

On Dialogue between Different Traditions in Philosophy

By David Charles

1. The new millennium began with fireworks and celebrations. In many great cities, the year 2000 was greeted with public and private parties. Across the countryside, beacons and bonfires were lit to herald the dawn of a new age. As the international date line moved slowly and inexorably from east to west, Tokyo, Sydney, Delhi, Cairo, Athens, Moscow, Berlin, Paris, London, New York and San Francisco lit up the night sky with brilliant displays of colour and light. It seemed as if all round the world, peoples of many different nations were caught up in the moment, delighting in the size and magnificence of the celebrations before them.

Similar celebrations have attended other great national events in the past. But one thing that was unique about this celebration was the way in which all round the world people could share in each other's joy as midnight arrived in the different time zones. With the help of a technology developed only in the last decade, we could all witness and participate in the festivities of others many thousands of miles away. For a day, people everywhere joined in mutual harmony and understanding to celebrate one event, and in so doing celebrated not only a change in the calendar but also their common humanity and shared hopes for a better world. For a short time, we were all readily comprehensible to one another, united as participants in one well-understood and common enterprise.

Although the date of the new millennium is fixed by the Christian calendar, it was celebrated with equal

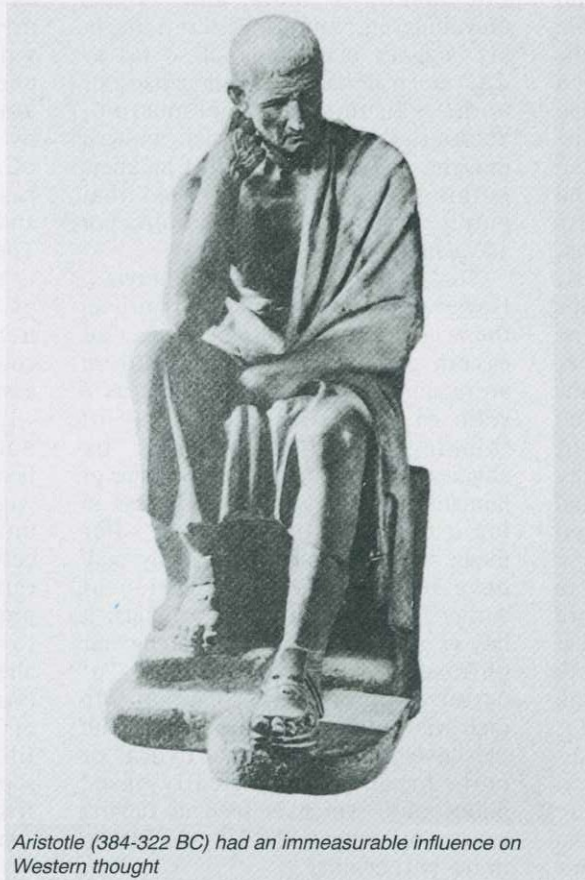
enthusiasm all over the world, by Muslim, Jew, Hindu and Buddhist alike. For many it was a secular landmark. Indeed, in many Christian countries, the celebrations lacked major religious significance. Religious leaders, whether Pope or Archbishop, made brief appearances before the

has marked so much of the past two millennia.

Did we witness on January 1st the dawn, albeit partial and fleeting, of one world, one tolerant community made up of different peoples with different traditions, united in mutual understanding and respect? Or was it simply that the forces of cultural globalization were at work, leading us all into a pattern of 'partying' developed in the prosperous west and sold all over the world by the cultural power of Hollywood, CNN and the other American-based media empires? Or was the event, as it will have seemed to some, merely a triumph of presentation over substance? Are old differences and misunderstandings still alive and well beneath the surface, waiting to break out when difficulties arise? Do ancient stereotypes and fears still persist, even if these are not presented to us in the guise of religious differences as of old?

Chairman Mao once said that it was far too early to tell whether the French Revolution had been a good or a bad thing. It is certainly too early for any of us to tell which of these interpretations of January 1st 2000 will prove to be the correct one.

2. Economic globalization makes large parts of the world look very similar to one another. London, Tokyo, Los Angeles and Berlin resemble each other physically to the extent that an incautious traveller could easily mistake parts of one for the other. These cities, and many others, are a model to many in developing countries



Aristotle (384-322 BC) had an immeasurable influence on Western thought

party really got under way. It seemed as if the religious differences and divides of the past were irrelevant to the celebration of the new millennium. The new century began without any sign of the religious intolerance which

of what they themselves hope to achieve. In our great cities, many work in similar occupations, sharing in seconds information and expertise with collaborators thousands of miles away. But despite all this, important intellectual, cultural and ideological divisions have survived. These provide, even within a secular age, the potential sources for misunderstanding and conflict. While different countries have learned to trade and cooperate commercially with each other, there has been far less progress in the exchange of philosophical ideas.

The universities of the US and Europe have, with very few notable exceptions, shown little interest in the rich philosophical traditions which emerged in the early centuries of the first millennium, and influenced the formation and development of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism. Even the names of these great early thinkers remain virtually unknown: Nagarjuna, Bhartrhari, Dinnaga, Dharmakirti, Asanga, Vasupati, Sakyamuni. Nor are their doctrines understood or discussed. The German philosopher Hegel once claimed that the Indians did not *think*, since they never raised their intuitions to the level of concepts, and so lacked philosophy altogether. Since his day, Husserl and Heidegger both have represented philosophy as a Greek invention, a distinctively European contribution to the world of ideas. Others, more cautiously, merely tacitly assume that the only philosophical tradition worth studying runs from Socrates through Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant and culminates either in the contemporary analytical or phenomenological schools. There are very few thinkers anywhere who are thoroughly at home both in this tradition and that, for example, of Buddhist or Nyaya thinkers.

Nor is the mind set confined to the academy. Many in the west have only the most incomplete and sketchy ideas of the varying schools of eastern thought. In popular culture, it is seen simply as spiritual and transcen-

dental, aiming at the removal of pain or stress, and culminating in a mystical union with the truth. All this is contrasted with Western thought, presented as theoretical and scientific, the product of rigorous intellectual analysis and not of practical exercise or personal discipline. For some, the appeal of eastern thought lies precisely in its supposed rejection of the excessive intellectualism of western thought, the manner in which it offers other roads to wisdom, ones free from the constraints of logic, unfettered by science and untainted by materialism. Nor is this view confined to the west. For some in India and Japan, prevailing currents in western thought are seen as inadequate in so far as they are materialist or rationalistic or both. From their perspective, Socrates, the father of much western thought, was right to see that he knew nothing, because he realised that purely rationalistic means were not adequate to reach the truth.

This picture has many adherents. However, for every one free spirit in the west, drawn to some aspect of eastern philosophy in this way, there are countless more who reject it as a relic of an earlier age, a way of thinking rendered obsolete by advances in our present knowledge of human psychology, or by progress in logic or computing science. For them, while Buddhist philosophy may have interest as the reflection of earlier times and different societies, it has no role to play in deepening our philosophical understanding of ourselves or our own condition. In their view, the future lies solely with the development of the analytical or more broadly scientifically-based philosophy, which is seen as having grown to dominate the US and Britain in the past century.

In these respects, the intellectual world follows a pattern similar to that of the economic and political one. Intellectual globalization can easily be simply the worldwide spread of western thought, having little if anything to learn from the distinct philosophical traditions of India,

China and Japan or from the religious heritage of Islam. Indeed, for some in the east, the way ahead may seem to consist in importing western philosophy along with western technology as a form of modernisation. The most fashionable alternative to this approach is a form of relativism: other philosophical systems are seen as reflecting different cultural backgrounds in different countries. These differing systems arise from radically differing ways of doing philosophy, from different types of philosophical games with different types of rules and aims. What counts as success in these different games may be as different as what counts as winning in the different games of chess, baseball, polo and sumo wrestling. There is no way objectively to compare the differing types of game that are played, since each has its own standards of correctness and its own view of what truth is. The only alternative to westernisation is to accept the essential relativity of philosophical activity. What counts as truth in Oxford or Harvard is not what counts as truth in the great schools of eastern thought.

If these are the only options, little or nothing can be gained from intellectual or cultural exchange between western and eastern thinkers. For, unlike the participants in the celebration of the millennium, they cannot be equal partners in a shared project. Either there is no one project to which all can contribute, or alternatively the future lies solely with (for example) western analytic thought or Zen mysticism or spiritual practice. Either way, contemporary philosophers have little if anything to learn from those working in other philosophical traditions.

3. Are these the only options? Is the only practical choice the one between the intellectual dominance of one tradition and some form of cultural relativism?

Neither of these options is particularly attractive. Take that of relativism. Many are drawn to philosophy

precisely because they see it as a rational activity, one that is not hopelessly culture bound. While one may perhaps accept that there are many different types of humour or music or art, each with its own distinct and incomparable nature, it is far more difficult to think that this is so for the things one holds to be true or known. If our methods of thinking are not universally valid, can we justifiably rely on them to the extent that we do?

The other model, globalization on the western model, is no more appealing. For many, it looks like a new form of cultural imperialism, based on the belief that what is in fashion in the west is superior to what is on offer elsewhere. In earlier days this form of imperialism was given a religious basis, but now that in turn has been almost completely lost. Nor is there any obvious connection between distinctive aspects of the American or European economic models and superiority in thought. Rather, if philosophy is not radically culturally bound, one would in general expect to be able to learn from the serious and considered views of others, even though their starting points appear different to one's own. Indeed, Aristotle built a major part of his own philosophical method on precisely this belief. The best method, in his view, for arriving at the truth in certain areas consisted first in looking for those areas where one's predecessors and contemporaries agreed and then, where they disagreed, in trying to respect the most plausible and attractive aspects of their views.

This said, our issue remains: can we realistically envisage a more meaningful and respectful dialogue between different philosophical traditions, a discourse in which the partners would be the leading historical and contemporary figures of these differing approaches? Or do the two alternatives, globalization (on the western model) and relativism, really exhaust the field?

There are several reasons to doubt

whether these two, somewhat unpalatable, options are the only ones available to us in the new millennium. First, and perhaps most important, these options seem compelling only if one views the two alternative traditions from a great height, at a considerable distance and in very general terms. For, in reality, there are very many distinct schools within both western and eastern thought. Just as there are major differences between analytical and phenomenological traditions in the west, so too there are similar differences between, for example, Mahayana Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. Within the Mahayana tradition itself, there were from the beginning two distinct schools, one associated with Nagarjuna, the other with Asanga and Vasubandhu. These were further divided into sub-schools, with different emphases and different leaders, and changed and developed as they gained influence in Tibet, China and Japan. While all these schools can be loosely grouped as elements within the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, they differ from one another in many important respects. There is, in reality, no one thing which can be named as Mahayana Buddhism, still less eastern or western philosophy as a whole.

Both traditions are internally diverse. While there are mystical and intuitive elements in Indian thought, this is also true of much influential western philosophy also. Plato, for example, saw vision of the Forms as the highest aspiration of the philosopher, and his views have found an echo in much neo-Platonist and Christian philosophy. Further, as Bimal Matilal has argued, Indian thought, even in its most metaphysical aspects, was rigorously analytical and logical in its argumentation. Thus, in his study of Nagarjuna's work, he showed in detail the logical and discursive basis of his thought.¹ Indeed, throughout his writings, Matilal succeeded in showing that Indian logical theories were no less logical, hardheaded and analytical that

their counterparts in the west. Matilal was the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics in Oxford, and dedicated his professional career to showing the value of these aspects of the varying schools of eastern thought which he studied.² The image of eastern thought, which led Hegel to regard it as pre-conceptual, is based on a deep, and widespread, ignorance of what it involves.

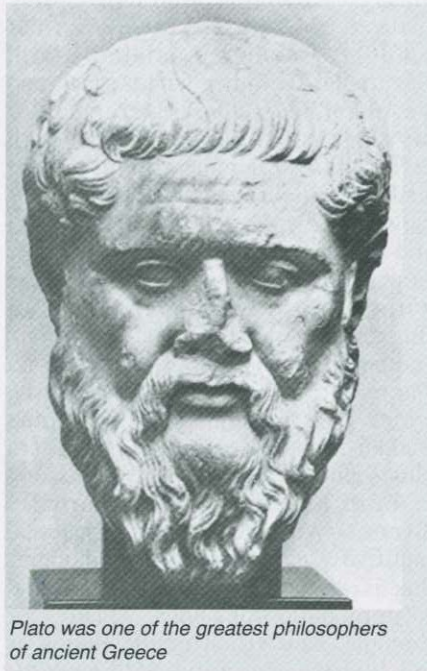
Diversity is also a major element in the western tradition. It cannot be represented as through and through abstract, scientific and intellectualist. In the last century, one of the most powerful critiques of precisely this kind of philosophy was launched by Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most important western philosophers of the past one hundred years. He argued that our understanding of the most basic forms of language was grounded not in a grasp of abstract entities, or meanings conceived as distinct entities, but in our everyday practices of teaching and learning ordinary skills and techniques. He rejected much traditional, Platonist, philosophy because it required us to have and exercise extraordinary intellectual powers to grasp concepts and ideas.³ His model of the master of language was modelled on the type of understanding of the ordinary craftsman who knows how to carve or stain wood but lacks a theoretical account of what he should do. In his case, the starting point lies in his ability to do certain things when the wood is before him. Indeed, much recent philosophy in both analytical and phenomenological traditions has been aimed at de-mystifying what is involved in a grasp of concepts, to free that from the Platonist account, favoured in different ways by the founding fathers of these schools, Frege, Russell and Husserl. In their very different ways, Quine, the American logician, and Heidegger, the German phenomenologist, represent precisely this movement in contemporary western thought.

Nor is it true that contemporary western philosophy is throughout in

the grip of the scientific paradigm. In recent years, a major debate has been renewed over the objectivity of ethical and moral judgements. For those with a scientific background, such judgements must be subjective because they cannot be established as true by scientific means. They are not verifiable within an acceptable scientific methodology. But, of late, many have challenged the crucial subjectivist assumption: that what is real is what is discoverable by science. Nor has this debate confined to moral philosophy. Our experience of ourselves, of what it is to be the persons we are, is notoriously difficult to capture in objective scientific terms. On this basis, Thomas Nagel and others have concluded that the scientific picture of the mind, as that is presented in cognitive science, is incapable of capturing what is distinctive of our experience as persons.⁴ The scientific paradigm of the mind, and the human person, is subject in the west to more sustained intellectual challenge from philosophers than from psychologists or from religious thinkers. The scientific world view, reductionist in aspiration, with its commitment to explanations in terms of either fundamental physics or Darwinian biology, is in no way an unchallenged orthodoxy among contemporary analytical or phenomenological schools. While some operate within the confines of the model set by science, a sizeable and influential group, perhaps the majority, would reject that model as incomplete and misleading. Many of the criticisms made of aspects of western analytical thought by Buddhist thinkers have also been expressed within that tradition itself.

While eastern and western thought can appear radically, indeed incommensurably, different when compared as distinct homogeneous wholes, this appearance is not sustained when they are examined in greater detail. Indeed, the traditional images and self-images which I began (in section 2) are substantially and damagingly misleading. When one compares the

logical and analytical parts of Indian thought with that of the west, there is little or no reason to believe that the former is a contribution to a wholly different discipline with its own fundamentally distinct rules and goals or, for that matter, a less sophisticated and more simplistic version of the same thing. Thus, for example, as Matilal and his students have shown, there are elements in the Nyaya's analysis of names (such as 'goatstag') which lack a reference, which anticipate and rival Bertrand Russell's famous account of similar topics at the beginning of the twentieth century.



Plato was one of the greatest philosophers of ancient Greece

4. There is a second reason, apart from lack of detailed knowledge of each others' actual positions, which serves to explain the absence of much worthwhile dialogue between Indian, Chinese and Japanese philosophy on the one hand and eastern and contemporary western philosophy on the other. This is, at least on the part of much analytical philosophy, a neglect of the serious study of the history of the subject within their own tradition. Quine, the influential

American logician, is said to have held that the history of philosophy began with his own teacher, Carnap. In the heyday of analytical philosophy, some said: 'Rubbish is rubbish, and the history of rubbish is philosophical scholarship.' Indeed, their attitude towards the history of western philosophy parallels the attitude towards Indian or Japanese sketched above. For some, earlier philosophers were engaged in an unsuccessful attempt to do what can now be done in a better and more sophisticated way. For others, earlier thinkers were engaged in a wholly different project, which cannot be properly compared with that of the contemporary philosopher. The dilemma was essentially the same: either we regard earlier thinkers as engaged in an inferior version of what we are doing now or else we see them as engaged in an incommensurably different type of activity, fitted for their time and place but not for ours. The motive for this attitude is not, in this case, a form of cultural imperialism, which sees what is here as better than what is elsewhere. It is rather a type of historical hegemonism, which depicts what is now as better than what was present at other times. Both take what is here and now as the test against which all else has to be measured.

These two attitudes spring, in part, from a common source, a shared account of what it is to understand someone else's viewpoint. We must begin, according to this account, with what we understand and seek to translate all else into our own discourse. If we fail to find an adequate translation, the other's viewpoint will be wholly mysterious to us. The best that can be said is that it represents an incommensurable language game, forever cut off from our own interests. Alternatively, we find a translation into our own concepts and concerns. But if we take the latter as basic, the other views will seem to be either the same as or inferior to our own. For, if they have to be expressed in our own terms,

they cannot be better than the ideas we already have. However, if they are the same as ours, there is little point in finding this out. For this will merely confirm what we already know. Worse still, if they are inferior, they can be dismissed as failed attempts to achieve what we have now secured. But, whichever way it turns out, there is no hope of gaining genuine philosophical enlightenment from a study of the viewpoint taken at other times or other places.

This way of thinking unduly restricts the possibility of worthwhile dialogue. For the latter frequently consists in the attempt to widen and increase one's own conceptual resources so as to capture what the other is attempting to say. In the history of philosophy, one frequently becomes aware of views and conceptualisations quite distinct from one's own, which shed light on the way one is thinking of particular problems. From this new perspective, one can proceed to rethink, and on occasion modify or alter, the concepts one has used to set up the problem one is considering. For the way one has set up the problem may have, on occasion, been precisely what led to the difficulty. Thus, for example, much contemporary analytical philosophy has proceeded on the assumption, inherited from David Hume, that the mental states which explain action are desire and belief. If so, either moral attitudes are expressions of our desires (as in forms of subjectivism) or else they represent moral beliefs about the world (as most objectivists accept). But this debate begins with, and is sustained by the assumption, that desire and belief are independent and well-defined states, which together exhaust the possible sources of action. But it is precisely this basic assumption which is challenged when one carefully studies the writings of Aristotle on these issues. In his account, certain types of desire and of belief are not independent states at all, but rather represent two ways of thinking about the same states, ones which are neither purely beliefs nor yet simply

desires. By historical reflection of this type, one can increase one's philosophical understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. One is not at all restricted to taking one's immediate starting point for granted as unassailable. Indeed, neglect of other viewpoints leads, in this case, to an impoverishment of one's conception of the issues themselves.

If one can deepen one's understanding of philosophical issues by historical study within one tradition, one can also do so by engaging with thinkers in other traditions. Here, too, it is important to see their views in some historical and larger theoretical perspective. If one's Zen-inspired interlocutor begins the discussion by calling into question some basic logical law, it is helpful to see his move as the result of a long and traditional train of philosophical thought, which takes as its starting point sceptical doubts about the nature of meaning itself. Once viewed in this light, what had initially seemed hopelessly puzzling and paradoxical becomes recognisable as the reflection of concerns shared also in analytical circles. Then, one can begin to reflect together on the motivations for a scepticism of this kind, their attraction and assumptions, and engage in a deep and worthwhile philosophical discussion, one from which both parties may hope to learn. So understood, his remark will appear not as an attempt to induce sudden illumination simply by casting doubt on reason at its strongest point. Rather, it will be seen as a profound move in a shared philosophical enterprise.

5. The question still remains: can there be a worthwhile dialogue between thinkers from Indian, Chinese, Japanese and western traditions? So far, we have seen that the arguments commonly advanced against the possibility of such a dialogue are weak and inconclusive. But we have not shown that such a dialogue can be conducted. The only real test for that will come when

philosophers from these divergent traditions become sufficiently well acquainted with each other's work and thinking for detailed discussions and comparisons to be attempted. But we are still far off from that goal. There are, as was mentioned above, very few philosophers who are at home in more than one of the great traditions of philosophy. Nor do we as yet have the type of academic exchange between people, particularly young people, working in these traditions which would make for sustained and informed dialogue. There remains, as we begin the new millennium, almost as great a divide between practitioners of these varying approaches as there was at the beginning of the nineteenth or eighteenth century. It seems a worthwhile task to attempt now to rectify this situation.

One example may serve to illustrate the type of project envisaged. On a traditional understanding of some of the most difficult issues in western metaphysics, one begins one's investigation with the assumption that there exists a world, independent of us with its own intrinsic order and interdependencies, such as may be grasped by any competent or rational observer, no matter what their particular point of view. The philosophical task is to show how we can come to have knowledge of such a world, when our senses are fallible and our reasoning incomplete and partial. This task proves most difficult. The sceptic gives us good reason to doubt that we can come to have knowledge of this type. One immediate response to this situation is simply to trust our preferred methodologies, confident that they will lead us to the truth. Another, is to lapse into scepticism, a third to follow a non-conceptual, or even a mystical route, to gain knowledge of reality.

This is the type of response which attracts traditional realists. But there is another opposed strategy: to regard reality as our own construct, a projection we make on the basis of our subjective experience. If we follow this idealist line, we will

understand talk of objects, not as of something existing independently of us, but as our own creations. The idealist succeeds in showing how knowledge is possible, but only of mind-dependent objects and properties. The realist, by contrast, holds on to mind-independent objects, but only at the cost of calling into question their knowability.

The debate, thus set up, may seem insoluble. Is there another possibility, one which in some way undercuts this debate? Perhaps, objects may be mind independent in some ways but not available to all knowers, no matter what their capacities or situation. Perhaps, if one focuses solely on the type of knowledge which characterises the ordinary craftsman, one will see that the radical dichotomy between mind and world is itself an illusion. Perhaps we cannot see objects as other than what he can operate on in certain ways, or characterise how he acts save in terms which invoke objects of this sort.

I have merely sketched the possibility of a position intermediate between that of the traditional realist and the idealist. What is of interest for present purposes is the fact that philosophers working in western, Indian and Japanese traditions have converged on this possibility. In the last century, Ludwig Wittgenstein began to investigate this type of approach in his later years, and his lead has been followed by others more recently. Aristotle and Plotinus may have initiated this way of thinking in the west,⁵ but others have seen aspects of it at work in the writings of Nagarjuna, at the beginnings of Mahayana Buddhism, and in the emphasis, characteristic of Zen Buddhism, on understanding being given in practice itself.⁶ Much more needs to be done to mark out and make determinate the intermediate position now under discussion. In this task, those working in Indian, analytical and Japanese traditions may all have much to contribute, and much to learn from each other. For none has as yet succeeded in the task at hand.



Mencius (c.372 - c.289 BC) was a renowned Chinese philosopher

6. In conclusion, we must ask a further fundamental question: does the existence of the intellectual gap we have noted between east and west really matter? Surely, the future lies not with philosophical but with commercial and scientific exchange? In the years ahead, will not a new universal popular culture be forged based on shared music, films, sport and fashion, one facilitated by easy access to the information super highway, not one grounded in discussion of philosophical and religious topics among intellectuals? Is collaborative and constructive dialogue on philosophical issues of the type we have just mentioned important?

For philosophers, of course, understanding is one of the highest goods, and for that reason for them intellectual exchange is important. But there are further and more general goods to be gained. It is crucial that we recognise the contribution that other countries and civilisations have made in these areas. For in this way, we can see each other not merely as economic and political agents, the mainstays of evolving or distinct power blocks, but also as representatives of interesting and inter-

connected ways of thinking, each with something to contribute to a shared intellectual and spiritual project. When we view each other in this way, we may grasp more securely, in recognising what we have to learn from each other, the shared humanity we glimpsed at the dawn of the new millennium.

1. B.K. Matilal, *The Logical Illumination of Indian Mysticism*, O.U.P. 1978.

2. See, for example, B.K. Matilal, *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in the Indian Philosophical Analysis*, The Hague, 1971.

3. For an exceptionally clear elucidation of Wittgenstein's thought, see David Pears, *The False Prison*, OUP, 1987.

4. See, for example, Thomas Nagel's famous essay 'What Is It Like To Be A Bat' in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge, 1979.

5. For further discussion of this line of thinking, see my *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence*, OUP, 2000.

6. See, for example, David Burton, *Emptiness Appraised, A Critical Study of Nagarjuna's Philosophy*, Richmond, 1999, and Mark Sideritis, 'Matilal on Nagarjuna', in *Relativism, Suffering and Beyond, Essays in Memory of Bimal Matilal*, P. Billmoria and J.N. Mohanty (eds), Delhi, 1997. **DTI**

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