<Keynote Speech>

The Future of the Buddhist Studies

International Academic Conference on Digital Buddhist Texts and International Collaboration

Jonathan Silk*

요 약

This lecture addresses itself not to predictions about the future but rather to two aspects of a modest proposal: Namely, first, it is essential that we improve communication, amongst ourselves as scholars of Buddhism, but more importantly with specialists and lay people outside our narrow circles. Second, we must work to improve cooperation, both between institutions but also amongst individuals on a global basis in order to broaden the scope and depth of what we are able to accomplish.

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At the outset, let me express what a great pleasure it is to be able to thank Dr Hwang Soonil and his colleagues at Dongguk University for the kind invitation to come to Seoul, to participate in this important meeting, and to discuss cooperation between Dongguk and Leiden Universities. As I will mention in my remarks, I believe that such cooperation is of the greatest importance for the Future of Buddhist Studies.

Now, I understood that I had been asked by the conveners of this meeting to address myself, or rather to address you, on the impossibly broad topic of "The Future of Buddhist Studies." I do not think that I am particularly good at predicting the future, or at least the annual reports from my retirement fund do not suggest much success in this regard. However, it may be that I have some better ideas about where I think, or better *feel*, the field of Buddhist Studies *should* be headed than I have about how to invest money. I do not think I am alone in my uncertainty about the future, although this uncertainty is not one born of despair at some environmental crisis, or unstable neighbors, or catastrophic meteor showers. When we look, for instance, at picture books or see old news reels depicting the World's Fairs of past decades, or read old Science Fiction, we cannot help but receive a stark reminder of the futility of imagining the directions in which society and knowledge will head. In the few minutes we can share today, then, let me rather try to suggest only a few ideas about what the near term future might bring us or, as I said, several directions in which we might like to head.

In such a forum it would be silly, and arrogant, of me to dare to offer any observations regarding future technologically oriented directions for Buddhist Studies. For me, for the most part, old man that I am, a computer continues to be a glorified typewriter. Therefore, I say no more than this: I hope and expect that the great promise of computers will continue to show tangible fruits, that they will allow us to do things which we either can not do now at all, or which we cannot yet do efficiently and effectively. I hope and expect to learn very much more about this from your papers at this meeting.

That said, it is worth emphasizing that without the right questions, without intelligent and well considered questions, the best machine is no more than a piece of furniture. And asking the right questions, good and potentially fruitful questions, presupposes that we have given

some thought to what it is that we wish to know.

One of the most important points I would like to try to make today is this: I believe it essential that we, as scholars interested in the study of Buddhism, spend much more time talking — and more importantly, *listening* — to our colleagues in different fields than we are generally wont to do. I do not mean to say that we as a field are immature — although we are. I do not mean to say only that we have much to learn from the way things have been done elsewhere — although we do. And I do not mean to say that the future lies in cooperation — although it does. What I mean to say is that it will not be fruitful for us to continue to speak only to ourselves, to continue to ask questions the answers to which only interest us. Perhaps needless to say, unless we first *listen to* what others are talking about, we will not be able to *talk with* them about topics of possible mutual interest. In saying that it will not be fruitful for us to continue to speak only to ourselves, I use the term "fruitful" to mean productive of useful results, by which I mean results that will allow us to place our discoveries and understandings in as wide a context as possible. And by the expression "continue to speak only to ourselves" I intend in the very first place to refer to Buddhist scholars speaking only to other Buddhist scholars, or even worse, only to other similarly focused sub-specialists. But in fact, if we are honest, we need to acknowledge that, more often than we would like to admit, speaking only to ourselves means more or less literally just what it says: one individual talking, muttering even, just to himself. We write books for ourselves, not for others, no matter who those others might be. We read texts by and for ourselves. We think about questions *we* are interested in, and posit answers that may mean something to ourselves, but which we do not, or certainly not often enough, struggle to express meaningfully to others. I confess that while I understand it, and even in some respects believe it to be a necessary part of the creative process, I also find this myopia problematic even from a moral point of view. But this is not the only thing I wish to emphasize here. Rather, my two central points in this respect are simple: first, two heads are better than one, and second, unless we communicate, what we do is pointless, because it is fruitless.

As to the first point, as a visitor here in a Buddhist university, what I say may resonate

well, but I hope that it does so in a secular academic context as well. All of us have learned, often painfully, that we are not half as smart as we hope we are. But even units of less than half, added to one another, produce a greater whole. There are very good reasons to believe that few if any scholars — or others — in premodern times studied Buddhist texts alone. We know that translations were habitually done in teams, for example, and that the translation teams, at least in China, often worked in public, the master expounding the text as it was being rendered. We have the misfortune to live in a time when we usually cannot avail ourselves of traditionally trained specialists, much less masters, to assist us in our translations or study of most of the literature we confront. This is, of course, *ipso facto* true of all premodern literature. This is all the more reason why we should try to help each other.

Hence the first proposal, if I may arrogate to myself the right to make such proposals in this forum: I firmly believe in the utility of working together. I think, therefore, that *a* future of Buddhist Studies — I do not say *the* future, of course — lies in teamwork. I know that there are already many team projects being carried out in various places, and across localities. This type of work should be encouraged. One very small scale venture has already proved its value to me over the past several years. I have taken advantage of the wonderful technology of Skype to read texts with colleagues as far apart as Leiden, Venice, Tokyo and Xian. Global interconnectivity can allow group work among persons who may have scarce chances to meet in the flesh, or even no such chances at all. So this is one thing, and in fact nothing more than a technological extension of what was in some places already practiced for long years. But few of us have the great good fortune to live in Kyoto, for example, where it is possible to circle a table with well trained and eager specialists on a regular basis. We can, however, recreate this type of environment on our desktops wherever we may sit. The main difference may be that we have to provide our own tea.

Another vital link lies in inter-institutional cooperation, of the type I alluded to a moment ago between, for instance, Dongguk and Leiden Universities. I think the links between institutions in Asia and in Europe and America are of great importance. The program through which the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai funds visiting Numata Professors, although in actual practice sometimes not quite perfect, for a variety of reasons, is a very good beginning. Other

programs which allow students to study abroad, whichever side of an ocean 'abroad' happens to designate, are also very important. But more systematic links would be most welcome, and I hope that, among other things, this visit of mine to Korea will assist in cultivating more such links.

More than these example of joint work, however, I am also becoming increasingly convinced of the utility of another type of group project, although I confess that I found myself, in the beginning, not so much eagerly running as rather dragged toward this conclusion.

My conversion, so to speak, took place thanks to the funding structures of Dutch, and more broadly European, universities and research sponsoring entities. These structures are based on the model of the hard sciences, where large teams are the norm. My conviction had been that this type of team was not suitable for the humanities in general, and for our type — by which I mean, of course, *my* type — of Buddhist scholarship in particular. I am primarily interested in reading texts, and I had convinced myself that what I needed was a room with my books, a lamp, and nobody knocking at my door, no urgent email reminding me of this meeting or that appointment, or 10.000 other miscellaneous obligations. I felt that I knew the best way to do my scholarship, and that the funders did not understand what differentiates the humanities from the natural sciences. I still think this to be true for the most part, but even funders can sometimes be right for the wrong reasons. And in this regard, that is to say with regard to the creation of larger, natural science-type project, I have discovered, with all due humility, that I was quite wrong. It is true that reading a text takes quite a lot of private time. But it also benefits enormously, or immeasurably, from reading the text with others. That much is obvious, and I have already mentioned it a moment ago. So this is not exactly what I am talking about here, though I will return to this theme in a few moments. What surprised me, pleasantly I must say, but what notwithstanding the pleasure was indeed a surprise, is that having been forced by the funding model into devising a project that necessitates the creation of a team, I have come to realize how truly dynamic and exciting this approach to scholarship can be.

I have been fortunate enough to have been awarded considerable financial support for a

five year project on "Buddhism and Social Justice," work which will involve myself and four other researchers over five years. One of the exciting things about the structure of this project is that it allows me, or compels me, to make a virtue out of necessity: the project includes colleagues who are working on interrelated areas of research which I could simply not have tackled alone. The project spans a range from textual, philological work to anthropology to sociology. All these elements we aim to explore in constant contact with each other and with constant mutual feedback. This is quite different from reading a text together, either simply working through one work all together or splitting up the chapters, say, amongst a team — the kind of team work with which many of us are familiar. Here the key difference is that the collaborative aspects of the work simply could not have been done in isolation. The project, which is still in its early days, envisions a true synergy, a whole genuinely greater than the sum of its parts, and this synergy comes not only from the vastly varied expertise of its members but from our cooperation. While my own expertise, such as it is, centers on India, other researchers so far on board will work on monastic economy in Tibet, research being carried out by Berthe Jansen, and ethnicity and Buddhism in Bhutan, work very ably begun by Kate Kragh, and on Korea, this to be taken up in the coming year by a scholar now finishing up his PhD right here, at Seoul National, Thomas Kim. We hope to appoint another PhD student or post-doc researcher within a matter of weeks. To repeat the main point here: It is not only the diversity of areas and methodologies that make the team more than its individual members, but the interaction and mutual inspiration that the environment stimulates.

I do not suggest, of course, that this sort of arrangement is perfect, or even appropriate, for every variety of research. However, by the same token, it does seem to me that being open to such possibilities has the potential to greatly broaden the scope of our possible researches.

Let me turn now to another aspect of teamwork, one to which I alluded earlier. I have observed for a number of years the progress in making available the treasures of the Buddhist literary traditions to modern audiences, audiences of scholars and lay persons alike. I often think that the situation in which we, at least we in Europe and America, find ourselves

today has many remarkable similarities to the situation in China in the early centuries of the Common Era: growing interest in Buddhism, a long domestic tradition, as it were, of philosophy and religion, active scientific culture, and so forth. Yet there clearly yawns a great gap between the wealth of Buddhist literature and its modern comprehension and appreciation. There is no time today, and this is probably not the place, to contemplate the nature of this gap in its global extent. Moreover, I am fully aware that the issues I raise here do not apply, or apply only in a significantly different fashion, to the contemporary study and dissemination of knowledge of Buddhism in Asia. This is a topic no doubt better left to the consideration of others. What I would like to concentrate on for a moment is one aspect of the supply and demand of this situation in regions outside of traditionally Buddhist Asia. Just as in the early days of Chinese Buddhism, in our times too there are few structures which facilitate the production of translations of Buddhist literature. Moreover, and I hope I do not cause offense to anyone here by saying this, some of the present-day structures that do exist do not, in my opinion, always help move things in a positive direction.

In thinking about these questions, I am deeply influenced by the attitude and approach of my esteemed teacher, Prof. Gadjin M. Nagao. Prof. Nagao had the perhaps antipopulist view that a prerequisite for translation was a solid understanding of the source material which a translation claims to render. Now, I certainly would not dare to say that the landmark series he edited in Japanese, the original instantiation of the *Daijō Butten* in fifteen volumes, consistently reflects scholarship of unimpeachable authority. These volumes presented, for virtually the first time, modern Japanese renderings of central Mahāyāna works ranging from the Perfection of Wisdom through works of Vasubandhu. They thus attempted to be both reliable from a scholarly point of view, and to make available this scholarship to a readership broader than that of fellow scholars. Toward this end, the translations thoroughly eschewed the use of the tradition-hallowed terminology borrowed from Xuanzang, instead sticking to a strict policy of translating into actual modern Japanese. This tendency in much Japanese scholarship to employ equivalents coined or popularized by Xuanzang has some similarities to the recent creation of a justly mocked “Buddhist Hybrid English,” and equally creates an almost insurmountable barrier to comprehension for outsiders, that is, in most cases, for

anyone who is not already thoroughly familiar with Buddhist technical vocabulary. Now, although there is at least one volume in the *Daijō Butten* series which bears a rather esoteric relationship to the original it purports to render, on the whole the translations are of a very high standard, and it is my impression, although I am far from a native speaker of Japanese, that the contents of the texts have generally been made highly accessible via the chosen medium. The point I wish to make here in this regard is that Prof. Nagao was, while a scholar of the highest standards, not necessarily a self-paralyzing perfectionist. He clearly recognized the virtues of work done rather than left undone because it could not be done perfectly.

Despite this stance, it is true that at his death Prof. Nagao left unpublished, among other things, his translation of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṁkāra*, a text to which he had devoted his attentions for more than 50 years. (This annotated translation is now, however, being published by his son, and I understand that there is an intention to publish it commercially after revision.) I also experienced personally aspects of Prof. Nagao's quasi-perfectionism with respect to his index of the *Mahāyānasaṁgraha*, a work whose translation he did publish in two amply annotated volumes. He published an index of his reconstruction of Sanskrit technical terms, coordinated with their Tibetan and Chinese renderings, and an index of Tibetan terms coordinated with the reconstructed Sanskrit and Chinese. However, despite having prepared it carefully, he never agreed to publish his index of the Chinese translations. Of course, one might say simply that since we have electronic texts available, there is no need for such indices. But Prof. Nagao would emphasize, and I would fully endorse, the idea that a complete index is easy to generate, while an intelligent index is very diffcult. I well remember being impressed with Urs App's computer generated indices of key words in context in Chan texts, produced in the late '80s and early '90s in Kyoto. Such an index, however, it is fair to say, provides little or nothing that cannot be obtained from an electronic version of the text and reasonable search algorithm, as Urs himself knew as well as anyone. Hence, as personal computers became more common, Urs dropped the project. But an intelligent index which highlights key terms, and even more which carefully coordinates terms in a translation with relevant terminology in other languages, is another thing entirely. Prof.

Nagao was never satisfied that he could make the maximum sense out of the often rather free and interpretive Chinese translations of the *Mahāyānasaṁgraha*, perhaps in part because of ideas he had about the work of Paramārtha which today some scholars would question. Leaving this aside, I still believe that it would be of great benefit to publish Prof. Nagao's index to the Chinese translations of the *Mahāyānasaṁgraha*, but I understand why he was reluctant to do so. Part of what lies behind the curtain here, so to speak, is a tension between helping things along by publishing something which is manifestly imperfect, and hindering further progress by publishing something which is manifestly imperfect. There is no simple, one-size-fits-all answer.

Prof. Nagao was also involved with another project, his reaction to which demonstrates something of his views on the utility of imperfect results. This project continues on its way, and at least some of the persons in this room are or have been involved in it in one way or another, I believe. This is, of course, the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai's project to translate the Taishō Tripiṭaka into English. I do not think I am spilling any secrets when I say that, as I understood it, Prof. Nagao stepped down as the chairman of the board of the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai due to his strong disagreement with the trajectory of this project. In brief, he believed that it was premature, and that the results, rather than encouraging the proper understanding of the sources, would discourage or retard more reliable efforts. There are a number of reasons why one might think so. As far as I understand, though I would welcome correction on this point, translators for this project were and continue to be solicited based on their own self-evaluation. That is to say, it having been determined that a certain text should be translated, an appeal was made for some person or persons who wished to under-take this task. The results so far, I suspect many of us would agree, demonstrate the extreme unevenness of the quality control behind the venture. There are volumes published in this series by highly qualified scholars whose appreciation for the complexities of the work before them cannot be criticized. At the same time, however, the series has published a number of works concerning which, as the expression has it, the less said the better. Is there, then, a better way?

I mentioned a few moments ago my idea that we find ourselves, in some respects, at a

place rather similar to that at which the Chinese found themselves some two millennia ago. Or in any event, I think there is something to be learned from this model about the translation of Buddhist literature. There are, however, of course, very important differences. In most cases we do not have access to scholars trained in the tradition, and this is certainly true by definition with regard to the Indian traditions which, having vanished by roughly the 13th century, have no direct modern descendants. I leave aside for the moment the interesting question of in what respects Tibetan traditions, on the one hand, or Southeast Asian traditions, on the other, represent lineal or 'authentic' descendants of the traditions of later and earlier Indian Buddhism, respectively, although this is certainly something worth considering were we to go into the question in great detail. But let me think out loud for a moment rather about the area of greatest professional interest to me, namely Mahāyāna sūtras, and their presentation in modern guises.

When, in the middle of the second century of our era, these texts began to be translated into Chinese, there were usually native informants available to guide the translation processes. Sometimes, however, there were not, and there are a number of interesting cases in earlier Chinese translations (and again later, in the Song) when it is evident that the translators were woefully misguided. Errors which demonstrate that the translators could not have understood the text before them raise a host of provocative questions, both about the process of translation and about the process of the reception and transmission of such products. Rather than considering those questions here, however, I would like to assume that we, whether our starting point is as disinterested scholars or as missionaries for some tradition or another, wish, for our part, to produce translations which do *not* contain such interesting errors. Or to put it another way: there may be very good reasons for translating a text in a way which might seem to be, in some fashion, not strictly 'accurate.' We might think here, for instance, of some versions of the *geyi* style translations of early Chinese Buddhism, at least as they are naively understood, namely as employing preexisting Daoistic notions to render Buddhist concepts. In this light, one might well make an argument that an English translation of Shinran, say, that makes ample use of Christian terminology, of terms like 'faith' and 'grace' for instance, is fully justified. But I believe that even translators who

choose such a course would agree that it is better to do this in full awareness, and on the basis of a sound understanding of the dimensions of meaning in the original source, than naively or by creating accidental resonances. No one wants to make errors, and no one wants to mislead an audience.

These thoughts lead me back to Prof. Nagao and a dream of his, one which has become in turn my own dream as well. This is indeed a dream of the Future of Buddhist Studies, and it is not only out of esteem for my teacher and his scholarship, but because I fully and indeed fervently believe in his vision that I hold it as a sort of sacred duty to try to realize this dream of his. The dream envisions spreading knowledge about Buddhism, to be sure, but is a vision of the process toward this goal in which the first and highest priority is the prior establishment of a proper understanding.

Prof. Nagao's principled opposition to the translation project of the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai was based on his recognition of the fact that the translations this project has promoted were in all too many cases based on inadequate understandings of the sources. The solution which he proposed, and which I in my turn would very much like to see actualized in his name, not for his sake but for the sake of its inherent validity and value, he referred to as the establishment of a *yakukyōin*, the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *Yijing yuan* 譯經院, translated variously as "Institute for Canonical Translation," "Institute for the Translation of Scriptures" or "Sūtra Translation Bureau." Prof. Nagao's vision was of an institute which would host scholars for a limited period of time to edit, study, and translate a single text. The invited scholars would be specialists in the text in question, and their work would involve careful research and analysis of the work, not aiming to produce a quick and dirty result, as it were, but a thoughtful and lasting one. Of course, Prof. Nagao, although he published widely, had his heart squarely in the Yogācāra tradition, and like many textual scholars, whether or not focusing on this particular tradition, he had a special reverence for Xuanzang, often considered the greatest of the Chinese translators. As far as I know the institution within which Xuanzang worked was not specifically called the *Yijing yuan*, but the idea is similar: a dedicated laboratory within which scientific research is carried out on a specific object, with the goal of transferring knowledge from one setting to another. The

lasting value of Xuanzang's translation work is evident in virtually all areas of East Asian Buddhism down until today. It would be the height of hubris to assume that we are capable of anything other than a pale shadow of his accomplishments. Nevertheless, we should not for this reason hesitate, but ought rather to begin.

This idea of the establishment of a *Yijing yuan* brings together the two main ideas I have tried to outline in this talk, namely the central importance of communication and of teamwork. To establish a working and workable *Yijing yuan* would require us to think about what we would like to do, and about what we are capable of doing. It would require us to examine our assumptions about our field, and to reflect on its possible futures. If what I have said today has any meaning — and I'm not sure it does, but if it does — I hope that I have managed to communicate to you my dedication to this idea of communication, between scholars of Buddhism on the one hand, whether the be located in a Buddhist university in Korea or in a secular institution in the Netherlands or in a monastery or in a café, and between scholars and the reading public on the other hand. I hope that it will be possible to establish the institutional frameworks necessary to enable and encourage team cooperation, aimed toward the most reliable groundwork upon which to build in the future.

The final point I would like to make is that all of this takes patience: the Chinese took centuries to digest and naturalize the Buddhism they began to import at the beginning of the common era. If we too want to build a solid foundation, based on reliable philology and carefully considered translation and multi-faceted understanding, this will take time. Rushing the job will lead to the same result as does hasty construction work: the edifice so shabbily built will come tumbling down. We should instead be slow and careful and do it right, always together, forging and testing our understandings in communication and cooperation.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Abstract

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This lecture addresses itself not to predictions about the future but rather to two aspects of a modest proposal: Namely, first, it is essential that we improve communication, amongst ourselves as scholars of Buddhism, but more importantly with specialists and lay people outside our narrow circles. Second, we must work to improve cooperation, both between institutions but also amongst individuals on a global basis in order to broaden the scope and depth of what we are able to accomplish.

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