always wise, there's no guarantee that the adaptations are skillful. Just because other people have made changes in the Dhamma doesn't automatically justify the changes we want to make. Think, for instance, of how some Mahayana traditions dropped the Vinaya's procedures for dealing with teacher-student sexual abuse: Was this the Dhamma wisely adapting itself to their needs?

The Buddha foresaw that people would introduce what he called “synthetic Dhamma” – and when that happened, he said, the true Dhamma would

disappear (SN 16:13). He compared the process to what happens when a wooden drum develops a crack, into which a peg is inserted, and then another crack, into which another peg is inserted, and so on until nothing is left of the original drum-body. All that remains is a mass of pegs, which cannot come near to producing the sound of the original drum (SN 20:7).

Some scholars have found the Canon's warnings about the decay of the Dhamma ironic.

This strongly held view [that Buddhism should not change] seems a bit odd in a religion that also teaches that resistance to all-pervasive change is a root cause of misery.

The Buddha, however, didn't embrace change, didn't encourage change for the sake of change, and certainly didn't define resistance to change as the cause of suffering. Suffering is caused by *identifying* with change or with things that change. Many are the discourses describing the perils of "going along with the flow" in terms of a river that can carry one to whirlpools, monsters, and demons (Iti 109). And as we noted above, a pervasive theme in the Canon is that true happiness is found only when one crosses over the river to the other side.

8. The Buddha was not a prophet, and he did not pretend to speak for God. Thus he was careful never to present his teachings as moral obligations. His *shoulds* were all conditional. As the first line of the Karaniya Metta Sutta (Khp 9) states,

This is to be done by one skilled in aims
who wants to break through to the state of peace:

In other words, *if* you want to break through to a state of peace, *then* this is what you have to do. And although generosity is one of the things one must do to attain that goal, when the Buddha was asked where a gift should be given (SN 3:24), he responded, "Wherever the mind feels confidence." This means that if we regard social action as a gift, there is no need to seek the Buddha's sanction for feeling inspired to give in that way; we can just go ahead and do it – as long as our actions conform with the precepts. But it also means that we cannot use his words to impose a sense of obligation on others that they should give in the same way.

This is especially true in a teaching like the Buddha's, which is strongly pragmatic, with each teaching focused on a particular end. To take those teachings out of context, applying them to other ends, distorts them. The teaching on dependent co-arising, which is often interpreted as the Canon's version of interconnectedness, is a case in point. The factors in dependent co-arising are primarily internal, dealing with the psychology of suffering, and are aimed at showing how knowledge of the four noble truths can be applied to bring suffering to an end. There is nothing to celebrate in the way the ordinary interaction of these factors leads to suffering. To turn this teaching into a

celebration of the interconnectedness of the universe, or as a guide to the moral imperative of social action, is to thwart its purpose and to open it to ridicule from people disinclined to accept its moral authority over their lives.

At the same time, the Canon questions the underlying assumption – which we've inherited not only from the Transcendentalists and Romantics, but also from their Enlightenment forebears – that human culture is evolving ever upwards. The early discourses present the opposite picture, that human life is getting worse as a sphere for Dhamma practice, and it's easy to point out features of modern life that confirm this picture. To begin with, Dhamma practice is a skill, requiring the attitudes and mental abilities developed by physical skills, and yet we are a society whose physical skills are fast eroding away. Thus the mental virtues nurtured by physical skills have atrophied. At the same time, the social hierarchy required by skills – in which students apprentice themselves to a master – has mostly disappeared, so we've unlearned the attitudes needed to live in hierarchy in a healthy and productive way. We like to think that we're shaping the Dhamma with our highest cultural ideals, but some of our lower ways are actually dominating the shape of Western Dhamma: The sense of neurotic entitlement produced by the culture of consumerism is a case in point, as are the hype of the mass media and the demands of the mass-market for a Dhamma that sells.

As for trusting the impulses of the mind: Try a thought experiment and take the above quote – that we must be open to the radical creativity that comes when concepts fall away – and imagine how it would sound in different contexts. Coming from a socially concerned Buddhist activist, it might not seem disconcerting. But coming from a rebel leader teaching child-soldiers in a civil-war torn country, or a greedy financier contemplating new financial instruments, it would be a cause for alarm.

The Buddha probably would have agreed with the Romantics and Transcendentalists that the human mind is essentially active in making sense of its surroundings. But he would have differed with their estimation that this activity is, at its root, divinely inspired. In his analysis of dependent co-arising, mental fabrication comes from ignorance (SN 12:2); the way to end suffering is to end that fabrication; and this requires an attitude, not of trust, but of heedful vigilance (DN 16). Thus heedfulness must extend both to one's attitude toward one's intuitions and to the ways with which one reads the Canon.

This point touches on what is probably the most central issue in why the Transcendentalist approach to reading the Bible is inappropriate for reading the Pali Canon: the issue of authority. In the Bible, God's authority is absolute because He is the creator of all. We, having been created for His inscrutable ends, must trust His authority absolutely. Although the Transcendentalists denied that the Bible carried God's absolute authority, they did not deny the concept of absolute authority in and of itself; they simply moved it from the Bible and,

bypassing other alternatives, placed it with the spontaneous intuitions of the heart. Following their lead, we as a culture tend to see the issue of authority as a simple either/or: either absolutely in the Bible or absolutely in our intuitions. As a result, when we read in the Kalama Sutta (AN 3:65), “Don’t go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture... or by the thought, ‘This contemplative is our teacher,” we skip over the words in the ellipsis and assume that there is only one other alternative, as stated in a message rubber-stamped on the back of an envelope I once received: *“Follow your own sense of right and wrong – The Buddha.”*

However, the words in the ellipsis are equally important: “Don’t go by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, or by probability.” In other words, you can’t go simply by what seems reasonable or agreeable to you. You can’t go simply by your intuitions. Instead, the Buddha recommends that you test a particular teaching from a variety of angles: Is it skillful? Is it blameless? Is it praised or criticized by the wise? When put into practice does it lead to harm and suffering, or to wellbeing and happiness?

This requires approaching the practice as a skill to be mastered, one that has already been mastered by the wise. Although a part of mastery is learning to gauge the results of your actions, that’s not the whole story. You must learn how to tap into the wisdom and experience of experts, and learn to gauge the results of your actions – at the very least – against standards they have set. This is why we read and study the Canon: to gain a clear understanding of what the wise have discovered, to open our minds to the questions they found fruitful, so that we can apply the wisdom of their expertise as we try to develop our own.

It’s in this context that we can understand the nature of the Buddha’s authority as presented in the Pali discourses. He speaks, not with the authority of a creator, but with the authority of an expert. Only in the Vinaya does he assume the added authority of a lawgiver. In the discourses, he calls himself a doctor; a trainer; an admirable, experienced friend who has mastered a specific skill: putting an end to suffering. He provides explicit recommendations on how to act, speak, and think to bring about that result; instructions on how to develop qualities of mind that allow you to assess your actions accurately; and questions to ask yourself in measuring your progress along the way.

It’s up to us whether we want to accept or reject his expertise, but if we accept it he asks for our respect. This means, in the context of an apprentice culture – the culture set up in the Vinaya (Cv.VIII.11-12) – that you take his instructions on how to end suffering at face value and give them a serious try. Where the instructions are ambiguous, you use your ingenuity to fill in the blanks, but then you test the results against the standards the Buddha has set, making every effort to be heedful in reading accurately and fairly what you have done. This sort of test requires a serious commitment – for a sense of how serious, it’s instructive to read the biographies of the Thai forest masters. And because the commitment is so serious, the Buddha advises exercising careful judgment in choosing the

person to whom you apprentice yourself (AN 4:192) and tells you what to look for before growing close to a teacher (MN 95). You can't trust every teacher to be a genuinely admirable friend.

This is all very straightforward, but it requires stepping outside the limitations of our culturally conditioned ways. And again, it's up to us whether we want to read the Pali Canon on its own terms. If we don't, we're free to continue reading it poetically and prophetically, taking the Buddha's instructions as grist for our own creative intuitions. But if that's our approach, we'll never be in a position to judge adequately whether his instructions for putting an end to suffering actually work.

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