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Wittgenstein and Buddhism, by Chris Gudmunsen. London: Macmillan Press, 1977. pp. viii + 128. Price: £ 8.95 (U.K.).

Wittgenstein approached philosophy with a remarkable freshness of insight; some of his seminal reflections have, as a consequence, served to open new vistas to contemporary inquiry into such important philosophical issues as the foundations of logic and the role of language in conceptual thought. His views, significantly, have a definite relevance to other fields of investigation as well. Wittgenstein's characteristically terse, suggestive and often arresting remarks on psychology, ethics, aesthetics and religion, for example, are topical, illuminating, and on occasion unusually instructive; and they have in turn attracted a good deal of recent attention. (Cf. C. Barrett, ed., *Wittgenstein's Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Oxford, 1966. The religious aspect of Wittgenstein's thought has been carefully examined in W.D. Hudson, *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief*, New York, 1975.)

The relation of this acute and very influential Western thinker's ideas to Buddhism—perhaps the most philosophical system of Oriental religious thought—has been the subject of intermittent discussion for some time among a select group of scholars engaged in the interpretative study of Eastern philosophical standpoints. Works that deserve especial mention in this connection include those of F.J. Streng (*Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*, 1967), W.A. Shibles ("Wittgenstein and Zen" in *Wittgenstein, Language and Philosophy*, 1969) and K.N. Jayatilleke (*Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, 1963). These efforts have to all intents and purposes remained at the periphery of Wittgensteinian studies: none of the more prominent exponents of Wittgenstein's thought have ventured to comment upon them, or indicated an interest in them. Still, the importance of such efforts cannot be gainsaid, simply because there undoubtedly are some very striking resemblances between the approaches of Wittgenstein and Buddhism; and, surprisingly, this is so amidst many obviously deep seated differences between them—differences of time and place of origin of the respective philosophies, as well as the cultural contexts that generated them. The recognition of such differences perhaps accounts for the reluctance felt by Wittgenstein scholars to compare these two systems of thought.

Nevertheless, the points on which the reflections of an outstanding contemporary Western secular thinker who, evidently, was in search of intellectual truth, tend to coincide with the approaches of an ancient system of religious philosophy which, in contrast, elevated spiritual emancipation above everything else, are indeed worthy of attention, and deserve scholarly scrutiny. And such scrutiny—significantly enough, of a notably sustained kind, and on a scale which has not been hitherto

attempted—is the object of Chris Gudmunsen's *Wittgenstein and Buddhism.*

Wittgenstein's philosophical views as well as the interpretation that was given to some of the concepts and principles associated with Buddhism tended—of course in very different ways, and under the influence of very different types of factors—to change or evolve. There is thus an 'early' and a 'later' Wittgenstein corresponding to the strikingly dissimilar ideas elaborated in his two epochal works, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and the posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). It is possible similarly to make a distinction between the 'early' Buddhism of the Pāli texts on the one hand, and the 'later' Buddhism of the Māhyānist thinkers on the other. Gudmunsen seeks for the most part to draw attention to parallelisms that exist between the approaches of 'later' Wittgenstein and 'later' (Mahāyāna) Buddhism. His central point is that "much of what the later Wittgenstein had to say was anticipated about 1,800 years ago in India." (p. 113)

This is a statement that might understandably astonish many: Wittgenstein, after all, has been widely considered to be one of the prime founts of philosophical modernity and innovation in our age—an 'original' thinker who has had no precursors in any serious sense. However, the statement in question is amply—and on occasion impressively and illuminatingly—substantiated in the course of Gudmunsen's work. The author points to a number of topics on which there is a coincidence of view between the late Wittgenstein and Mahāyāna thinkers.

Gudmunsen's discussion of these topics is preceded by an account of a viewpoint he considers antithetical to the later Wittgenstein and Mahāyāna Buddhism. This is identified as that of 'Russell and the Abhidharmists,' and is elaborated in Part I of the work, which covers its first two chapters. Here the author highlights early Buddhist Abhidhamma thought in the philosophical idiom of Bertrand Russell. Gudmunsen clearly underrates and disvalues the philosophical viability of this viewpoint: its characteristic features are examined mainly in order to contrast them polemically with those of the later Wittgenstein and the Mahāyānists which are held to be more cogent and persuasive. This is a point that Gudmunsen emphasizes time and again, even in the course of his main discussion, in Part II of the book. Like the Mahāyānists of old, he considers the approaches associated with the early Buddhist schools to be defective or otherwise vitiated.

The major portion of the work is concerned with a systematic comparison of the later Wittgenstein and Mahāyāna Buddhism. Part II, 'Wittgenstein and the Mahāyāna' is wholly devoted to this task; individual topics for comparison are taken up systematically in chapters 3 to 7. Gudmunsen identifies resemblances on such issues as the process of knowing, the import of language and the function of language in

thinking, as well as the mind itself and its acts. He argues that many of Wittgenstein's widely-acclaimed contributions to philosophical analysis were, even in matters of detail, often foreshadowed in the Mahāyāna texts: a striking case in point is his linkage of Wittgenstein's celebrated reflections on the idea of 'language-games' in the *Philosophical Investigations* with a noted Mādhyamika scriptural source. (Cf. pp. 48-49) Gudmunsen refers to most major Mahāyānist thinkers; yet Nāgārjuna, understandably, comes to the fore often: not only is his *śūnyatā* doctrine compared to Wittgenstein's philosophy in several contexts, but it is also argued that he actually anticipated some of the later Wittgenstein's luminous and profound observations on the complex relationships that exist between language and thought on the one hand, and thought and reality on the other. The author places his greatest emphasis throughout on the affinities between the Mādhyamika and Wittgenstein. Some attention, nevertheless, is also given to the Yogācāras.

It is important to point out that though the resemblances between Wittgenstein and Mahāyāna Buddhism form the primary focus of this book, the differences that separate them are not disregarded, but are, on the contrary, at times duly observed. Also, the resemblances themselves are not traced to any influence Buddhism may have exerted on Wittgenstein; they are, in his view, 'best explained as being similar reactions to similar stimuli'—in sum, both Wittgenstein and the Mahāyānists seem only to have responded to and interpreted experiential reality in similar ways. (pp. 112-113)

Such, then, are the essential lines of argument in this short but complex attempt to juxtapose two recondite systems of philosophy. Though it has some shortcomings, it deserves to be recognized as a noteworthy contribution to both comparative philosophy and Buddhist (Mahāyāna) exegesis. Admirers of the Western analytic tradition in particular should find its discussions instructive; for they do serve to indicate that some of the philosophical techniques and procedures developed in the West in this century were enunciated and applied long before in India—though of course with different ends in view. (What has to be recognized here is that even in circumstances that required intellectual discussion or logical argument, the Buddhist stresses the primacy of the soteriological motive; the need, in other words, to keep the quest for liberation always in the foreground of our thinking.) At another level, Gudmunsen's study can be said to afford a helpful and timely reminder to one section of Buddhist scholarship—namely the exponents of early or Theravāda Buddhism—that Mahāyāna doctrines (which the latter are apt to regard as metaphysical or speculative in a somewhat pejorative sense), do in part actually exhibit the analytic features and *avant garde* approaches of present-day Western philosophy,

and that those doctrines can, therefore, be exponded in a manner that would appeal to the contemporary mind. This, evidently, is a point that has a relevance to exegetical as well as apologetic efforts which proceed from a Buddhist context.

This book is, by and large, laudable, but, as already hinted, it has a few shortcomings. First of all, the author has failed to provide any background information on either Buddhism or Wittgenstein—it can indeed be held against him that he plunges into a knotty inquiry beset with many difficulties without preparatory observations of any kind. This procedure, unfortunately, tends to diminish the book's usefulness for those who lack considerable prior knowledge of the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy and the interpretation of Buddhism in the different schools. Of course, Gudmunsen's discussion is for the most part technical, and it is no doubt mainly addressed to the 'specialist' rather than the layman; but the 'specialist, it is well to add, will perhaps have complaints of his own: it appears, for example, that the book offers no systematic information—or for that matter clues of a serious kind—on previous research into its field of inquiry; and yet the scholarly reader might find such information valuable. The author is not unaware of previous research of the sort just alluded to; in fact he extensively uses the writings of Western interpreters of Buddhism who have discussed Wittgenstein, often in lieu of a direct examination of the primary sources on both sides, but sometimes, (and this might not be a harsh judgement), as a substitute for independent thinking as well. The bibliography—and indeed Gudmunsen's book as a whole—shows little evidence of an acquaintance with the enormous expository and critical literature on Wittgenstein's philosophy. The Buddhist scholar can perhaps afford to overlook this, and might not view it as a desideratum; but interpreters of Wittgenstein who happen to read this book cannot be blamed if the feel otherwise.

These criticisms relate to the author's omissions; objections can also be raised against what he in fact says: it is possible, for example, to question the appositeness of some of the parallelisms that he draws. The points on which such questioning is admissible will perhaps increase when one delves into the philosophies as set forth in the original texts rather than the translations which the author actually used. Though Conze's largely negative approaches to comparative philosophy need not, as Gudmunsen himself recognizes, be taken as a guide, Conze was certainly not wrong when he cautioned that "the search for philosophical parallels is frought with many pitfalls." (E. Conze, "Buddhist Philosophy and Its European Parallels" in *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, London, 1967). Further, one can with justice take exception to the manner in which Gudmunsen views early Buddhism. The abrasive tones in which

he uses the term "Hīnayāna', and his largely negative assessment of that school might understandably offend those who appreciate and value the approaches of classical Buddhism. It is possible (and perhaps perferable) to see the development of Buddhist thought from wider perspectives, in a spirit of 'oecumenism.' Moreover, the tolerance this entails accords with the quintessential temper of Buddhism. Those who choose to adopt these perspectives and attitudes will no doubt find the author's persistent endeavour to pit Hīnayānism against Mahāyānism not only openly tendentious, but at times somewhat disagreeable, because it appears to have sectarian overtones.

Though the shortcomings noted above are worthy of attention, they do not seriously undermine the book's overall significance or value. Gudmunsen's discussion clearly represents a substantial contribution to an interesting, complex theme in comparative philosophy. He has not, of course, exhausted it; but future scholars who seek to deal more amply or in greater depth with the same theme will find much of what is written in *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* stimulating, provocative and, on the whole, instructive; and therefore, well-nigh impossible to ignore.

Vijitha Rajapakse

INFORMATION FOR ADVERTISEMENT AND BOOK REVIEWS IN THE 1981 *JIABS* nos. 1 AND 2

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1. Since the first issue of the 1981 *JIABS* will go to the printers soon, we will be able to include your advertisement in this issue only if it is received by us by the middle of May, 1981. Books received by January 31, 1981, may be reviewed in that issue.

2. The second number of the 1981 *JIABS* is expected to go to the printers in Mid-July. Books received by May 30th, 1981, may be reviewed in that issue. The deadline for advertisements to be received by us for the *JIABS* no. 2 is, however, July 15th, 1981.

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   Half page— $50.00

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