Karma Made Me Do It

A Buddhist Take on Consciousness and Free Will

A Templeton Foundation project (Global Perspectives on Science and Spirituality) in the early twenty-first century provided the opportunity to consider the relationship of science and spirituality in the Asian context. My slice of the project, centered at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya, Japan, focused on the Japanese concept of kokoro *as a way to reconsider questions of the mind and consciousness. As I wrote in an earlier essay in proposing this project, "*Kokoro *is a broad and multivalent Japanese concept that includes the rational workings of the 'mind' and the emotional feelings of the 'heart,' as well as the movings of the 'spirit' and the impulses of the 'will.'* Kokoro *is all of these, and their unity and inseparability is assumed, without insisting that 'thoughts' and 'feelings' are the same—a diversity within a unity, or a unity of diversities." Further intense and focused discussions with Pranab Das of Elon University, as part of a follow-up Templeton project on consciousness and emergence, resulted in part in the preparation of this essay, which was never published. I have upgraded and revised it and offer it here for publication for the first time. It is quite different in some ways than the previous essays in this collection that have focused specifically on the Tiantai Buddhism of Zhiyi, but is related in the sense of showing how Buddhist ideas may provide a different perspective on matters such as the question of consciousness.*

Over a period of ten years I read as much as I could on the themes of consciousness, the philosophy of mind, and will and agency—especially with regard to the quickly progressing fields of neuroscience and "brain science"—including the works of Ian Barbour, Philip Clayton, Christian Coseru, Antonio Damasio, Pranab Das, Michael S. A. Graziano, Iriki

Atsushi, Christof Koch, Ray Kurzweil, Sangheetha Menon, Nancey Murphy, Thomas Nagel, Andrew Newberg, William Newsome, Alvin Plantinga, Robert John Russell, B. Alan Wallace, Daniel M. Wegner, and many more. The overwhelming conclusion is that greater minds than mine have spent much more time and effort wrestling with this question, and as far as I can tell we are still not anywhere near a satisfactory answer or understanding of "mind" and consciousness. I have thrown up my hands in defeat and have decided to focus my energies on matters that are more easily comprehended, like Chinese Buddhist philosophy.

As a result of an extended five-year Templeton "Global Perspectives on Science and Spirituality" project conducted at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture between 2005 and 2009 in Japan, one of the conclusions—or perhaps more accurately, a "remaining conundrum"—was an awareness that we are currently faced with two unacceptable (or, at least, unappealing) options, two conceptual extremes in the interpretation and understanding of human consciousness:[1]

1. Radical or absolute dualism, which posits a mind, soul, or spirit that is of a different or independent substance/existence than physical matter; that there is a mental or spiritual reality apart from our physical existence, especially in the sense that it can continue beyond the death of the physical body.[2] Beyond the problem of identifying exactly what this "extra-material stuff" could be,[3] there is the

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[1] See the summary of the final international project conference in *Brain Science and Kokoro: Asian Perspectives on Science and Religion*, edited by Paul L. Swanson (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2011, available at nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/en/publications/symposia/brain-science-and-kokoro/), and my "*Kokoro* [Mind-Heart-Spirit]: Affirming Science and Religion in the Japanese Context," in *Global Perspectives on Science & Spirituality*, ed. Pranab Das (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2009, 55–68).

[2] It is, of course, possible to speak of mind, self, soul, or spirit without positing an independent or post-life entity, but here I am referring in particular to the understanding that there is something non-material that can act separate from the body (as in out-of-body experiences) or continue beyond physical death.

[3] As Ray Kurzweil put it so eloquently, "if … intelligence-enhancing extra-material stuff really exists, then I'd like to know where I can get some"; see *Are we Spiritual*

vexing question: if mental or spiritual and material substances exist independently or are different realities, then how do they interact? And if they interact, as they obviously must to be experienced, how can they be considered two independent or different realities?

2. Total reductionism, where matter is all there is and all mental activity and consciousness is reduced to the physical activity of the brain and body. In short, there is no "mind" or "soul" independent of the body. Though an oversimplification, this is probably the default position of most, if not all, neuroscientists. This position, however, raises a number of uncomfortable ethical issues: are we mere machines? If all actions are mechanically determined, how do we account for moral responsibility and does it make any sense to speak of free will? How does consciousness arise from cold, unconscious matter, or do we need to redefine what is meant by "matter." And what do we mean when we say "I"?

Thus we have a conundrum—a problem with conflicting poles seemingly without an acceptable solution. When faced with a conundrum, the only options are to redefine or rethink the terms that lead to the conundrum, reject both poles in favor of a "middle way" that incorporates or satisfactorily explains both poles, or think "outside the envelope" by questioning the very assumptions that lead to the conundrum. Thus let us experiment by looking at some Buddhist (or non-Western) ideas and see if they provide any hints for a way forward.

Thoughts on some buddhist ideas

First, a caveat. I do not mean to present "Buddhism" as an easy or glib answer to Western philosophical conundrums, and some (Buddhists and Buddhist scholars) may disagree with my presentation

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Machines? Ray Kurzweil vs. the Critics of Strong AI, ed. Jay W. Richards (Seattle: Discovery Institute, 2002, 194).

of Buddhist ideas. Let me just say that I wish to explore and present not "Buddhism" per se, but some ideas that were inspired by the Buddhist tradition as a different perspective for further discussion.

The eighteen aspects of human sense experience

A basic analytical category in the Buddhist tradition is to discuss human experience in terms of its eighteen aspects (or, more technically, "realms" or "elements"; Skt. *dhātu*). That is, a human experience involves some combination of the six sense objects (of what can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, and thought), the six sense organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind), and six sense consciousnesses (of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and knowing) that make up an experience. The lack of any one of these aspects (or, rather, at least one aspect from each of these three sixfold categories) means that the experience is not complete. For example, there must be some external stimulus or object (without necessarily defining in what way that object "exists" externally) that is perceived by a sense organ and then consciously "naming" it as a matter of awareness. In concrete terms, something *visible* (with color and form) is perceived by the *eye* and then is identified through a process known as a "*sight consciousness*" or "awareness" of a visible object. If the sight organ—the eye—is broken or not functioning properly, a visible object cannot be recognized as such, or results in a misconception. Again, even if there is a visible object that is perceived by the eye, there is no experience of a visible object if this is not consciously perceived. Even if someone is speaking and your ears are healthy, you do not "hear" anything and there is no auditory experience if you are not paying attention or aware of the sound coming your way. If a student is in a classroom and the ears pick up the vibrations made by the teacher's voice, but the student is thinking about what to eat for lunch or where to go for happy hour, there is no "hearing" of the lecture.[4]

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[4] Thus, to give a Buddhist answer to a classic Western philosophical question, if a tree

Let us take, for example, the experience of a "red rose" and the various thoughts and emotions that it elicits. Through the eye one perceives the dark red color and complicated interweaving forms of the petals, the contrasting green of the leaves and stem. Through the nose one absorbs the subtle scent of the flower. With the fingers one touches the soft petals, and the piercing sharpness of the thorns. By being conscious or aware of these sights, aromas, and tactful sensations, one cognizes—and recognizes—and gives the name to the experience of a "red rose." But this is not all. The experience of a red rose can elicit a variety of further thoughts and emotions. It may make one feel romantic or nostalgic, remembering the gift of a red rose on a special occasion, further eliciting a faint taste of chocolate on the tongue. It may provoke bitter sorrow at the memory of a failed romance. A pious Christian may recall the passion of Christ, with the red petals the color of blood flowing down from the crown of thorns. A flamenco aficionado may find the heart pounding at the memory of a handsome or beautiful dancer with a red rose clutched in the mouth. A person from a culture where there is no tradition of red roses may be puzzled by the strange beauty of the flower, or not perceive beauty at all. All of these are possible iterations of the experience of a "red rose," brought on not only by the sense perception but also from memories and habitual mental and emotional associations.

In this way, human experience is explained without positing an independent "self" or agent that has these experiences.[5] Note that each

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falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, there is no "sound." That is, there may be external vibrations or "sound waves" produced by the falling tree, but without a healthy ear to pick up these vibrations and no awareness to recognize the possible perception and to "name" the noise, there is no experience of a "sound." A corollary of this approach is that, in the Buddhist theory of language, conceptualizing or verbally "naming" something is necessarily inadequate and incomplete. By definition, a name or conceptual description does not fully capture the thing itself. "Red rose" is the naming of an experience based on a causal process, not the thing itself.

[5] Again, this idea is not unique to Buddhism or totally lacking in the Western philosophical tradition. David Hume, for example, writes that "I can never catch *myself* at any

sense has its own “consciousness”; there is no single agent or “I” apart from the experience, and “consciousness” is spread out and differentiated among a variety of sense factors: awareness of color, awareness of sound, awareness of scent, and so forth. In the words of William Waldron, this is “consciousness in terms of causal relations rather than in terms of essential or intrinsic natures.”[6] Thus there is no single reified “consciousness,” and an experience is not reduced to merely the physical working of the brain. Or is it? In this explanation, what is the role of the “sixth sense”: the “mind” that “knows” thoughts? Is it something more than the cognitive and emotive functioning of the brain? Or are we still left with the same conundrum?

Karma and the web of causes and conditions

If consciousness is a matter of causal relations rather than intrinsic nature, then a topic of interest is the Buddhist teachings on karma (and volition), and the related idea of the interconnected and interdependent web of causes and conditions. Buddhist tradition claims that the historical Buddha’s enlightenment under the Bodhi tree occurred when he realized that all events are the result of an almost infinite combination of various direct and indirect causes and conditions (Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*), with the natural corollary that nothing arises without a cause.

First, a standard definition of karma is “a term used to refer to the doctrine of action and its corresponding ‘ripening’ or ‘fruition,’ according to which virtuous deeds of body, speech, and mind produce happiness in the future (in this life or subsequent lives), while non-

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time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perception.... I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” (From the *Treatise on Human Nature*, book 1, quoted by Antonio Damasio in his *Self Comes to Mind* [New York: Vintage Books, 2010, 12].)

[6] See William S. Waldron, “A Buddhist Critique of Cartesian Dualism in the Cognitive Sciences: Naturalizing Mind and Qualia,” in *Brain Science and Kokoro* (Nanzan, 2011, 69).

virtuous deeds lead instead to suffering."[7] Karma, of course, is not a unique or even specifically Buddhist idea, but the important ingredient for Buddhism is that mental intention or volition is the key to determining whether it is a good, bad, mixed, or neutral action, and that determines whether there will be corresponding good or bad recompense or retribution.

One problem with the idea of karma is that it is too complicated to ever figure out or identify exactly which actions produce which results (except, theoretically, for a highly enlightened person such as a Buddha). Fundamentally it boils down to accepting the law of karmic recompense by faith. It is impossible for us mere mortals to tell how or when a specific evil act (telling a lie, giving in to anger, being greedy) results in a particular punishment or suffering, although there are many tales and stories throughout history that purport to do exactly that. Buddhist history is full of stories about how a specific good deed—saving a spider, feeding a leper, copying a certain text, sacrificing one's body to feed a hungry tiger—directly resulted in a specific reward, but such matters are impossible to verify scientifically and historically with our limited means. It is said that one of the powers of a Buddha is to discern all causes and conditions of the past, especially those good deeds that contributed to his enlightenment.[8] However, to say that a Buddha can perceive the intricate workings of karma and identify which action contributed to which result, is as rationally unsatisfactory as claiming that God understands such-and-such a mystery that we mere mortals cannot fathom. It may bring some spiritual comfort, but does not provide a full understanding or solve our conundrum with regard to consciousness.

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[7] See *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton University Press, 2013, 420; Kindle Locations 31904–31906).

[8] "Although the Buddha acknowledges that the connections between karman and its effect may seem so complex as to appear unfathomable (why, for example, does the evil person who harms others live in wealth, while the good Samaritan who helps others lives in poverty?), he is adamant that those connections can be known, and known with perfect precision, through the experience of awakening. Indeed, two of the three kinds of knowledge and one of the superknowledges that are by-products of enlightenment involve insight into the validity of the connection between karmic cause and effect for both oneself and for all beings: viz., the ability to remember one's own former lives in all their detail; and the insight into the karmic destinies of all other beings as well." *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Kindle Locations 31941–31949).

A second problem is the issue of moral responsibility in a world of deterministic karmic retribution. If someone is suffering the inevitable results from past evil deeds, then who are we to try and alleviate that suffering? Should not those people suffer their "just desserts"? This way of thinking can be used to justify discrimination against lepers (who were thought to have contracted their disease as a result of bad karma) or refuse help for the poor and hungry. I believe that the proper Buddhist response to this objection is to invoke the ideal of compassion and to seek to do good deeds that will in turn give rise to good results in the future. But this still does not overcome the theoretical amorality of a deterministic karmic law.

Again, there are supposed to be no exceptions to the law of karma: you get what you pay for. Technically, "the fruition of action is also received by the mental continuum of the being who initially performed the action, not by another; thus, in mainstream Buddhism, one can neither receive the fruition of another's karman nor redeem another's actions."[9] However, as alluded to above, this iron law of karma is often ignored in lived Buddhism. The Mahāyāna tradition of East Asia, for example, includes a strong tendency to admit, and even celebrate, the "transfer of merit" (Jpn. *ekō*) that contradicts this hard law of karma. Many Buddhist rituals in Japan are capped with a closing sequence during which the participants wish or vow that the merit accrued by the just-performed ritual should be shared with or distributed to all beings throughout the universe. There are also many traditional tales of altruistic action in which a person shares or transfers his or her merit to another. This shows that the Buddhist ideal of compassion "trumps" the cold calculation of karmic determinacy, in fact if not in theory.

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[9] *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Kindle Locations 31922–31925).

Mental activity as four phases of a causal process: The arising and perishing of momentary individual thoughts

The examples of Buddhist ideas we have briefly discussed above are broad and basic concepts common to Buddhism in general. Let us look now at a more specific analysis of mental activity or "thoughts" in terms of causal relations by the sixth-century Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi (538–597), namely, his analysis of the arising and perishing, or the four phases, of a thought. These four phases are 1. pre-thought, 2. imminent thought, 3. the thought itself, and 4. thought concluded.[10] "Pre-thought" refers to the situation before a thought has arisen. "Imminent thought" refers to the situation when the thought is about to arise. "The thought itself" refers to the momentary dwelling of a thought due to causes from coming into contact, or having a relation, with an object of cognition (as in the eighteen aspects of a sense experience). "Concluded thought" refers to the situation when the thought has come to an end (or "has perished"). This causal process is explained as follows:

> Although during the phase of "pre-thought" a thought has not yet arisen, the thought is not ultimately nothing. This is like the state of a person who has not yet performed an activity, and later performs an activity; we cannot say that since the activity has not yet been performed, therefore there is no person. If it is determined that there is no person, then who later performs the activity? Since there is a person who has not yet performed the activity, therefore there is a performance of the activity.

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[10] These four phases of thought are presented in Zhiyi's *Great Cessation and Contemplation* (T 1911, 46.15b–17b), a major philosophical text for the East Asian Buddhist tradition on the theory of meditation (comparable in scope and influence to the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas in the West). It is also discussed in somewhat more detail in Zhiyi's lesser-known treatise on *The Concentration of Being Fully Aware of Your Thoughts* (T 1922, 46.623a–624b). See my annotated translations of these texts in *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight: T'ien-t'ai Chih-i's Mo-ho chih-kuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018) .

> The mental process is also like this. Because there is the phase of "pre-thought," one can attain the phase of "imminent thought." If there were no "pre-thought," how could one attain "imminent thought"? Therefore even though the thought itself does not yet exist at the phase of "pre-thought," one cannot say that ultimately there is no thought [even at this phase].
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> Even though thought has perished at the phase of "concluded thought," it also can be contemplated. This is like the state of a person who has finished an activity—one cannot say that the person does not exist. If it is determined that the person does not exist, then who previously performed the activity? The perishing of a thought at the phase of "concluded thought" is also like this. It cannot be said that it is a permanent perishing. If it were permanent perishing, then this would be the extreme heretical view of annihilationism, that there are no causes and no results. Therefore although a thought comes to an end and perishes, one can still contemplate it.[11]

In other words, a thought (or any phenomenon) does not exist on its own but is part of a causal process. The example of affirming an action of a "person" before the action takes by positing the continuing presence of a "person" implies that there is a "mind" beyond or before the arising of thoughts, but this is denied in Buddhism. Even more basic than the idea of the four phases of a thought is the analysis "arising and perishing." How and why do thoughts and consciousness—or by implication anything—arise and perish? Zhiyi analyses this issue in great detail in terms of the classic Madhyamikan Buddhist tetralemma: "a," "b" (or "not-a"), "both," and "neither."[12] In Madhyamikan Buddhist logic, the unavoidable conclusion of analyzing something in terms of the tetralemma is to discover that all options are "unobtainable" or not viable, and one is left to contemplate that all things are beyond conceptual thought and cannot be adequately verbalized or explained. This is first expounded in reference to wondering how the situation of "pre-thought" perishes and "imminent thought" arises:

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[11] See the *Great Cessation and Contemplation*, T 46.15b25–c3 (*Clear Serenity*, vol 1, 344–47).

[12] Madhyamika is one of the two major traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, originally developed by Nāgārjuna in first-century India. One classic expression of the tetralemma is that things either exist, do not exist, both exist and do not exist, or neither exist nor do not exist.

> Reflect upon, contemplate, and discern the appearance of pre-thought, imminent thought, thought [proper], and concluded thought. At that time contemplate precisely that either [1] the thoughts of pre-thought perish and the thoughts of imminent thought arise; [2] the thoughts of pre-thought do not perish yet the thoughts of imminent thought arise; [3] the thoughts of pre-thought both perish and do not perish and the thought of imminent thought arise; or [4] the thoughts of pre-thought neither perish nor do not perish and the thoughts of imminent thought arises. In this way—by analyzing pre-thought with the tetralemma—you contemplate that the arising of the mental activity of imminent thought cannot be obtained [and is beyond conceptual understanding]. If the mental activity of imminent thought cannot be obtained, then non-arising also cannot be obtained.[13]

As a specific example of how this logic works, here is the analysis of the non-viability of how a "pre-thought" gives rise to an "imminent thought":

> First, the analysis of pre-thought in terms of the first part [in terms of the tetralemma, that is, "a"]: Contemplate the arising of imminent thought as non-obtainable. If we say that imminent thought arises along with the perishing of the pre-thought, the pre-thought already perishes and where does the imminent thought arise? Does the arising coincide with the perishing of pre-thought, or is the arising separate from the perishing of the pre-thought? Suppose we say that the arising of imminent thought coincides with the perishing of pre-thought. However, the phenomenon of perishing does not correspond with the phenomenon of arising, because the nature of arising and perishing are mutually exclusive.

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[13] See *The Concentration of Being Fully Aware of Your Thoughts* (T 46.623c2–8; *Clear Serenity*, vol. 3, 1770–71).

> Suppose we say that arising contains perishing within it. However, arising and perishing are mutually exclusive, and this is impossible. It is as if in a mature fruit the seed was contained in the skin so that when the skin ripens the seed emerges. But the skin is not the seed and the seed is not the skin. How can one get a seed from the skin? The same is true for thoughts. One cannot attain arising from perishing. Therefore the coinciding of the perishing of pre-thought and the arising of imminent thought cannot be obtained.
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> Suppose we say that there is the arising of imminent thought separate from the perishing of pre-thought. However, this means that there would be an arising without cause, which is impossible. If there is an arising that arises from no place, then this cannot be called "arising." It is like empty nothingness that does not arise from any place; therefore nothingness cannot be said to "arise." One should know that the perishing of pre-thought and the arising of imminent thought cannot be obtained.
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> Practicing contemplation is like this. Whether [these factors] coincide or are separate, you should contemplate the perishing of pre-thought and the arising of imminent thought as non-obtainable.[14]

A similar deconstructive analysis can be done (involving much repetition ad infinitum) with the arising and perishing of each phase of thought, or by extension to any causal relationship or any action (good, bad, or neutral). In short, this analysis concludes that none of the four options of the tetralemma (that is, all possible conceptual options) are viable, and we are left to ponder the fact that such matters are beyond conceptual understanding and verbalization.[15]

This analysis is reminiscent of the ancient Greek philosophy of Zeno's paradoxes—such as denying the possibility that an arrow can fly, or that Achilles can ever catch up to a tortoise in a race—that purport to prove the impossibility of motion despite our mundane experience that takes motion for granted. Thus the analysis of thought in four phases, and the deconstruction of "arising" and "perishing," is presented as a meditative exercise for attaining insight through understanding the causal process of "thinking." It claims to show that it is impossible to explain or show how a thought arises and perishes, or that any causal process actually works, even though we do in fact constantly experience immeasurable instances of phenomena arising and perishing around and within us. The exercise may be useful for attaining meditative concentration by overcoming unwanted attachment to conceptual thoughts and verbal expression that are considered obstacles to awakening, but it does not fully illuminate the problem of consciousness, except perhaps again focusing our attention on consciousness as a causal process rather than something that "exists."

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[14] See *The Concentration of Being Fully Aware of Your Thoughts* (T 46.623c9–22; *Clear Serenity*, vol. 3, 1771).

[15] For a classic critique of Nāgārjuna's use of the tetralemma, see Richard Robinson's essay "Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute All Philosophical Views?" in *Philosophy East and West* 22/3 (1972): 325–31.

Concluding comments

We have considered Buddhist ideas of sense experience, karma, the web of interconnected causation with consciousness as a causal process rather than as an independent existence, the phases of a thought, and the logical impasse concerning the arising and perishing of thoughts.[16] In terms of our conundrum, Buddhism would certainly deny the first possibility of a radical dualism between body and mind, but neither would it accept a complete reduction of all experience to the physical activity of body or brain. These ideas, however, still leave us with a familiar problem with regard to consciousness and free will: if all is determined by previous causes and conditions, there is no culpability for actions taken by an actor, and thus "responsibility" is meaningless. If consciousness is merely a pattern of connected causal events, how can we make a volitional, free decision? If, on the other hand, karmic recompense is initiated through volitional acts, this introduces factors from outside the web of karmic interdependency, unless you somehow factor in the volitional acts. But, where does this "volition" come from, and how does it work? If it is merely the result of former activity, we are back to the deterministic web of former causes and conditions. If volition introduces factors beyond the web of previous causes and conditions, this contradicts the law of karma and posits the possibility of something arising without a previous cause. The conundrum remains.

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[16] One might expect in an essay on Buddhism and consciousness that I would refer to the "consciousness-only" or "mind-only" idealism of the Yogācāra school, the second major school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, but I am not sufficiently conversant in this philosophy and have thus deliberately avoided it. For detailed discussions along these lines see the work of William Waldron, op. cit., and *The Buddhist Unconscious: The Ālaya-vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought*. Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); also the work of Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophic Investigation of Yogacara Buddhism and the Ch'eng wei-shih lun* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).