

Book Reviews

Fire and Cognition in the R̥gveda. By Joanna Jurewicz. Warsaw: Dom Wydawniczy ELIPSA.* 2010. 485 pp. ISBN 978-83-7151-893-5.

This book would be of great interest to anyone working to understand not only what the Buddha meant by the things he said, but why he said them in the particular way he did. The book doesn't deal with Buddhism at all, yet as Prof. Jurewicz lays out her new understanding of what the R̥gvedic poets were doing with their verses – illuminating not just their meaning but their methods – what she finds presents compelling parallels to the Buddha's own methods and his message. Further study of her work and of other scholars working in the field of Vedic studies can only help increase our understanding of what the Buddha was saying. The period she is studying provided much of the cultural context for the times in which he came to his insights, developed his methods, and taught. The methods then used to convey information are likely to be closer to those he used than are methods that evolved much later.

When we in the West began our encounter with the Vedas, in the 18th and 19th centuries, one of the first impressions that seemed to stick was that they were filled with bad puns, outlandish linkages through unlikely pairings, and, in general, disorganized thinking. For example, this is what F. Max Müller had to say:

“...a literature for which pedantry and downright absurdity can hardly be matched anywhere.”¹

*Because the book is hard (impossible?) to find in the West, here are the publisher's contact details: ul. Inflancka 15/198, 00-189 Warszawa; tel/fax 22 635 03 01, 22 635 17 85; e-mail: elipsa@elipsa.pl; website: www.elipsa.pl.

¹As quoted by Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press (1989).

This Western chauvinism is being slowly dispelled as scholars discover that it may well be that these ancient authors were as clear as anyone in their thinking, and as skilled in the artistry applied to their presentation of new and hard-to-describe ideas about cosmology and cognition as any modern writer. It wasn't that the ancient poets lacked sophistication, but that we, as interpreters, have assumed that our way of explaining what we see is the best, perhaps even the only way to go about it. Consequently we have been unable to apply clear thinking and an open mind to those ancient hymns. In our ignorance, caught in our preconceptions, we could not see the depth in these works, nor fully appreciate their beauty.

Jurewicz's book goes a long way toward remedying this failure. Using the relatively new science of cognitive linguistics, she first untangles and then neatly reties various references, mostly to activities that were both familiar to the audience the poets were addressing, and of critical importance to them. Two of the main themes she picks up on are expansion (from the experiences of the Aryans moving east) and the appearance of the morning light.

As she describes her work in the book:

“The present book will therefore treat the RV as evidence as to how Indian philosophical thinking began. Though Rgvedic thought is immersed in dense figurative language and seems to lack the discipline of rational thought, I will show that such a discipline can be found and it is possible to reconstruct its main lines.”²

After a brief history of the works she covers, she begins with an introduction to cognitive linguistics, which I will summarize, far too briefly. It is the study of how we use our common experiences to describe something new or unfamiliar to our listeners, with the expectation that they will be able to leap to an intuitive understanding of what we are trying to convey. This idea is already familiar to us via similes and metaphors, but what is being described here is often much more subtle and complex.

In the book “The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending And The Mind's Hidden Complexities” (2003) early explorers of cognitive linguistics, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, provide an example of the way an “input space” is used to generate a fresh insight into a new skill. In this case the speaker is trying to describe to an apprentice waiter how to carry a tray one-handed through a crowded

²*Fire and Cognition*, p. 22.

restaurant. The skill involves adopting a special gliding step to manoeuvre between tables, and the “input space” that’s called on is how a skier moves downhill avoiding bumps and manoeuvring around curves. In order to acquire the skill the new employee will take from the input space just those aspects that would apply, leaving out, for example, how the skier’s two feet remain more or less parallel, rather than walking.

So, for example, in Jurewicz’s book, images of the restrictions of darkness are touched upon and overlaid with many other claustrophobic situations like being trapped in a rocky enclosure, as one might when migrating through the mountains in an attempt to take over new territory. Daylight is associated with freedom of movement and the ability to see clearly, even to know. One’s enemies are associated with enclosure, with darkness, and with ignorance.

All these images and concepts are here amply demonstrated, building up an intriguing map of the ways in which the Vedic poets consciously used this method of describing and layering common cultural events, and the ways they were perceived, into “input spaces” that were intended to bring the recipient to understanding obscure and unfamiliar concepts. Those concepts are not, in our time, easily spotted by those of us who were raised in a culture that simply doesn’t speak or teach in quite that way. And, as Jurewicz points out, our lack of familiarity with the cultural context also makes it difficult for us to understand the imagery.

“The basis for metonymic and metaphoric conceptualisation comes from experience and each linguistic community builds a consistent net of concepts that facilitate thinking about the world. The more the speaker’s experience is remote from the hearer’s, the more difficult is mutual understanding, and the experience of the Rgvedic poets is very remote from ours.”³

One of the things being described through references to the light of dawn is the process of cognition, of the perceived special ability of the poets and their audiences to see and therefore to understand what their enemies, caught in darkness, could not. We use these same images of “seeing the light” and having understanding “dawn on” us. Our use of these metaphors is so familiar we often don’t even think about the origins of the phrases. It may well be that the methods of the Vedic poets – though rather different from ours – were equally familiar to their listeners.

³ibid p. 43

By the conclusion of her book, she has built a convincing case for the poets' careful and elegant use of what we now call "cognitive linguistics" using their own ingenious (though to us obscure) style to describe metaphysical concepts through the language of everyday reality.

As she describes the ultimate meanings of their messages, it is possible to hear echoes of the Buddha's insights, or perhaps more aptly, the Buddha echoing their insights and their methods. It seems to me that he is playing off the rishis in about the same way they played off cultural knowledge. Stephanie Jamison describes this as the poets using cultural knowledge of gods and rituals and the way they are expected to be discussed to "play with and play against these expectations."⁴ This seems to me to be very much what the Buddha was doing.

One of the ideas the Buddha may have been playing off is the idea of darkness, as an equivalent of ignorance, against the idea of light as represented by him through Awakening.

"The symbols of darkness convey the idea of lack of freedom, while freedom appears with the symbol of light... In this way That One manifests itself as the Other which is totally opposed to itself – the Other who is not free. We may presume that its lack of freedom is caused by its lack of cognition."⁵

In other words, in the Vedic understanding, there is Self and Other, and Other is none too smart, in darkness, and is not free. To be free, Self must defeat Other (and its ignorance). This is, in a sense, what the Buddha is saying: that we must free our Buddha-nature from the dark, enclosing, limiting ignorance of the enemy of freedom we have ourselves created.

I suggest that, just as we have not understood the Vedic poets because they were conjuring ideas using methods that are not familiar to us, so we may have misunderstood some of what the Buddha was saying for the very same reasons. I am not suggesting that his methods were exactly the same as theirs, but it would be useful for us to consider the possibility that he refined and built on both their ideas and the sophisticated techniques they used.

Considering the use of language as something that evolves, it is easy to see that the Buddha's methods will have a much closer kinship to the indirect and poetic

⁴ibid p. 33. Jurewicz quoting Jamison in her book, *The Rig Veda Between Two Worlds / Le Rgveda entre deux mondes*. Quatre conférences au Collège de France en mai 2004 (Publications de l'Institut de Civilisation Indienne). Paris: de Boccard (2007).

⁵ibid p. 439.

style of the Vedic poets, than they will have to the rather bald and straightforward speech that we use more than two thousand years later.

What I see as possible is that he was aware of their methods and used them consciously, but as a kind of “spin”, almost a reverse of what they were doing. They used everyday, familiar experiences, and concepts drawn from them, to describe something too obscure to be talked about otherwise. By the time the Buddha lived, several centuries later, the ideas the poets had introduced had become commonplace. Now the discussion of how we come into being, how we think about things, and the cosmic order and gods’ effects on us had become what was normal and understood and talked about widely in society; this was the new common ground. The Buddha used what was once obscure but by then commonplace, to describe something hard to see and hard to describe: what we do that builds the sense that we have a lasting self, which we do through everyday experiences, when we feel, and perceive, and react. If this is the case, then there is a certain very beautiful symmetry to his methods. He took what was once obscure, that had been described by the mundane, and then had, by the time he taught, become quite familiar; and he used the by then familiar to describe his new idea, which is at first obscure but which, once we understand what he’s describing (the everyday experience of life), we will find to be quite mundane! From the mundane to the sublime, which became mundane, and was then used to describe the sublime which is really mundane.

“Thus That One reintegrates its unity of a free reality and, at the same time, freedom becomes an inherent feature of its manifested aspect.”⁶

Beyond what seems obvious to me – that the Buddha was playing with and playing on the methods and ideas of the Vedic poets – I would argue that the Buddha used rebirth as an “input space” in the way the poets used dawn light: not to talk about the apparent subject, but to get the listener to conjure up something else entirely. They might have said, for example, that it is dawn light – or the fire god leading them, as dawn light – that gives them the power to win battles. This might well be true. But battles aren’t always won; so is it necessarily true? No, and so light to win battles isn’t the always-truth that’s being discussed when those ancient poets talked of dawn winning battles: they were really talking about the light in our minds, which is an ultimate truth. And the Buddha was talking about the same

⁶ibid p. 439.

thing – about ignorance and the way we think – though both his reasoning and the point he was making were different from theirs.

Jurewicz discusses the definition of general domains as superordinate categories (like “animal” or “furniture”). The subordinate categories are the finest (like “retriever” or “rocker”). But the base levels (like “dog” or “chair”), which are in between are, according to cognitive linguistics, psychologically the most significant to us. She then says that the superordinate level, which I would say is the level the Buddha is addressing when he speaks about karma and rebirth, has:

“...an overall perceived shape which is mentally represented by a single image... Each general domain serves as the source domain for several target domains... The general domains refer to natural phenomena, objects and activities... in the case of conceptual blends, they often provide organizing frames for the whole conceptual network and give it consistency. If elaborated, they also facilitate understanding of an abstract concept in terms of a more concrete one and highlight various aspects of their target domains, or the concepts in focus, in the blends.”⁷

This is what I see Gotama doing with the natural processes of conception, consciousness, and birth into name-and-form – which are superordinate processes – as well as when he gives a particular set of names to the ordinary experiences we have of contact, feeling, and so on. Those particular names (e.g. *taṇhā* and *upādāna*) would recall fire rituals to the minds of his audience. He is using the very familiar (to his audience) concepts of the origins of self and the way rituals create and modify self, as well as the supposed outcome of those rituals, as a superordinate general domain. If it works as intended in the mind of the recipient, this will help them come to see the “target domain” of what it is we do that creates the certainty that we have a lasting self, as well as where this leads. I would further suggest that in all his descriptions of the way karma and rebirth work, he is doing the same thing: using ideas familiar to his audience as a general domain that models the concepts he is trying to get across. Over and above what the Vedic poets may have been doing with their methods, the Buddha adds another level of usefulness to the general domain of karma and rebirth, providing insight into the flow of actions – the processes – that cause us to create a sense of self from the conditions of our nature and the societies we live in. The lessons he teaches about

⁷ibid p. 38.

karma and rebirth would have been useful to his audience even if they never “got” the “target domain” of the deeper lessons he was trying to teach. A large part of my point is that, though we cannot understand the Vedic poets without great effort, it must have been easier for their audience, because they were accustomed to their teachers speaking in that way. They knew that something was being addressed other than the obvious, and that they were expected to make the leap from the “input space” to the “target space” – from the skier’s stance to how it applies to the waiter’s. Apparently, that style of speaking was common enough during the Vedic period to be understood by the contemporary listener, because if it were otherwise – if the Vedas were as incomprehensible and apparently foolish to the audience then as they have been, until recently, to us – it’s doubtful they would have been passed on. Even though these techniques are uncommon now, it is reasonable to consider that the Buddha made use of them. In both the case of the poets and of the Buddha, we tend to fail to understand the very different methods that were in use, and thereby miss some of what would have been much clearer to their original audiences.

Jurewicz’s book describes and explains many linkages of the everyday to the obscure, the profane to the sublime, and many of them seem likely to underpin the Buddha’s thinking, or at the very least to have been familiar concepts he was “playing with, on, or against”. Even though the book is dense with scholarly arguments and evidence, it is quite readable. Indeed, for anyone serious about understanding the Buddha’s words in the context of his times, it is a must-read.

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