Where We Do Stand

The Convocation Address to Begin the 187th Year

by Janet Gyatso

Where do I stand as a scholar of Buddhism? Where do I stand as an American woman scholar of Buddhism—born in Philadelphia; mother born in Russia; father’s family from Lithuania; raised Jewish; deep affinity with Tibet; years of friendships with and indebtednesses to Tibetan Buddhist masters; and all with a Philadelphia cocksure, sarcastic skepticism about most everything? What is my stance when I am trying to be closest to the artistic impulses that I originally wanted to follow vocationally, when I am trying to write passionately, which is how I feel I must write even while constrained by a highly conservative and critical field of professional “Buddhology”—not to mention a hesitancy to impose personal feelings upon a foreign culture to which I do not belong? Where do I stand, and what is my stance, when I try to think in a way in which my field has not yet conceived of thinking, a way that I myself do not yet know, but toward which I feel myself surely propelled—that is, a way of inspiration? What is my stance when I teach students?

Questions like this have long obsessed me in my life, but they are questions that I have taught myself—perhaps out of necessity—to like, to think are good questions. As I enter into the space of thinking now not only about the stance of an individual, but also about an institution and, most of all, about the stance of a scholarly vocation, I find myself more determined than ever to make good on the radical Buddhist injunction to take my stand in emptiness. By this, Buddhists have always meant not pure nothingness but rather a self-conscious recognition of infinite changeability, of openness, and a place where the daunting feat of mustering confidence within what is provisional can be attempted. For some reason I have long been compelled by the idea that a solid stance on a ground of flux is the best place from which to contemplate fundamental matters.

And so it is Buddhist sentiment that has led me to begin my meditation today with the place where we are standing. And now I’m talking, literally, about the physical ground itself. I will start optimistically with the multiple possibilities the ground has led me to begin my meditation today with the place where we are standing. And now I’m talking, literally, about the physical ground itself. I will start optimistically with the multiple possibilities the ground has led me to begin my meditation today with the place where we are standing. And now I’m talking, literally, about the physical ground itself. I will start optimistically with the multiple possibilities

Janet Gyatso, Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies, with Dean William Graham.

...ground itself, there are a plethora of ways that this situation could be construed. There is a case for arguing that this is a good development, that our move out of a specifically Christian space represents our willingness to accommodate and validate the growing diversity of our student body, the growing diversity of our faculty, and the growing diversity of our curriculum itself. (Another illustration of this is the fact that in a few weeks from now, there will be another temporary structure on this ground, albeit for a very different purpose, the celebration of Sukkot.) But there is also a case to make that this development is something to mourn, a break with a venerable tradition at the Divinity School; that it might signal an intolerance for other people’s religious expression, or at least a discomfort anywhere except a neutral, faceless place, and that this neutrality and facelessness threatens to cast us out into a desert devoid of meaning altogether. In fact it appears that not only has our convocation been moved out of the church; there has also been a decision to make the service altogether nonreligious, whatever that means. Whatever it does mean, the decision goes significantly further than merely avoiding sectarian affiliation. So we need to think, too, about the distinction between neutralizing sectarian affiliation and eliminating “religion” altogether.

Whatever we might think about it, this is the situation in which we find ourselves now. So if we decide to imagine the salutary effects of reducing our grand convocation to a bare ritual on the lawn, how far can we go? In particular, what if we decide to take this very bareness as an icon of openness and newness? At the minimum, we could say that this is a chance to build into our working habits a recourse to freshness, a habit of frequent refreshment from square one—the bare ground.

It can hardly be entirely coincidental that the year of relocating its opening ritual to this bare ground is also a year in which Harvard Divinity School is in the process of re-conceiving itself, not only through its curriculum but also through the vision of its entire mission. Many of you here may not be aware that the Divinity School Convocation has been extremely inclusive in past years, that the very clear self-understanding of Memorial Church is that it invites the participation of all, and that the Christian symbols in the church do not in fact function to exclude. (The very fact that I, a Jewish professor of Buddhist studies, was asked to give the convocation address, and was asked a long time before the issue of venue emerged, is testimony to that inclusiveness.) But I really want to talk about the situation where we have landed rather than about what led up to it.

Actually, not unlike the malleable
that what I will say now is only my partic- 
ular take on where we are. In any event, 
we are still very much in the process of 
thinking through—and debating—the 
many interesting issues involved.

But it is not only to invite especially 
the Harvard Divinity School into this 
process of collective self-reflection that 
I have decided to air some of these matters 
here today. It is also to encourage us all to 
think together about the study of reli-
gion at any time and place, and about the 
kind of orientation that will best guide us 
to the future. In this, I want also to 
stress that the basic questions we are de-
bat ing now about the nature of the aca-
demic study of religion at the Divinity 
School—and our stance toward what we 
study—are richly complex issues that do 
not lend themselves to final resolution, 
ever! And that is a good thing. It should 
be part of the excitement of every open-
ing of the school year, and the welcom-
ing of a new class, to remind ourselves of 
the fundamentally nondecideable issues 
that are at the heart of what we are, in 
fact, to build it into our way of writing, 
thinking, and reading—and teaching. In 
particular, as a teacher I aspire to model 
for students my own accommodation of 
debatability, my own continual rethink-
ing and fostering of a way to think to-
gather—about the issues as they present 

themselves to us, as being at the very heart of where we stand 
when we study religion.

I think such principles as continual 
thinking and learning how to think to-
gether, mutually, are especially germane 
for Harvard Divinity School at this 
moment because we are engaged in a debate 
about more than one religion. A key aspect of 
what we have been pondering together 
lately directly parallels the matter of our 
change in Convocation venue. One cen-
tral issue before us at the moment is, in-
deed, the place of religious traditions 
other than Christianity in the HDS cur-
riculum. For the last 20 years our basic 
curriculum has been divided into three 
sections, or areas: Area I focuses on the 
nature and interpretation of scripture, the 
Bible; Area II has courses in theologi-
anal, historical, and systematic theology 
of Christianity; and Area III studies the 
religions of the world other than Chris-
tianity. Now to have Area III, which at 
present covers Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, 
Buddhism, and Meso-American religions, 
in the curriculum at all has been a bold move on the School’s part, 
but of late there has been an increasing 
sense that we need to look again at what 
constitutes a curricular area actually 
signifies. Think about it: What are we 
saying when we have one area that focus-
es on the study of a single religion other than 
Christianity. Y es, there is attention to its 
background in the Hebrew Scriptures 
along with its historical and cultural con-
text, but the structure as a whole unques-
tionably serves to position Christianity 
as the paradigmatic religion at the Di-
vinity School and all the other religions 
of the world as the Others. And this ob-
observation has brought us to the rather 
radiical realization that we need to get rid 
of Area III. By which I mean not to elim-
inate the religions studied there, but 
to redefine the structure of the course 
groupings of I and II. For Hin-
duism, Islam, and Buddhism too have 
scriptures, and philological intricacies, 
and hermeneutical problems, and reli-
gious institutions, and ethics. We can 
even speak of something like Buddhist 
thought if we take the time to consider 
what that might mean in a specifically 
Buddhist context.

We are beginning to take seriously 
the notion that students concentrating 
on ethics, for example, might be just as 
well served by a course in Daoism or 
Taoism, or a course in Confucianism, which 
would studies how messages addressing crises 
drew on the Bible in late antiquity, as she 
would from a course on Chinese Bud-
hist messianic cults and how they drew 
upon the Lotus Sutra to create a com-
mix of religious thought. The at least, 
we would be able to say, no more 
apples and oranges; our entire curricular 
structure would be founded in approach 
or type of issue.

O nce the main reasons that we 
can even contemplate such a sea 
change is that the School is final-
ly beginning to have enough faculty 
who actually teach religions other than 
Christianity. Appointments have recent-
ly been made in Meso-American reli-
gions, in Islamic studies, and in Hindu 

terms of personal conviction, there is 
now a wide range of religious orienta-
tions among the faculty members them-
selves. To be sure there are still many 
holes in the HDS curriculum, as well as 
gaps in our faculty diversity—and most 
outstanding, although not actually rele-
vant to what I am arguing here, but I 
want to say it anyway since it is so impor-
tant, is our really pressing need for 
African-American Religious studies at 
the Divinity School, not to mention 
African-American faculty members as 
such. But as I said, that’s a different 
matter; what I want to explore now right 
are the implications of the larger shift we 
are contemplating.

One way of getting at that those im-
plectic issues is to ask whether it is 
true that for me was at first a confusing 
disconnect, and then an amusing irony. 
During my first year here I took it upon 
myself to ask that we discuss the status of 
Christianity at the Divinity School at 
our annual faculty retreat. When the re-
quested and I took it literally, as my 
taken back as I listened to the discus-
ion. I realized that many in the room
Note in this that I have not posited any universal, tradition-free, generic, or perennial religion that is at the bottom of all its varieties. What I am experimenting with, however, is the idea of a passionate religiosity—perhaps I should say love of religion—that animates the mission of our School while not being associated with any religious tradition or bound necessarily to any one tradition.

The question of how to study religion religiously while also remaining aware of its relativity and historical embeddedness is one of the places where I would like to leave this incoming class standing, pondering—or not with the answer but simply poised to ask the question. And there are so many ways to abide in that space; I can imagine a spectrum, from the historian who marvels with delight at the seemingly infinite variety of weirdness that religions humans have come up with, to the Jewish theologian who finds new depths of beauty in her own convictions by observing a Muslim man kneeling in prayer to God.

For one end of that spectrum—the one that starts somewhere near the bottom of what I hope that our Divinity School will give us is a certain entitlement to be passionate about what we study and write. And I don’t mean to say that passion is the privileged domain of religion, but simply that the study of religion has special rewards to contribute. I want to go further than that, however. What is it about religion that inspires passion? Perhaps we could talk about the homologies drawn in many religious traditions between romantic, or even sexual, love, and love and devotion for God. Or perhaps we might just like it to be that the Divinity School is a place that offers us a valuable, if limited, encouragement—in fact abides in comfort—with passion in one’s academic work.

Or perhaps—and this is to move from being the critical historian to being the philosopher of religion—one might think that the whole of Christianity is about the impossible mix of all that is at the bottom of morals, including the varieties that give rise to religion. I have in mind, as an example, Martin Heidegger’s meditation on the nature of thinking and his brilliant and provocative realization that to think is synonymous with having gratitude—that, inspired by the etymological connections between “think” and “thank,” he was led to ponder what it is that calls upon us to think, how what is thought-provoking is a gift, how both thinking and thanking are rooted in human activity and one of the most basic sentiments of religiosity.

I would like to use such a discovery of pious gratitude at the heart of all thinking as a model to explain to myself (surely a bundle of contradictions religiously if there ever was one) why, while I do not believe in a deity who is looking down upon me, or can make anything happen for or against me, why I still pray, fiercely, when I am hoping for something, maybe most in those moments when I am wanting it beyond my power to effect and, in fact, is most likely ever to be fulfilled. An example would be when, in a Buddhist key, I pray that all people around the world be removed from their terrible suffering in war and plague, or when I pray that all the animals of our world be saved from the torture that could be relieved of their agony. I wonder about this stance of prayer, which seems to have nothing to do with any ontological propositions. I think of the Divinity School as a place where I can wonder, professionally, about that stance. And finally, I might imagine what the theologian-to-be, or even the minister-to-be, will take from this academic environment that will relate to her vocation. Does the deployment of critical historical methods temper homiletic fervor, or does that norm not apply and content alone relay? Does the identification of layers of the Bible as the products of particular historical circumstances—or even more challengingly, as adaptations of older, “pagan” traditions—undermine faith, or do neither nearly nor content account for relay? Does the recognition of similar styles of devotion, or claims of legitimacy in disparate religions, undermine the originality of revelation, or does the comparison make for a precise context in which to recognize the similarity while, even more important yet, providing a set of bridges, or common spaces, in which to share religiosity with like-minded people from other parts of the world? Here I am indebted to Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s insistence that we must be friends with the people whose religions we study, we must come to know, we must learn to distinguish, and we must encourage a life that can become known only in that personal two-way relationship known as friendship, in which there is an implication that we have an ability to abide with other people’s religion—not just to study religious and religiously articulate ourselves in a common space so as to inhabit the questions of religion together?

When I first came to HDS two years ago I harbored some question about what a Buddhist would be doing in a divinity school, and even why the endowment of my chair had been accepted in the first place. Although I was aware of the very liberal and pluralistic orientation of HDS, it was still not clear to me how what I would be teaching would actually fit into a curriculum that, as just discussed, is thoroughly thorotoughly religiously oriented. The answer of course was Area III, but that only moved the question from “why Buddhist studies?” to “why a whole area of the curriculum devoted to non-Christian religions?” As I poked around for an answer, one of the main things I heard was that a significant number of the other religions of the world were thought to be particularly necessary for our ministerial training program. In this day and age, with our globalizing society, it is essential for a minister in any denomination and any neighborhood to have a good idea of the religious backgrounds and heritage of all people around—as so best to comfort the sick, give solace to the grieving, to avoid insult or insensitivity to anyone, and to present one’s message in ways that will be understandable to as many people as possible.

I am very happy to be in the position of educating Christian ministers in as much as they wish to learn about Buddhist ideas, customs, and literature. It is an honor to be in a position to explore these matters in a way that is truly, not just minimally, not just tangentially religious but central. The answer of course was Area III, but that only moved the question from “why Buddhist studies?” to “why a whole area of the curriculum devoted to non-Christian religions?”

Rather, he simply learned some things from the way of compassion that touched him, and that perhaps affected his understanding of himself and his ability to be empathetic with others, insights that would continue to inform his full career.

It is probably our growing interest in this sort of cross-fertilization, the profound effects of learning “from” many forms of religion beyond the one with which we identify, that is the main reason that the question of how to get rid of Area III. The idea is that when the study of non-Christian religions is integrated curricularly with the study of Christianity, students will still be able to concentrate on one or another specific religion, but there would be no separate curricular category for the “other” religions of the world. Rather, if this change comes to pass, we will be saying in our very curricular structure that what we study here most fundamentally is “religion”—or, if you like, from a more socio-historical perspective, “religions.”
The likely place that community could turn to, academic Buddhism, suffers under a strong sense of its limitations, of being restricted to studying Buddhism “objectively.” Indeed many of—us—and I can attest there was some trace of this in my own case—feel considerable apprehension, especially with respect to getting tenure, that being a committed Buddhist would actually undermine our standing in the field.

Now this should make little sense in a world in which virtually all of academia has already rejected the ideal of objectivity—the idea that we should eliminate subjectivity from academic work. That is now agreed to be impossible. Nonetheless in Buddhist studies the ideal of doing just that, eliminating all subjectivity in one’s work, still exerts a powerful force, such that in both the United States and Europe, people in Buddhist studies are trained to speak only about what the tradition “itself” says, a fact a text “itself” says—as if we could ever get at that free of our own framings, as if the tradition itself knew exactly what it was saying and was consistent all the time, as if the text itself was fully self-conscious in every word it recorded. I think that such expectations have left my field bankrupt of ideas, frightened to learn anything “from” the wealth of materials that we study, too intimidated to appropriate anything whatsoever for fear of sounding like a new-age entrepreneur, and too removed from the spirit and vitality of the traditions we study to venture anything original about intentions or mentalities or tensions whatsoever, save to jump at a chance to prove a Buddhist wrong, to expose myths, or simply and safely to edit a new text. And even that, I can tell you, is not safe.

I think you know what I am going to say: I am hoping that Buddhist studies, and indeed the study of all of the Area III traditions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme and indeed the study of all of the Area III traditions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme and indeed the study of all of the Area III traditions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme and indeed the study of all of the Area III traditions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme and indeed the study of all of the Area III traditions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme and indeed the study of all of the Area III traditions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme and indeed the study of all of the Area III traditions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediary place to stand, between extreme

Notes
2 Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why? p. 39 n. 18, In The History of Reli-
gions: Essays in Methodology, edited by Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959, pp. 31-38. He goes on to say in the next sentence, “This is peculiarly true of religious faith, but applies in some measure to all human discourse.”
3 It was Hallisey’s Buddhist Ethics class that Tim Stein was referring to. Hallisey has elaborated his distinction between “learning about” and “learning from” further in his essay “In Defense of Rather Fragile and Local Achievement: Some Reflections on the Work of Guru-
lugomori,” in Religion and Practical Reason, edited by David Tracy and Frank Reynolds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 121-162, regard-
ing the difference between treating something as an object for analysis, and adopting it as a tool of analysis (p. 136).

In the Beginning of Creation Was Consciousness
The Dulcinea Lecture for 2002-03
by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

My lecture title may sound somewhat strange, but I chose it on purpose. I believe that we are, at the present stage of history, on the curve of life—what the French call courbe de vie—of the paradigm that has dominated Western civilization since the Renaissance. And this transformation has at its heart the question of consciousness. This change began about 50 years ago, right on this campus, with Thomas Kuhn, a major American philosopher of science and an old friend, and a few others, including myself, who were grappling with this question of paradigm shifts. He and I did not exactly agree on what the shift was or what we meant by paradigm, but we both felt that a major change was afoot. Of course, things do not happen quickly, as he himself pointed out in his important writings. It takes some time. But I do believe that the most important questions that face present-day civilizations involve not only solutions within the present parameters within which people think, but also those parameters themselves—that is, the paradigm within which human beings carry on their intellectual and also practical activities.

So, I speak about “in the beginning was consciousness.” In fact, the original title I had thought up for my lecture was “In the Beginning Is Consciousness”—because “in the beginning” does not simply refer to a past time; it involves a principal reality here and now. Let me begin by quoting from several of the sacred scriptures of the world. In the Rig Veda, the oldest of all Hindu sacred scriptures, we read, “When alone is the dawn beam-
ing over all this, it is the one that similarly becomes all this.” The one is Sat, Chit, and Ananda—that is, the three states of being, bliss, and consciousness, Chit.

(Continued on next page)