

Seeing Buddhas, Hearing Buddhas: Cognitive Significance of Nenbutsu as Visualization and as Recitation

Richard K. Payne

The Institute of Buddhist Studies

IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN Buddhist English, the term “nenbutsu” is usually, if not exclusively, associated with reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha in the form “namu Amida Butsu.” The Japanese Buddhist term “nenbutsu” (念仏) derives from the Sanskrit *buddhānusr̥ti*, which—like nenbutsu—means to think about the Buddha, to keep the Buddha in mind. In addition to keeping the Buddha in mind by recitation, one can also keep the Buddha in mind by visualization.

Such visualization practice is known to us from a variety of sources.¹ Among Pure Land practitioners probably the best known source is the *Contemplation Sutra*, which gives a progressive series of meditation instructions in which Sukhāvati, the pure land of Amida Buddha, is visualized in increasing detail. This visualization progresses from first forming an eidetic image of the setting sun, to the lapis lazuli ocean upon which Sukhāvati rests, to the trees, rivers, and central lake upon which one finds three massive lotus blossom thrones where Amitāyus, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and Avalokiteśvara (Amida, Daiseishi, and Kannon; 阿彌陀, 大勢至, 觀音) are seated. This section of the sutra is structured as a conversation between the Buddha Śākyamuni, Ānanda, and Queen Vaidehī, who has been imprisoned by her own son. In the seventh step of the visualizations described in this section of the *Contemplation Sutra*, Queen Vaidehī has been given a vision of Amida, his retinue, and Sukhāvati, and requests to be told how beings in the future will also be able to see Amida, his retinue, and Sukhāvati. The Buddha replies,

Those who wish to see that Buddha should form an image of a lotus flower on the seven-jeweled ground. They visualize each petal of this flower as having the colors of a hundred jewels and eighty-four thousand rays of light issuing forth from each vein. They should visualize all of these clearly and distinctly. Its smaller petals are two hundred fifty *yojanas* in both length and breadth. Each of these

lotus flowers has eighty-four thousand large petals. Between the petals there are a hundred *koṭis* of king *maṇi*-gems as illuminating adornments. Each *maṇi*-gem emits a thousand rays of light that, like canopies of the seven jewels, cover the entire earth.

The dais is made of Śakra's pendent *maṇi*-gems and is decorated with eighty thousand diamonds, *kiṃśuka*-gems, *brahma maṇi*-gems, and also exquisite pearl-nets. On the dais four columns with jeweled banners spontaneously arise, each appearing to be as large as a thousand million *koṭis* of Mount Sumerus. On the columns rests a jeweled canopy similar to that in the palace of the Yāma Heaven. They are also adorned with five hundred *koṭis* of excellent gems, each emitting eighty-four thousand rays shining in eighty-four thousand different tints of golden color. Each golden light suffuses this jeweled land and transforms itself everywhere into various forms, such as diamond platforms, nets of pearls, and nebulous clusters of flowers. In all the ten directions it transforms itself into anything according to one's wishes and performs the activities of the Buddha. This is the visualizing of the lotus throne and is known as the seventh contemplation.²

The *Contemplation Sutra* visualization parallels, but does not duplicate in exact detail, the descriptions of Sukhāvati found in the *Larger* and *Smaller Sukhāvattīvyūha* sutras. Although other sensory modalities, such as hearing, touch, and smell are referred to in the course of these sutras, these hyperbolic visual descriptions form part of the larger overall emphasis on vision as a primary sensory modality in early medieval Indian Pure Land Buddhism.³ Take for example the description of the trees of Sukhāvati that is found in the *Larger Sukhāvattīvyūha Sutra*:

Again, seven jeweled trees completely fill that land. There are some made of gold, some of silver, and others made of beryl, crystal, coral, ruby, or agate. There are also trees made of two to seven kinds of jewels.

There are gold trees with leaves, flowers, and fruits of silver; silver trees with leaves, flowers, and fruits of gold; beryl trees with leaves, flowers, and fruits of crystal; crystal trees with leaves, flowers, and fruits of beryl; coral trees with leaves, flowers, and fruits of ruby; ruby trees with leaves, flowers, and fruits of beryl; agate trees with leaves, flowers, and fruits made of various jewels.

Again, there are jeweled trees with purple-gold roots, white-silver trunks, beryl branches, crystal twigs, coral leaves, ruby flowers, and agate fruits. There are jeweled trees with white-silver roots, beryl trunks, crystal branches, coral twigs, ruby leaves, agate

flowers, and purple-gold fruits. There are jeweled trees with beryl roots, crystal trunks, coral branches, ruby twigs, agate leaves, purple-gold flowers, and white-silver fruits. There are jeweled trees with crystal roots, coral trunks, ruby branches, agate twigs, purple-gold leaves, white-silver flowers, and beryl fruits. There are jeweled trees with coral roots, ruby trunks, agate branches, purple-gold twigs, white-silver leaves, beryl flowers, and crystal fruits. There are jeweled trees with ruby roots, agate trunks, purple-gold branches, white-silver twigs, beryl leaves, crystal flowers, and coral fruits. There are jeweled trees with agate roots, purple-gold trunks, white-silver branches, beryl twigs, crystal leaves, coral flowers, and ruby fruits.

These jeweled trees are in parallel rows, their trunks are evenly spaced, their branches are in level layers, their leaves are symmetrical, their flowers harmonize, and their fruits are well arranged. The brilliant colors of these trees are so luxuriant that it is impossible to see them all. When a fresh breeze wafts through them exquisite sound of the pentatonic scales, such as *kung* and *shang*, spontaneously arise and make symphonic music.⁴

It is important to note an aspect of this description of the trees of Sukhāvati. This is the way that the different kinds of jewels are identified with the different parts of the trees in a regular, progressive fashion. Taking one example, “ruby” is introduced for the flowers of the trees, and then moves downwards to leaves, twigs, branches, trunks, and roots, until at the end it comes back to the top as the fruit. And the same systematic progression is found for each of the different kinds of jewels. But this is not simply a random or accidentally effusive display, rather, it is very systematic—one is tempted to say, disciplined.

Paul Harrison has noted that these sections of the Pure Land sutras “may strike contemporary readers as strangely inaccessible.”⁵ Harrison recognizes, however, that the problem is with the modern reader’s expectations, specifically that such a text is “straight description.” What if we step back from our own preconceptions about the nature of the text? “What then, if we try to read it differently, not as describing a world, but as constructing it, that is, as prescription?”⁶ Harrison has identified here an important hermeneutic principle for understanding Buddhist texts—they are not simply narratives as one who is accustomed to reading novels would expect. Frequently, one also needs to consider whether such texts are describing practices, perhaps within a larger narrative frame.

More specifically, however, the way in which the context of the imaginal world being prescribed are systematically organized has cognitive implications that suggest that this is not simply based on a visionary

experience. The systematic character of the prescriptions evidence the text having been systematically—and perhaps repeatedly—restructured, which is only possible because it is a written text. In other words, writing has mediated between whatever visionary experience may have originally inspired this work and the text as we know it today.⁷ Superficially, this is obvious. What is more significant is that writing is not simply an otherwise transparent tool for recording such an experience, but itself structures the text and allows it to be systematically and reflectively reworked. The cognitive implications of this, discussed more fully *infra*, apply to many Mahāyāna works.

In addition to the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*, other textual sources within the Mahāyāna corpus, such as the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, emphasize the visual sensory mode. Two sections of this latter text are of particular interest in connection with the development of nenbutsu as visualization. In the first, there are directions for enabling one to see the Buddha Amitābha.⁸ Many Pure Land figures commented on the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, and as Harrison says, the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* “is well-known for containing the earliest dateable mention of the Buddha Amitābha / Amitāyus.” Despite this and the large number of commentaries by Pure Land figures that the work generated, Harrison goes on to caution, “however, because of the later history of the text in China and Japan its Pure Land aspect has often been over-emphasised.”⁹ He sees the text as much more in line with the Prajñāpāramitā teachings of emptiness than with later, more explicitly devotional forms of Pure Land teachings.¹⁰ While philosophically there may be a difference between the devotional quality of the Pure Land sutras and the emphasis on emptiness that forms the central teaching of the Prajñāpāramitā, I would also suggest that there is a stylistic similarity between the Pure Land sutras and the Prajñāpāramitā sutras. In the same way that the *Larger Sutra* systematically went through different possible combinations of jewels to form the different trees described as filling Sukhāvātī, so also do the Prajñāpāramitā texts pursue their metaphysical negations in a systematic fashion. We will consider this more fully *infra*, when we consider the cognitive significance of these works.

In the second section of the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* there are general directions regarding a visualization leading to the ability to see all the buddhas of the present era.¹¹ It is the purpose of this meditation to allow the practitioner to gain direct access to the presence of a buddha, to hear the teachings directly for oneself, and to bring those teachings back for propagation. As Harrison puts it, it is “one of the main aims of the *samādhi* that gives our *sūtra* its title is to provide practitioners with the means to translate themselves into the presence of this or that particular manifestation of the Buddha-principle for the purpose of hearing the Dharma, which they subsequently remember and propagate to others.”¹² The practitioner of this

samādhi does not need to acquire the divine eye or actually travel to the lands of the buddhas of the present, but is able to directly see them in their many myriads.

We also find visualization practices throughout the tantric traditions of Buddhism. These practices are a central part of the ritual practices (*sādhana*), but are also—perhaps most dramatically—evidenced in the complex visual imagery of the *maṇḍalas*.

An important implication that is worth noting at this point is the transformation of vocal nenbutsu from a practice in which one engages into an experiencing of the sound of the nenbutsu passively, that is, as coming to one from Amida. I believe that it was Rennyō who emphasized that one is not simply to recite the name of the Buddha Amida, but rather that the goal is to hear the Buddha Amida reciting the nenbutsu. So recitation is no longer experienced as an activity that I am undertaking, but rather becomes transformed into an experience that comes to me. It seems quite plausible that there is a strong link between this kind of experience, the experience of hearing Amida calling to me, and the ideas of Other Power.

Given the descriptions found in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, I believe that the same experience of the sensory object as existing separately from one's own active creation of it is the goal of visualization. The goal is not so much the actual mental capacity to form a mental visual image, but rather to be thereby enabled to see all the buddhas in the ten directions.

FROM SENSORY MODALITIES TO STAGES OF HUMAN COGNITION

The two forms of nenbutsu—recitation and visualization—are reflected in a variety of religious experiences and religious practices reported from around the world.¹³ It seems likely that these also reflect the dominance of visual and auditory sensory modalities in these religious cultures. But we can take this analysis a step further and suggest that the existence of these two ways of keeping the Buddha in mind may in fact also point to different kinds of cognitive functioning related to different sensory modalities.

It is common to talk of humans as having five senses, or in the case of the *abhidharma* system, six. From the perspective of cognitive science, however, it is more appropriate to speak of sensory modalities. This is a distinction that does make a difference—each of the sensory modalities actually includes a variety of different senses within it. For example, rather than the sense of touch—implying a single sense—Antonio Damasio refers to “somatosensory,” which he explains “includes varied forms of sense: touch, muscular, temperature, pain, visceral and vestibular.”¹⁴

Sometimes, three sensory modalities are identified as the main ones—visual, auditory, and somatosensory.¹⁵ The latter is also sometimes

referred to as kinesthetic. Recent developments in educational psychology have led to the promotion of the idea that students differ in which of these sensory modalities are dominant, and that consequently, students also have different styles of learning. Some are thought to be more visual learners, while others are more auditory or kinesthetic.¹⁶ It appears, however, that such distinctions are not inherent. According to Bradd Shore, dominance is culturally constructed (and, it is worth noting, culturally constructed does not mean culturally determined). Discussing Samoan culture, Shore says that “For example, the experience of muscle tone and body posture is centrally involved for Samoans in the distinction between center and periphery in numerous contexts, with central experiences associated with muscular tension and postural centering, while peripheral meanings are experienced through muscular relaxation and freeing up of bodily extremities.”¹⁷ The forms of nenbutsu seem to correspond to the different main sensory modalities and learning styles. Visualization practices of remembering the Buddha would perhaps be more effective for those whose dominant sensory modality is vision. Similarly, recitation would be more appropriate for those having the auditory sensory modality dominant. And, though it is no longer actively practiced, dancing nenbutsu¹⁸ (*odori nenbutsu*, 踊念仏) would be effective for kinesthetic learners. Given that the dominance of one sensory modality over the others is culturally constructed would seem to suggest that such dominance can change over time.¹⁹ The rise of visualization practices would seem to be such a change.

In his essay “Notes on the Vision Quest in Early Mahāyāna” Stephan Beyer hypothesized a relatively sudden rise in early medieval India of a religious culture centered on visual experiences, what he refers to as “the great wave of visionary theism of the early centuries AD” and identifies as “having three major components: the technique of visualization, the sense of devotion, and a metaphysical need to explain the soteriological potential of the new contemplative technique.”²⁰

This third characteristic of “the great wave of visionary theism” identified by Beyer—“a metaphysical need to explain the soteriological potential of the new contemplative technique”—is evidenced in the section of the *Contemplation Sutra* that immediately follows the one we recounted *supra*:

The Buddha said to Ānanda and Vaidehi, “After you have seen this, next visualize the Buddha. Why the Buddha? Because Buddhas, Tathāgatas, have cosmic bodies, and so enter into the meditating mind of each sentient being. For this reason, when you contemplate a Buddha, your mind itself takes the form of his thirty-two physical characteristics and eighty secondary marks. Your mind produces the Buddha’s image, and is itself the Buddha.

The ocean of perfectly and universally enlightened Buddhas thus arise in the meditating mind. For this reason, you should single-mindedly concentrate and deeply contemplate the Buddha, Tathāgata, Arhat, and perfectly Enlightened One.²¹

One of the consistent themes in the interpretation of visualization practices has been the presumption that they reflect visionary experiences. As Beyer puts it, visualization techniques represent a quest “for the control—for the conscious return—of the originally uncontrolled and given visionary revelation.”²² This is the pattern we have seen *supra* with the vision of Amida being first given to Vaidehī by the Buddha, and then followed by her request for a meditation practice, a technique that will allow beings in the future to have the same visionary experience. It would be easy for us to treat this as a general rule, an idea that is itself rooted in the three different explanations for the appearance of new texts given by Mahāyāna authors. Harrison explains that one of these three is the idea given in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*: “this text, and other Mahāyāna sūtras as well, are the residue of visionary experiences in *samādhi*.... Through their access to visions of the Buddha, practitioners are assured of the constant possibility of hearing the dharma, and thus authentic *buddhavacana* may be brought into the world at any time.”²³ Given that this is a rhetorical claim for the authority of a text, while noting that it was apparently considered a meaningful and effective claim by the authors, we need not simply accept it as given. If we give serious consideration to Corless’s suggestion regarding differing sensory domains, and take into account the differing stages of human cognitive development, a more complicated picture suggests itself.

In his study of the developments in human cognition, Merlin Donald has described four distinguishable stages in the development of contemporary human cognition.²⁴ In sequence he refers to these four as episodic, mimetic, mythic, and theoretic. At all four stages these cognitive styles are linked to memory systems, while the latter two are also linked with distinct cultural systems. The first of these, the episodic, is one that we share with all animals. This is the ability to learn from episodes, and is recorded in what is known as episodic memory. The example that comes to my mind is the ability of rats to learn their way around a maze.

Some animals, particularly what are called the higher primates, are able to do more than this in that they can learn by imitation. This is the second or mimetic stage of cognitive development identified by Donald. This form of learning is a major advance over episodic in that it begins the process that allows for the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another. It is, in other words, the basis for culture. The fact that children learn so much more rapidly by imitating others is evidence of the power of this mimetic cognition.

The creation of language constitutes the third stage of cognitive development, one in which knowledge is recorded in oral transmissions of myth organized according to narrative forms. Now knowledge can be abstracted from particular situations in which one individual learns on their own (episodic), or learns by imitating another (mimetic), and is retained in verbal formulae. Such verbal formulae are given structure by the forms of narrative—storytelling—which in turn become the basis for extended narratives—myths. Perhaps the most impressive instances of this verbal, narrative, mythic culture are the Vedas and the Homeric epics, which evidence what we today consider to be phenomenal feats of memorization. The Vedas are often identified as being instances where verbatim memorization of texts has been accomplished, as distinct from the Homeric texts which were “re-created” each time they were recited through the use of fixed recitative formulae. Walter J. Ong points out, however, that in the absence of written texts against which to check, this claim cannot be confirmed.²⁵ Two additional considerations may be relevant here. First, within the conceptual space of many religions, the characteristics of being old, original, or unchanged have high value and lend authority to a text or teaching. The rhetorical impact of the claim of being “timeless” as found in such phrases as “timeless truths” (or, more classically “the eternal verities”) provides evidence of the continuing positive value of this characteristic. This is certainly true of the Indic religious world where the claims for an unchanging Veda originate. Thus, we can see that there is an important payoff in the form of religious authority if one claims to be simply representing the “original” teachings. This dynamic is particularly relevant for contemporary Buddhism in the continuing claim of authority based on the idea that the Pāli canon represents the “original” teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha. (This is, of course, not to dismiss the importance of understanding the history of textual production, only to highlight the rhetorical assertion of authority inherent in the claim of being “original.”)

There is, however, another dimension that needs to be considered when comparing the question of the relative textual stability of Homeric and Vedic texts over time, and that is the different mnemonic technologies employed. The transmission of Homeric texts from bard to bard was probably much less highly structured and institutionalized than the kind of Vedic training discovered by Staal existing today among the Nambudiri Brahmins.²⁶ From an early age, significant amounts of children’s time was devoted to memorization of the texts, and this training included a sophisticated program of systematic bodily gestures related to the recitation—indicating a large investment of social capital. Thus, the textual stability of Vedic texts was maintained by a different mnemonic technology from that found in bardic culture, and was supported by a different social–institutional structure.

In the case of Buddhism, social–institutional support was provided by monasteries and the investment of their social capital in the process of

memorizing texts. Discussing the oral character of early Buddhist texts and the issues involved in their preservation, Joseph Walser comments that "In order for such oral preservation to take place, however, there has to be a degree of institutional organization and commitment to the labor of textual preservation. In the Buddhist case, oral preservation required countless hours of repetition and training."²⁷

No matter how extensive the mnemonic skills maintained in oral cultures, the oral or mythic stage still depends on the individual human's capacity for memory. As such, oral culture allows for very little reflective discussion about the mythic narrative. Ong identifies some of the characteristic forms of reflective thought that become possible upon the development of externalized forms of memory when he says that "an oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought."²⁸

Writing, in the sense of visual representations of information in symbolic form, marks the fourth of Donald's stages. Now memory has moved outside the limits of an individual's memory and taken up residence in external systems of memory. Where previously memory only existed in the mind-brain of an individual, when humans created systems of symbols for recording thoughts, memory could then be stored in forms external to the individual. It seems that initially these were mnemonic in character, just like today when someone puts a rubber band around their wrist in order to remember to pick up milk at the grocery store.

The most powerful of these symbol systems was writing, which allows for communication of ideas or thoughts rather than simply their recall. Writing has in turn given rise first to printing and, much more recently, to electronic forms of external memory. It may also be argued that pictorial representations have also served the same purpose, and have had a similar trajectory of development into first photographs, then into movies, and now into electronically recorded forms. Memory which is externalized and preserved in a written (or printed, or photographic, or electronic) record allows for greater intellectual freedom in relation to what is recorded.

According to Ong, interiorization of writing by the Greeks, that is, when writing became the cognitive norm for Greek society, required several centuries even after the Greek alphabet was developed "around 720–700 BC." This transformed Greek culture. "The new way to store knowledge was not in mnemonic formulas but in the written text. This freed the mind for more original, more abstract thought."²⁹ As indicated above in Ong's list of characteristic forms of thought not practiced in oral cultures, this "more original, more abstract thought" includes the possibility of critical reflection, which Donald suggest by identifying this as the "theoretic stage."

Most of the authors in this field—Ong, Goody, Donald, and others—focus attention on the Greeks. For our purposes here, however, we need to move beyond the Western academic habit of privileging the Greeks and their accomplishments—which seem to have overly emphasized the importance of *alphabetic* writing systems in the creation of external memory systems and literate cultures. Syllabic writing systems, such as those developed for Sanskrit, and graphemic writing systems, such as found in China, are simply close alternatives. Further afield one might suggest that the graphic systems involved in Mayan calendrics and Egyptian hieroglyphics constitute external memory systems allowing for *communication*. Even further, the variety of astronomical observatories in the ancient world, from Stonehenge to the Bighorn Medicine Wheel and many others, indicates complex reflective cognition only possible through the externalization of memory in the form of the observatories themselves.

I find that, given the variety of forms that external memory systems can take, and the key role of visual perception in the creation and use of those external memory systems, “graphic” may be more appropriate as a label for this stage of development.³⁰ This is not to claim that the development of writing systems was not an important advance. Writing in any form—not just alphabetic³¹—allows the reader to find out what is recorded, rather than simply being reminded. In this way it goes beyond being a mnemonic device and becomes a communicative device. As revolutionary as the advance of writing was, it itself could have only taken place within the context of an already developed capacity for externalizing memory through mnemonic devices.

Given Donald’s fourfold structure of human cognition in which all previous stages are retained, I would suggest that what we see in the rise of a visionary religious culture is largely motivated by the spread of graphic cognition. In other words, it is not simply that individuals had visionary experiences that provided the basis for visual descriptions and visualization practices, as Beyer suggests. While this may have provided an essential stimulus, I think that the complex visual forms described in the Pure Land sutras, found in maṇḍalas, and promoted as a form of meditative practice can only be explained when we consider that they are the end result of a process of elaboration that was made possible because they existed as graphic forms in external memory.

Consider in contrast to the hyperbolic descriptions of Sukhāvati that we heard previously, the following description of an island taken from the *Odyssey*:

Six whole days we rowed, six nights, nonstop.
On the seventh day we raised the Laestrygonian land,
Tepepyus heights where the craggy fort of Lamus rises.

Where shepherd calls to shepherd as one drives in his flocks
 and the other drives his out and he calls back in answer,
 where a man who never sleeps could rake in double wages,
 one for herding cattle, one for pasturing fleecy sheep,
 the nightfall and the sunrise march so close together.
 We entered a fine harbor there, all walled around
 by a great unbroken sweep of sky-scraping cliff
 and two steep headlands, fronting each other, close
 around the mouth so the passage in is cramped.
 Here the rest of my rolling squadron steered,
 right into the gaping cove and moored tightly,
 prow by prow. Never a swell there, big or small;
 a milk-white calm spreads all around the place.
 But I alone anchored my black ship outside,
 well clear of the harbor's jaws
 I tied her fast to a cliffside with a cable.
 I scaled its rock face to a lookout on its crest
 but glimpsed no trace of the work of man or beast from there;
 all I spied was a plume of smoke, drifting off the land.³²

This is the island of the giants, from which only Odysseus's ship will manage to escape. The Homeric epics are well-known to be from an oral culture, and there are stylistic features here that reflect that culture—Odysseus's description of his "black ship" and other similar formulae are part of the strategies for oral reproduction of these epics.³³ Here we are also induced to vivid visual imagery—the "wine dark sea" familiar from other passages is contrasted here with the "milk-white calm." But how different these are from the kind of Pure Land imagery recounted above. Here we find no repetition of a variety of characteristics through a systematic combination, such as the descriptions of the jeweled trees. The dependence of the oral text on a narrative structure, on a story-line, differs from the written text's existence as external to individual memory. This "stylistic" difference is made possible by writing or graphic representation. Having been externalized and objectified in a way that an oral narrative is not, it becomes possible to engage in the kind of systematic progressions found in the descriptions of the trees in the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*.

Turning back to a comparison with the style of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, consider the following description of the "great vehicle of the Bodhisattva" from the *Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*:

Moreover, Subhūti, the great vehicle of the Bodhisattva, the great being, that is the emptiness of the subject, the object, of both subject and object, of emptiness, of great emptiness, of ultimate

reality, of conditioned emptiness, of unconditioned emptiness, of infinite emptiness, of emptiness without beginning or end, of nonrepudiation, of essential nature, of all dharmas, of own-marks, of unascertainable emptiness, of the nonexistence of own-being, of existence, of nonexistence, of own-being, and of other-being.

What is the emptiness of the subject? Dharmas on the subject-side are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Therein the eye is empty of the eye, on account of its being neither unmoved nor destroyed. And why? Because such is its essential nature. And so the ear is empty of the ear, on account of its being neither unmoved nor destroyed. And why? Because such is its essential nature. And so the nose is empty of the nose, on account of its being neither unmoved nor destroyed. And why? Because such is its essential nature. And so the tongue is empty of the tongue, on account of its being neither unmoved nor destroyed. And why? Because such is its essential nature. And so the body is empty of the body, on account of its being neither unmoved nor destroyed. And why? Because such is its essential nature. And so the mind is empty of the mind, on account of its being neither unmoved nor destroyed. And why? Because such is its essential nature.

What is the emptiness of the object? Dharmas on the object-side are forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touch objects, and mind objects. Therein form is empty of form....³⁴

When confronted by such contrasting literary forms as those found in the Pure Land and Perfection of Wisdom literatures when compared with the Homeric epics, some might be tempted to fall back on the old clichéd stereotypes about the so-called “Indian mind” as versus the “Greek mind.” More recent developments in critical theory, however, suggest that such “explanations” serve as little more than thinly-veiled value judgments and virtually racist claims about ethnic identity. Instead, if we consider these as having their origins in different stages of the development of human cognition—Homeric epics in the mythic-narrative stage of cognitive development, and Pure Land and Prajñāpāramitā sutras as well as tantric maṇḍalas in the graphic stage—then certain characteristics of each style of (what I am loosely calling) “literature” makes sense.³⁵ The Homeric formulae assisted the poet by allowing the use of fixed narrative forms, maintaining the rhythmic cadences of the presentation. The systematic working through of different items—the jewels of which trees consist, the emptiness of various philosophic concepts, or the categories and descriptions of different deities in different locations in the maṇḍala—would seem to evidence the kind of reflective reworking of materials only possible when they are recorded externally, that is, in what Donald designates as external memory.

BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

There is loose usage of the term “evolution” that is simply a synonym for progress. Here, however, it is important to distinguish between “evolution” in this popular usage and the more technical use, that of biological evolution. This will allow us to be clearer about the nature of the cognitive changes being described.

Biological evolution involves changes in the genetic structures of an organism that are expressed in new biological structures or processes—this is usually referred to as the relation between the genotype and the phenotype. Such genetic changes require much longer periods of time to take place than the period of time involved in the rise of literate cultures. The difference between those people living in oral cultures and those living in literate cultures is not biological—there are no new brain structures involved—and, therefore, are not genetic or evolutionary in the more restricted, biological sense. The cognitive differences are a consequence of adaptations to different cultural environments.

Although there is not literally a new biological structure in the brain that has been created as an evolutionary process, Donald does discuss the change from mythic to theoretic cultures involves a new “hardware” for memory:

This change, in the terms of modern information technology, constitutes a *hardware* change, albeit a nonbiological hardware change. A distinction should be made between memory as contained within the individual and memory as part of a collective, external storage system. The first is biologically based, that is, it resides in the brain, so we will refer to it as *biological memory*. The second kind of memory may reside in a number of different external stores, including visual and electronic storage systems, as well as culturally transmitted memories that reside in other individuals.³⁶

It is also important to emphasize that the various stages of cognition are cumulative. Describing the way in which he has presented the developmental stages of cognition, Donald says,

From the start, I have made the simplifying assumption that each cognitive adaptation in human evolutionary history has been retained as a fully functional vestige. The simplest working hypothesis, by far, is that, when we acquired the apparatus required for mime and speech, in that order, we retained the knowledge structures, and the cultural consequences, of previous adaptations.³⁷

We might simply say that writing and its cognitive structures has not replaced spoken communication and its cognitive structures. Instead, one has been added to the other. External memory has not replaced individual internal memory, but rather been added to it. In a loose analogy, television has not replaced radio, but rather been added to it. In other words, because this development is cumulative, there is no we–they dichotomy—no evolutionary dichotomy between we, the literate, and they, the oral—to the extent that we are first they before we became we and we are still they. The oral / aural still functions as an important cognitive mode, despite having been augmented by externalizable systems of symbolic representation. In his study of the oral character of scripture, William A. Graham has stated that

there is much evidence to support our widespread association of writing with civilization, although this should not be used to support either the once fashionable assumption that preliterates are “simpler” or have lesser intellectual capacities than literates, or the argument that literacy automatically conveys new intellectual capacities.³⁸

In other words, the distinction between oral cultures, which employ individual, internal memory, and graphic cultures, which employ public, external memory, is not a judgment regarding superiority or a suggestion that new intellectual capacities have evolved, but rather a techno-cultural one in which intellectual capacities otherwise unavailable become possible. That the technology of systematic external symbolization of thought has had a corresponding cognitive consequence should be in no way surprising. Imagine how differently the world looks to two children, one of whom has a bicycle and knows how to ride it, and a second who neither has a bicycle nor knows how to ride. For the former, a playground that is beyond the reach of the latter quickly becomes part of his or her home territory. This may give us some sense of the cognitive implications of a technology itself so profoundly cognitive as writing.³⁹ Having a “text” externalized in written—or other graphic—form creates the possibility of reflecting critically on that text in ways not possible when the “text” is spoken, recited, and retained in individual internal memory. A new opportunity for the application of cognitive skills all humans share on the basis of biological evolution is created by the development of technologies supporting external memory.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER ASPECTS OF BUDDHIST THOUGHT AND HISTORY

Two additional aspects of the Buddhist tradition would seem to be, if not explained by, then at least given greater context by the historical

transformation from an oral to a graphic culture and its cognitive consequences. These two are the stylistic differences between the Pāli suttas and the Mahāyāna sūtras—which are striking to anyone who has read both—and the rise of Buddhist nominalism, particularly as expressed in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhayamikakārikā*.

Textual Stylistics

One of the areas where the distinction between oral and literary cultures is suggestive is the difference between the Mahāyāna sūtras and the Pāli sutta literature. Historically, the tradition maintains that what became the Pāli literature was an oral tradition, retained and “passed down orally by groups of memorizer-reciters known as *bhāṇakas* and were only written down around 70 B.C.E. in Sri Lanka during the fourth Buddhist council...after which they were still transmitted orally for many centuries.”⁴⁰

The Pāli suttas are strongly narrative in form, reflecting the oral culture in which they originated, while the well-known florid character of the Mahāyāna sūtra literature points toward a graphic culture. Just at the time that the Theravāda literature was being recorded, that is when the value of writing it down came to be institutionally recognized, the Mahāyāna was beginning as well, and integrated a positive valuation of writing from its origins.⁴¹ Taking just as a suggestive example, consider the difference between the opening of a Pāli sutta and one of the Mahāyāna sūtras. The *Mahāniddana-sutta* opens with the following very brief description:

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was living among the Kurus. Now, the Kurus have a town named Kammasadhamma. There Ven. Ananda approached the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to the Blessed One, sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: “It’s amazing, lord, it’s astounding, how deep this dependent co-arising is, and how deep its appearance, and yet to me it seems as clear as clear can be.”⁴²

Following on this, the Buddha Śākyamuni goes on to give one of the most famous explanations of the links in the chain of causation. In contrast, consider the opening of the *Vairocanaḥhisambhōdhi-sūtra*:

Thus have I heard. At one time the Bhagavān (Lord) was residing in the vast adamantine palace of the Dharma realm empowered by Tathāgatas, in which all the *vajradharas* had all assembled; the great pavilion [comparable to] the king of jewels, born of the Tathāgata’s faith-and-understanding, play, and supernatural transformations, was lofty, without a center or perimeter, and variously adorned with

great and wondrous jewel-kings, and the body of a bodhisattva formed a lion throne.⁴³

Another three—even lengthier—paragraphs follow this before the initial question that starts the sutra is asked.

While evaluating Buddhist literature in terms of the oral-graphic distinction does not add to our historical knowledge *per se*, it does, however, contribute to our understanding of why there are such sharp stylistic differences between different strata of Buddhist literature.

Buddhist Nominalism

As used in contemporary Western philosophy, “nominalism” is employed to label the idea that only particular things actually exist, and that universals or essences are only names (*nomos*, from which nominalism is itself named).⁴⁴ To take a mundane example, according to the nominalist view, the red of a cover of a book on my shelf does not exist anywhere else or in any other form than as found on that particular book cover. In other words, it does not exist as some universal or essence of which this particular book cover is an instance, as is held by Platonists and some of the non-Buddhist Indian philosophic schools. Given the highly psychological character of so much of Indian Buddhist thought, thoughts about general categories are themselves particulars—person P’s thought about general category X at time T, as it were. Such particular thoughts have the name of the general category as their objective referent, not some independently existing universal or essence. Buddhist thought, however, also maintains philosophic reasons for its rejection of metaphysical universals or essences.

Tom Tillemans comments on the use of the term nominalism in relation to Buddhist thought by explaining that nominalism “in the modern sense as found in Nelson Goodman and W.V. Quine, [is] where the essential requirement is that what exists must be particular; [however, the idea of] nominalism need not be, and indeed is not for the Buddhists, a philosophy where universals are just mere words alone, or *flatus vocis*.” Tillemans goes on to clarify this, saying “The peculiarly Buddhist contribution is that abstract entities are not just dismissed, but are *accounted for* as mere absences of differences and are hence unreal, as are all other absences for Buddhists.”⁴⁵ Universals or essences are abstractions, and abstractions are simply the absence of difference. Saying that the book cover and the pen are both red does not establish the metaphysical reality of redness. It just leaves out the differences between the actually existing red book and the actually existing red pen. In this sense then, nominalism has long been considered a characteristic of Buddhist thought.

However, if we consider the history of Buddhist philosophic thought from the perspective of its treatment of words and language, while attending

to the cognitive differences implied by the existence of different strata of Buddhist thought, we find that there is a significant shift toward nominalism with the Mahāyāna—which as noted above is more closely affiliated with writing. In the pre-Mahāyāna abhidharma literature, the predominant understanding of words is as speech, and “that speech, being the physical sound of words, is itself a real entity.”⁴⁶

Turning to the Prajñāpāramitā literature, we find that the ontological problems raised appear to be stimulated by reflections on the difference between things and their designations. For example, a bodhisattva “who courses in the perfection of wisdom, develops it, makes efforts about it” does not think, “‘I grow in perfect wisdom,’” but “on the contrary it occurs to him, ‘a mere designation is that.’”⁴⁷ Later in the same text we find the view of language as involving a difference between things and their designations expressed more clearly:

Verbal expression does not necessarily imply a settling down in names and signs. Only with reference to suffering do I use verbal expressions, not for the settling down in name and sign. For a Tathagata, or his disciple does not settle down in name and sign. If name could settle down in name, sign in sign, emptiness in emptiness... then the Tathagata, or his disciples, would settle down in name or sign. But since all dharmas are mere words, they do not abide in them. It is thus that a Bodhisattva, having taken his stand on mere words or signs, should course in perfect wisdom, but not settle down in it.⁴⁸

In light of our considerations regarding the cognitive consequences of writing, such different understandings of language—as speech contrasted with as designations—appear to be informed not simply by philosophic reflections but also by the differences between oral and literate cultures. Ong has noted that members of literate cultures

tend to think of names as labels, written or printed tags imaginatively affixed to an object named. Oral folk have no sense of a name as a tag, for they have no idea of a name as something that can be seen. Written or printed representations of words can be labels; real, spoken words cannot be.⁴⁹

Thus, as with the differences between the textual stylistics of Theravāda literature and Mahāyāna literature, the philosophic differences in how speech and language is conceived may be explained—at least to some significant extent—by the cognitive differences between oral and literate cultures.

CONCLUSION

One of the conclusions that we can draw from this inquiry is that the expansion of visionary religion hypothesized by Beyer is probably a literary accomplishment rather than a literally visionary one. The hyperbolic descriptions of Sukhāvati, the complexity of maṇḍala, and the emptiness of various philosophic concepts suggest a religious culture dependent on external memory—writing and drawing. Exception may need to be made, of course, for the existence of (probably very few) religious virtuosi who, like the bards who recited the Homeric hymns and other lengthy oral productions, were able through extensive practice and training to develop the skill to actually create such complex visual images. The two kinds of nenbutsu practice—verbal recitation and visualization—would seem to reflect oral culture and literate culture respectively. Hearing the voice of Amida reciting the nenbutsu formula is a direct appeal not only to the aural/oral sensory modality, but also to the cognitive functioning of oral cultures. As suggested by the *Contemplation Sutra*, and emphasized by Hōnen and Shinran, nenbutsu recitation is available to all of us as a religiously effective practice or as an expression of our religious experience.

NOTES

My thanks to the suggestions made and questions raised by Natalie Fisk Quli and Eleanor Rosch in the course of preparing this revised version.

1. For a systematic examination of the various texts that teach buddhānusr̥ti (Pāli *buddhānusati*), see Paul Harrison, “Commemoration and Identification in Buddhānusr̥ti,” in *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Janet Gyatso (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 215–238.

2. Inagaki Hisao with Harold Stewart, trans., *The Sutra on Contemplation of Amitāyus*, in *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, BDK English Tripiṭaka 12-II (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), § 15, p. 102.

3. The *Larger Sukhāvattvyūha Sutra* was translated into Chinese in the second or third century (Robert. E. Buswell, Jr., ed., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* [New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003], s.v. “Sukhāvattvyūha-sūtra,” by Mark Blum). Convention then would place its original composition to approximately the period from the middle of the first to the middle of the second century.

4. Inagaki Hisao with Harold Stewart, trans., *The Larger Sutra on Amitāyus (The Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life)*, in *The Three Pure Land Sutras* (see note 2), § 14, pp. 46–47.

5. Paul Harrison, “Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras,” *Eastern Buddhist* 35, nos. 1–2 (2003): p. 121.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Direct inspiration of each specific text by some specific visionary experience, however, need not be presumed—despite its being argued for as a source of authority (see Harrison, “Mediums and Messages,” p. 124). Such texts did not appear in isolation, but rather within the context of a well-developed literate culture. In other words, the referents may well be other texts, rather than visionary experiences. This is, in fact, a situation with which we are well familiar. A contemporary noir mystery, for example, is referring probably at least as much to the writings of Mickey Spillane and Dashiell Hammett as to their own personal experiences.

8. Paul Harrison, *The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present*, *Studia Philologica Buddhica Monograph Series*, vol. 5 (Tokyo: International Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1990), ch. 3.

9. Harrison, *Samādhi*, p. xxii n. 18.

10. Ibid., p. xviii.

11. Ibid., ch. 5.

12. Ibid., p. xx.

13. While I wish that I could claim this particular piece of analysis as my own, it is not. Unfortunately, and with apologies, I have been unable to locate the specific source from which this idea came to me. I thought that I recalled reading this in something that Roger Corless wrote, however, an extensive review of his publications, with the added assistance kindly given by Eisho Nasu, failed to turn it up. Although in some of his essays, Corless does speak of a different kind of pairing, that of apophatic and cataphatic, that particular pair does not match the cognitive and sensory analysis being developed here.

14. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (San Diego, New York, and London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, 1999), p. 318.

15. Ibid., p. 159.

16. <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/learningmod/start.htm>, accessed Wednesday, December 19, 2007.

17. Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 275.

18. Richard Bowring, *The Religious Traditions of Japan: 500–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 329.

19. It is speculative at this point, but it might be worth considering the possibility that for the same person different sensory modalities may be dominant in different social settings. Consider, for example, a person who has grown up in a culture that is predominantly visual, such as contemporary America, but has consistently experienced a highly auditory religious life, such as a BCA temple where nenbutsu recitation and sutra chanting are the main focus of their religious life. Might it not be the case that dominance is contextual as well as cultural—that in one setting they are more visual, while in the religious domain they are more auditory? The difference in contextual emphasis on one modality over another might be strengthened when other sensory modalities—less conscious ones, such as the olfactory stimuli of incense—are also consistently conjoined in the same social context. Taking these reflections another step, one might also consider the effects of experiences that are directed at non-dominant sensory modalities, such as extended rhythmic group dancing for someone who is predominantly visual. Might such situations produce a sense of disorientation, and be experienced as numinous?

20. Stephen Beyer, "Notes on the Vision Quest in Early Mahāyāna," in *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze*, ed.

Lewis Lancaster (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1977), p. 339. His evidence for this included both Buddhist sources and Hindu ones, but most important for his argument is Arjuna's vision of Krishna as all-consuming time in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

21. Inagaki and Stewart, *Contemplation Sutra*, p. 103.

22. Beyer, "Vision Quest," p. 332.

23. Harrison, "Mediums and Messages," p. 124.

24. Merlin Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991).

25. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (1982; repr. London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 65.

26. Frits Staal, *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar* (Asian Humanities Press, 1983).

27. Joseph Walser, *Nāgārjuna in Context: Mahāyāna Buddhism and Early Indian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 136.

28. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 55.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

30. I believe that Donald has unfortunately been seduced by the idea of "Greek exceptionalism" and focuses to too great an extent on theoretical thinking for his description of this stage of cognitive development. I think that more important than the ability to form abstract generalizations about causal relations (perhaps too limited a description of his understanding of "theoretic"?) is the opportunity for iterative refinement that external memory systems provide.

31. Donald and Ong both focus on alphabetic systems of writing. The issue, it seems to me, is not the character of the writing system, but rather the shift from a mnemonic device to a communicative one—that is, from one that depends on the "reader" already knowing what the "text" says, whether that text is charcoal sketches on a cave wall or knots in a string, to one like, well, hopefully this, in which the reader is learning something that he or she did not already know, whether the text is recorded in an alphabetic or an ideographic system. There would also seem to be some differences based on differing kinds of graphic representations. Heinrich Zimmer, for example, discusses differences between figurative and geometric representations. See, Heinrich Zimmer, "Yoga and the Linear Sacred Image," in *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India*, trans. and ed. Gerald Chapple and James B. Lawson with J. Michael Knight (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), ch. 3, "Yoga and the Linear Sacred Image (the *yantra* and the *Mandala*)," pp. 65–180.

32. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 233.
33. For an extended discussion of the mnemonic technologies of oral cultures, see David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
34. Edward Conze, trans., *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom, with the Divisions of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), p. 144.
35. A. C. Graham seems to have taken a similar approach to the comparison of Chinese and Western thought. Rather than “building a contrastive framework between China and the West on the purported distinctiveness of correlative thinking, Graham pointed instead to the relative weight that each philosophical tradition placed on correlative and analytic thinking. China embraced correlativity; the West ultimately divorced analytic thinking from correlative thinking and came to value analytic thinking more highly” (Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002], p. 16).
36. Donald, p. 308.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
38. William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 12.
39. See for a similar consideration of the impact of technology Ong’s discussion of orchestral technology. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 80–82.
40. Daniel Veidlinger, “When a Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Mahāyāna Influence on Theravāda Attitudes towards Writing,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (2006): p. 406. For additional discussion of place of orality and literacy in Theravāda culture, see *idem.*, *Spreading the Dhamma: Writing, Orality, and Textual Transmission in Buddhist Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).
41. *Idem.*, “When a Word,” p. 406.
42. <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html>, accessed Thursday, March 1, 2007.
43. Rolf Giebel, trans., *The Vairocanaḥśambodhi Sūtra*, BDK English Tripiṭaka, 30–I (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2005), p. 3.
44. Like most philosophic terminology, nominalism has a variety of

overlapping but not identical usages in the literature (see for a summary discussion of the different versions of nominalism <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/>, accessed March 17, 2007). To this complexity is added the further difficulty of employing terminology deriving from the Western philosophic tradition to talk about Buddhist philosophy. Fortunately, in this area of relatively technical philosophy, the positions and concerns of Western and Indic philosophers are very closely analogous to one another.

45. Tom J. F. Tillemans, *Scripture, Logic, Language: Essays on Dharmakīrti and His Tibetan Successors* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999), p. 4.

46. José Ignacio Cabezón, *A Dose of Emptiness: An Annotated Translation of the sTong thun chen mo of mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 476 n. 641.

47. Conze, *The Large Sutra*, p. 411.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 517.

49. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p. 33.

