



Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2): Clinging and Liberation

By Bhikkhu Anālayo

Introduction

Perhaps the best way to get started is by expressing my appreciation of Yahel Avigur and Brian Lesage for having taken the time to engage with my discussion of *Seeing that Frees* in Anālayo (2025). Exchanging ideas in this way is bound to open new perspectives for each of us and for our readers. This is of special relevance in the present case, as Yahel Avigur and Brian Lesage are respected Western Dharma teachers, and thus well represent the type of audience I am hoping to reach. Moreover, due to our shared commitment to Dharma practice, an exchange of ideas will not be marred by intentional misrepresentations, as sometimes can happen with debates in other contexts.

It is particularly fascinating for me to see how what was intended in one way by me can be read quite differently by others. In what follows I begin with some clarifications of my intended positions, followed by an example of the need to contextualize teachings on emptiness. Then I turn to the idea of a fading of perception and the nature of clinging. In this context, I discuss how a misunderstanding of the latter can impact actual practice, even to the extent of resulting in a promotion of sensual indulgence in a lack of awareness that this leads deeper into the bondage of clinging. In the final part, I discuss the relevance of a historical contextualization in general, which is a central concern of both my earlier and current contributions.

Bhikkhu Anālayo 2025: “Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2): Clinging and Liberation,” *Insight Journal*, 52: 101–127.

Emptiness Contextualized

By way of clarification, I would like to confirm that, as announced in the title of Anālayo (2025), my discussion was “on Rob Burbea’s *Seeing That Frees*” rather than on Nāgārjuna or the Perfection of Wisdom as such. This is why in the course of critical examinations I repeatedly quoted from *Seeing That Frees* rather than from texts by Nāgārjuna or Perfection of Wisdom literature in general.¹ At the outset of my article I announced that the “overall aim of my examination is to offer a contribution to the developing forms of Buddhism in the West by way of emphasizing the importance of a historical perspective in order to do justice to the precious heritages of different Asian forms of Buddhism” (p. 37). My intention was not to question this precious heritage as such.² Rather, my problematization concerns how this heritage is being handled by some Western Dharma teachers. My overall hope is to encourage a more in-depth engagement with this precious heritage rather than its dismissal.

In view of this, I very much appreciate the spirited defense of Nāgārjuna offered by Avigur and Lesage (2025: 76–80 and 82–86), which shows that, even though I thought I had given clear indications regarding the target of my criticism, what I wrote can give rise to misunderstandings in this respect. It thereby affords me a welcome opportunity to clarify that a subtle but important distinction needs to be made here. Instead of intending to question teachings by Nāgārjuna as such, I am rather questioning Rob Burbea’s not necessarily accurate understanding of Nāgārjuna—an assessment to which I come back in the next section of this article—and specifically his turning that understanding into “a sort of meta-theory of what Buddhist emptiness is meant to achieve” (p. 42). This is the key reference point for my discussions related to the topic of an “inherent existence” or more accurately “intrinsic nature,” *svabhāva*.³

Another clarification I would like to offer is that my intention was also not to object in principle to any form of syn-

cretism or a combination of different traditions to create something new. Instead, my objection is rather that for such an eclectic approach to lead to knowledge and understanding, it needs to be based on knowledge and understanding, in particular of the different traditions or teachings involved. Ignorance can only breed ignorance, and that is hardly conducive to a “seeing that frees.”

Combining different traditions requires more than just, in terms of the example I had provided earlier, picking up various items here and there in a supermarket. The image intends to convey that finding ways of teaching emptiness that are attuned to the needs of contemporary Western practitioners requires being well-informed about the traditions on which these ways of teaching draw. The example of supermarket shopping is meant to illustrate a failure to cultivate such understanding, in the sense that it is not enough to pick up one teaching on emptiness here and another there and then lump them together without a proper understanding of each on its own terms.

What emerges from this as my overall point is simply that teaching meditation is not a valid excuse for perpetuating ignorance.

An illustrative example would be the poem supposedly composed by Huineng in the narrative setting of a competition for becoming the sixth patriarch of Chan, which Burbea (2014: 333) considers to be reflecting “a much more profound insight into the fundamental emptiness of the mind” than the poem attributed to Huineng’s rival. The question is what type of emptiness Rob Burbea relies on for this evaluation.

In my earlier article, I noted that my presentation was “not meant to convey the impression that contextualization has been disregarded in principle,” as on one occasion Rob Burbea “contextualizes teachings on the need to transcend even notions of emptiness,” although “the same strategy has unfortunately not been applied consistently” (n. 39).⁴ The poem by Huineng is an example in case. As mentioned in my previous article, the whole story of Huineng’s poem is a polemical fic-

tion (p. 40f). In this contextual setting, its role is to advocate a radical version of sudden enlightenment, which in turn is based on a literal understanding of Buddhature as an already accomplished condition that requires no cultivation. This is not merely a matter of academic interest, as the central question in the background to Huineng's poem is whether an attempt at meditative cultivation of the mind is at all meaningful. Endorsing Huineng's position would conflict with the emphasis on a gradual meditative cultivation of emptiness elsewhere in *Seeing That Frees*.

The problem that emerges in this way can be elucidated with a few selected comments by scholars of the Chan tradition(s). Bielefeldt (1986: 143) notes that an "obvious problem with the 'sudden' meditation, of course, is that, taken in itself, its radical nondualism undermines the rationale for its practice." Poceski (2007: 196) comments that "the idea of suddenness counteracts the view that there is a direct correlation between the methods of cultivation and the realization of awakening." This "undermines the prospect of formulating coherent propositions about the exigencies of spiritual training undertaken by actual people." Sharf (2014: 937) adds that "the rhetoric of sudden enlightenment rendered it difficult if not impossible to champion *dhyāna*, since to countenance *any* technique was to betray an instrumental and hence misguided understanding of the path. This had the effect of instituting a rhetorical taboo against prescribing, or even discussing, specific techniques."

Applied to the present case, for Rob Burbea to endorse Huineng's advocacy of sudden enlightenment as a superior realization of emptiness has the consequence that it turns his own descriptions of a gradual meditative approach into an instrumental and hence misguided understanding of the path, to borrow the words of Robert Sharf. Of course, *Seeing That Frees* is a book on meditation and not a scholarly piece of research. At the same time, however, when Rob Burbea quotes and evaluates Huineng's poem without to all appearances an adequate understanding of its significance, room needs to be

granted for this to be clarified. The same holds in general terms when he gives his own translations of Sanskrit and Pāli texts, which on closer inspection turn out to be unreliable.

To the extent to which Dharma teachers present themselves as scholarly to their audiences, and are consequently being considered as such, to that same extent their audiences need to allow for their teachings to be evaluated based on scholarly knowledge. In fact, without the aura of authenticity garnered in reliance on his own translations of scriptural quotations, Rob Burbea's meditation instructions would probably not have garnered as much attention as they have received. It follows that this mode of presentation inevitably incurs the risk of some interpretations or presentations of scriptural quotations being incorrect. The circumstance that these are used to back up meditation instructions does not remove them in principle from the possibility of attempting to determine their accuracy.

Perhaps my take on the situation could be illustrated with the example of someone giving a talk and quoting various sayings in different languages, such as Greek, Latin, etc., giving the impression to the audience of being a polyglot. Eventually, someone who knows these languages has the courage to stand up and point out that the quotes are incorrect, thereby revealing that the speaker does not know the respective languages. My impression is that Rob Burbea quotes from, evaluates, and draws conclusions based on sources that have not been well understood. Room needs to be granted for this to be pointed out, just as I need to grant room for critical replies to my assessments.

Yet, with all the interesting and helpful perspectives offered by Avigur and Lesage (2025), I am left with the impression that most of Rob Burbea's actual errors identified by me have not been given the needed attention and thus, at least for the time being, have not been cleared up. One of the most serious errors in my view, which unlike others has fortunately received coverage in their reply, concerns the nature of clinging, to which I turn next.

The Fading of Perception

Avigur and Lesage (2025: 88) state that Rob “Burbea’s position—relying on Mahāyāna sources, as Bhikkhu Anālayo notes—is that contact, *vedanā*, and perception are all interwoven with clinging.” It may perhaps be opportune to clarify that the point of my noting references to Mahāyāna sources was to reflect the type of interpretive approach adopted by Rob Burbea; the intention was not to imply that these quotes take the position that “contact, *vedanā*, and perception are all interwoven with clinging.” Instead, this position needs to be considered a product of Rob Burbea’s own, independent thinking.

The situation can perhaps be illustrated with the Mahāyāna quote that opens the nineteenth chapter on “The Fading of Perception,” which then leads Burbea (2014: 250) to the following conclusion: “*The experience, the perception of a phenomenon, depends on clinging.* For a thing to appear as that thing for consciousness, to be consolidated into an experience, it needs a certain amount of clinging” (italics in the original). The only Mahāyāna source mentioned in the prior part of this chapter is *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25:24, the relevant part of which indicates that *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ prapañcopaśamaḥ śivah*,⁵ which could be translated as “auspicious is the pacification of all reification, the pacification of conceptual proliferation.”

The term translated here as “reification” is *upalambha*, which in its usage in texts related to Perfection of Wisdom literature refers, as explained by Harrison (1978: 48f), “to that mode of cognition which views its objects as existing in themselves; to have such notions about those objects is tantamount to being attached to them.” It is quite a challenge to express this meaning accurately in English translation, and my choice of “reification” should be seen as merely one of different possibilities in an attempt at doing justice to the meaning of *upalambha* in this type of context. Garfield (1995: 334) renders the corresponding Tibetan phrase as “[t]he pacification of all objectification,” which provides a good alternative choice.

At any rate, the employment of the term *upalambha* needs to be appreciated within the context of its usage in Perfection of Wisdom literature in order to arrive at a proper understanding of the phrase employed in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25:24, which calls for pacifying the particular mode of cognition that apprehends an object as possessing *svabhāva*. This is not a reference to just any type of cognition, but rather to one under the influence of the notion of an intrinsic nature. The term *upalambha* clearly carries a negative nuance here, comparable in this respect to the additional reference to conceptual proliferation, which similarly conveys a negative sense.

Burbea (2014: 249f), however, speaks of a “fading of perception—or, as Nāgārjuna and others sometimes called it, ‘pacification of perception’,” and then gives the term *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ* as the Sanskrit equivalent of the latter phrase in his footnote 2.⁶ The term “perception” is the standard rendering for Sanskrit *saṃjñā*, the third of the five aggregates. Elsewhere in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* the term *saṃjñā* occurs in this sense,⁷ and Burbea (2014: 15) uses the corresponding English term “perception” for the third aggregate when translating a reference in a Pāli passage to the five aggregates.⁸

The present line in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, however, is not concerned with the third aggregate. Instead, its concerns are with the more specific topic of viewing objects as possessing *svabhāva*. In other words, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25:24 is not advocating a pacification of perception in general, and it certainly does not imply that the perception of a phenomenon depends on clinging. Instead, this is a conclusion drawn by Rob Burbea based on a decontextualized reading and resultant misunderstanding of the import of this reference by Nāgārjuna.

Avigur and Lesage (2025: 81) refer to “the fading of perception as a central vehicle of insight” in their discussion of the primary goals of *Seeing That Frees*, which gives me the impression that this notion must be a central element in the meditation teachings of Rob Burbea. Avigur and Lesage (2025: 87) also mention that “Burbea introduces the term ‘fading of perception’ in Chapter 19 of *Seeing That Frees*,” which is pre-

cisely the chapter under discussion, adding that “[i]n our own teaching and with colleagues, we came to regard sensitivity to fading as a pivotal point in practice—and this chapter as the pivotal point of the book.” In view of this assessment, it seems fair to attempt to contextualize the above finding regarding *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25:24 by consulting the remainder of the nineteenth chapter in *Seeing That Frees*.

Based on a perusal of this chapter, as far as I am able to tell the only other instance where the idea of a “fading of perception” occurs in a textual quote from a Mahāyāna text appears to be when Burbea (2014: 252) refers to the *Samādhirāja-sūtra* as stating that “[w]ith perfect understanding that things are empty, dualistic perceptions fade away.”⁹ Unfortunately, he does not provide any indication where in this quite long text the relevant passage could be found.¹⁰ A fairly extensive search of the *Samādhirāja-sūtra* has not enabled me to identify a corresponding Sanskrit passage.¹¹ At any rate, even just going by the English formulation—independent of whether this is a translation of a passage from the *Samādhirāja-sūtra* or not—the issue at stake is not a fading of perceptions in general, but rather the more specific topic of a fading of dualistic perceptions.

In sum, to the extent to which I have been able to ascertain the situation, in the nineteenth chapter the main Mahāyāna scriptural source for the idea of interpreting certain meditation experiences as a fading of perception in general—and then taking this to imply that perception depends on clinging—appears to be *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 25:24. The specific significance of the term *upalambha* in this passage has not been recognized. The resultant understanding does not fit the reference by Nāgārjuna to *sarvopalambhopaśamaḥ*. If this reference were to be related to perception, it would not call for its fading—which Burbea (2014: 249) explains to convey that the perceived object begins “to soften, blur, and fade”—instead of which it would require a sharpening of perception so as to enable it to see through any tendency toward reification or objectification.

The Nature of Clinging

Avigur and Lesage (2025: 89f) explain that “when Burbea talks about clinging being part of contact, perception, and *vedanā*, he is referring solely to ordinary experience.” This is an interesting specification that is not evident from the way Rob Burbea himself formulates his assessments. An example would be the verse from the *Udāna* examined in detail in my prior contribution (p. 48–50), which Burbea (2014: 362) takes to imply that contact “is actually fabricated by clinging.” This assertion clearly reads as a general assessment of the nature of contact. In the present case, it is applied to a type of experience that according to the narrative setting can happen to worldlings and awakened ones alike, namely being revered or abused.

The basic problem with Rob Burbea’s position is simply that contact is involved in all types of perceptual experiences, wherefore the assumption that contact is fabricated by clinging grants a role to the latter in any type of perceptual experience. As I pointed out earlier, taking this position renders “impossible the existence of fully liberated beings *in the form recognized in mainstream Indian Buddhism*, be they arahants or Buddhas” (p. 51; italics added). The reply by Avigur and Lesage (2025: 87–91) moves beyond the frame of mainstream Indian Buddhism into topics related to Mahāyāna docetism and thus, although interesting in its own right, does not really help in addressing the problem identified by me. In fact, not a single one of the sources mentioned by them actually takes the position that the everyday experiences of a Buddha (or an arahant) inevitably involve clinging, which would be the case if clinging were indeed part of any type of perceptual experience.

The problematic nature of Rob Burbea’s take on clinging extends beyond the case of awakened ones. Even before eradicating clinging for good, it is certainly possible to have experiences that are temporarily free from clinging. An example reflecting the viewpoint of Pāli discourse literature on this possibility would be the *Cūḷatanhāsasāṅkhaya-sutta*, which describes an advanced level of meditation on feeling tones, *ve-*

danā, where one contemplates pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling tones from the viewpoint of impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and letting go. Such a practitioner is explicitly described as “not clinging to anything in the world,”¹² and such absence of clinging in turn furnishes the basis for realizing awakening. This implies that going beyond any form of clinging was possible before the actual event of realization. Such freedom from clinging occurs in a situation of experiencing feeling tones, of cultivating insight perceptions in relation to them, and with contact occurring all the time. It follows that, even before the event of awakening, the presence of feeling tone, perception, and contact need not necessarily involve any clinging.

The *Cūḷatanhāsankhaya-sutta*, in a way, places a spotlight on the instrumental value of cultivating an absence of clinging for progress to awakening. Conversely, the assumption that it is not possible to have an ordinary sense experience without clinging leaves not enough room for such practice. If clinging is considered an inherent part of any experience, being present whenever there is contact, perception, or a feeling tone, then the idea of cultivating a temporary freedom from clinging no longer makes practical sense. A correct understanding of clinging is, for this reason, not merely a matter of academic interest, but vital for anyone intending to walk the path to liberation from clinging.

In fact, an important dimension of early Buddhist emptiness practice related to daily life emerges precisely in relation to how one responds to the manifold opportunities for clinging to something in the here and now. A prominent opportunity of this type relates to sensual gratification, to which the *Mahā-suññata-sutta* and its parallels grant detailed coverage as part of their instructions on emptiness meditation.¹³ The important distinction between reacting with clinging and reacting without clinging to opportunities for sensual gratification, a recognition of which is crucial for progress in deepening emptiness, can easily be lost from sight once clinging is assumed to be present in any experience. In fact, with the same assumption,

the very idea of walking this path to its final consummation no longer serves as a valid goal.

This appears to be indeed a potential result of the above understanding of clinging, evident in the report given by Burbea (2014: 402) regarding the unfolding of the path of contemplating emptiness that he promotes: “[E]ven if there has been some sense of disenchantment brought about through practice, we can see now that going deeper into an experiential understanding of emptiness profoundly and wonderfully *re-enchants* this whole world of phenomenal appearances” (italics in the original). The description gives the impression that progress toward liberation made earlier through cultivating insight leading to disenchantment has stalled, and a U-turn has been taken, leading away from the freedom and happiness of liberation in favor of becoming re-enchanted and thereby reviving attachment and clinging. In other words, Rob Burbea’s own report to all appearances confirms the impression that the envisaged practice does not lead all the way through to the goal of freedom from *dukkha* and clinging. Other teachings by Rob Burbea, taken up in the course of the next section of this article, corroborate this impression.

Sensuality and Liberation

Avigur and Lesage (2025: 76 and 97) comment on *Seeing that Frees* that “[i]t is a work that has reanimated the path for many long-time Buddhist practitioners,” and that “[f]or many practitioners, this work has proven liberating.” At the same time, however, there are also many practitioners who have found the same book perplexing and confusing. In fact, my earlier article was written in response to requests for a clarification of Rob Burbea’s teachings, such as, for example, his take on the nature of clinging. In view of the significant repercussions that an inaccurate understanding of the nature of clinging can have, it remains open to further investigation in what sense his teachings are “liberating.” Already in its early Buddhist usage

the term “liberation” can connote a variety of experiences and states that include temporary types of liberation.¹⁴ If the referent is to lasting liberation from clinging in the way understood in mainstream Indian Buddhism, then I have difficulties seeing how Rob Burbea’s teachings could be liberating in this sense.

As mentioned in my earlier discussion, a central problem with his approach appears to be “a limited perspective on emptiness—missing out on its profundity and its potential for countering a range of delusions and forms of clinging that are not directly related to attributing *svabhāva* to phenomena” (p. 48). The range of possible forms of clinging recognized in early Buddhism can be explored with the help of a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallels, which provide a survey of four types of clinging to be overcome. The sequence in which these are listed reflects how readily each type of clinging is recognized. The first and most widely recognized type is clinging to sensuality,¹⁵ whereas the fourth and most subtle one is clinging to a sense of self.

Even a recognition of the need to overcome clinging to sensuality was not necessarily shared by all those who in the ancient Indian setting had dedicated themselves to a religious life by going forth. Another Pāli discourse and its parallel depict such practitioners engaging in sexual intercourse with each other, which exemplifies acting in a way that is pleasant now but has painful results in the future. Both versions report the reasoning by male practitioners of this type that their female partners are so pleasant to touch, making them wonder what problem other recluses and brahmins see in sensuality.¹⁶

Another Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel report the Buddha stating quite emphatically that sensual pleasures have lost all their attraction once one is able to access superior types of pleasure and happiness,¹⁷ such as those related to deep concentration, *samādhi*. The standard description of absorption highlights that access to such states requires leaving behind sensuality.¹⁸ The same principle holds for the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*, whose very name implies that the mind

partakes in the celestial dwelling of Brahmā, which lies well beyond the sensual sphere.¹⁹ Still superior in happiness is the realization of liberation; hence the indication that sensual and celestial happiness do not compare to even a sixteenth part of the happiness of the destruction of craving (and clinging).²⁰ From an early Buddhist perspective, sensual indulgence is decidedly not liberating.

To explore this topic in relation to Rob Burbea's teachings in general, in what follows I take up a few selected quotations from teaching transcripts available at the Hermes Amāra Foundation's website. Since this organization is dedicated to spreading Rob Burbea's teachings and acted as the publisher of *Seeing That Frees*, it seems reasonable to rely on material made available in this way. At the same time, it needs to be clearly recognized that, although stemming from the same teacher and published by the same foundation, these extracts are taken from meditation retreat teachings that do not necessarily stand in a direct relationship to *Seeing That Frees*. This restricts the possible use that can be made of them, as they need not have any relation to the topic of emptiness. All that can thus reasonably be expected is that, as the extracts taken up below reflect teachings given in 2017 and 2019 and thus after the publication of *Seeing That Frees* in 2014, they can provide a perspective on the evolution of his thinking since then.

Another limitation in what follows is that I am only presenting extracts from different talks. This can hardly be avoided, simply because presenting the whole relevant text would go way beyond the confines of this article. Fortunately, the full transcripts can be accessed easily by the interested reader with the help of the links I provide in my endnotes. Besides being mere extracts, the statements quoted in this way are made in an oral teaching context and thus inevitably lack the precision that comes with something written, as there has been no opportunity to reconsider, polish, and refine. All these limitations need to be kept in mind when reading what follows.

According to the relevant teaching transcriptions, the consideration that there is "a need to bring sexuality more ac-

tively into the path so that it forms an integrated part of the path” leads to the proposal that “[i]t has a relationship with sacredness, or the possibility of sacredness, *in, through* sexuality, as a possibility for us. It’s not just kind of defilement or delusion.”²¹ Instead, experience shows that “sexuality, the sexual energy, the sexual images, the actual lovemaking, sex, whatever, actually is really quite supportive of *samādhi*.”²² The same perspective points to “the possibility of using eros and the erotic-imaginal in the service of *brahmavihāra* cultivation and practice, or even *in* actual *brahmavihāra* practice, with *mettā* and compassion, etc.”²³ Moreover, there can be a practice experience where “there’s a lot of eros, for example, and there might be, you know, a sexual image that comes up,” and at times

[t]he eros, itself, the sexual image, the images, the energy and the desire, the sexual energy, the desire—all of that might then ignite. And the sense then may be, for instance, participating mystically in some kind of cosmic sacrament. This is the sort of, again, with the participation and the cosmopoesis and the dimensionality, so this attraction here, this sexual image here, has other dimensions, cosmic dimensions. It’s a holy sacrament.²⁴

These extracts corroborate the impression that a U-turn has been taken, leading away from what early Buddhism reckons the supreme happiness of liberation from craving in favor of becoming re-enchanted and thereby increasing clinging, even to the extent of celebrating the presence in the mind of a defilement as sacred.

The references to sacredness seem to be reflecting some influence of tantric approaches. By way of historical contextualization—without intending to present a monocausal perspective and just providing a brief sketch of a complex situation—Buddhist tantra appears to have been influenced by its non-Buddhist antecedent in the Indian setting, Śaiva tantra. The relevant strand of Śaiva tantra employs sexual intercourse

as a means for the acquisition of magical powers, which were believed to be achieved when sexual fluids resulting from such intercourse are offered to particular deities or ingested by the practitioner.²⁵ The claim to magical powers was an important factor in enabling Śaivism to rise to a considerable position of power and influence in the Indian setting, and this appears to have motivated some Buddhist practitioners to adopt similar practices in order to compete for patronage and material support.²⁶ This brief and simplified sketch of what was a complex development may perhaps provide sufficient background for appreciating the emergence of an orientation toward the sensual, even considering it a sacramental act, in some Buddhist tantric traditions. This development is diametrically opposed to fundamental tenets of mainstream Indian Buddhism.

In relation to such Buddhist tantric practices, it needs to be kept in mind that these were “an occasional, time-delimited practice to be undertaken by elite practitioners,” as explained by Wedemeyer (2011: 397) in the context of a discussion of tantric practice observance (*caryāvrata*). A key element in tantric work with sexual energies, whether involving actual copulation or just visualization practices, is complete submission to the *guru*. In his introduction to a translation of songs by *siddhas* of Indian Buddhist tantra, Jackson (2004: 37 and 39) highlights the importance of the *guru*, noting that “[t]here is, however, one topic on which the *siddhas* seem to entertain no ambivalence and permit no equivocation, and that is the centrality of the *guru*.” Thus, “anyone who is serious about practicing tantra ... must find a *guru* who will give initiation and instruction.”

From this perspective, Rob Burbea’s apparent appropriation of tantric elements would fail to do justice to their contextual setting. The respective teachings are not meant to serve as a commendation of sexuality and related imagery in general but rather feature as advanced practices to be undertaken under the close supervision of a qualified *guru*, who in turn has been authenticated by a lineage of prior *gurus*. Needless to say, the same appropriation also fails to do justice to the context pro-

vided by teachings on *samādhi* and the *brahmavihāras* in early Buddhism.²⁷

The lack of appropriate contextualization evident in transcriptions of his talks aligns with the same pattern evident in his book in relation to the cases of Huineng and Nāgārjuna, together with other instances of a similar type surveyed in my earlier article. The unfortunate result appears to be that Rob Burbea's teachings fail to do justice to each of these various traditions on which he draws. To reiterate a clarification made earlier, the idea is not to problematize the combining of different traditions in principle, let alone to dismiss the teachings of each of these traditions as such. Instead, my criticism concerns the taking of such teachings out of their context without adequately understanding them.

Historical Contextualization

These various examples of the drawbacks of a lack of contextual understanding should make the advantages of contextualization obvious. In what follows, I complement these examples with a general background regarding the type of contextualization that I hope to inspire, proceeding from Indian to Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism.

In the case of Indian Buddhism, a relevant aspect already recognized by Avigur and Lesage (2025: 95) is the way “classical Buddhist traditions ... provide historical contexts” when introducing a teaching. Following the standard marker of oral transmission in the form “thus have I heard,” the usual procedure in Pāli discourses and their parallels is to indicate that at one time the Buddha was dwelling at such-and-such a place.²⁸ At times, additional references can be found indicating that the reported event happened “just after [the Buddha's] awakening.”²⁹ Alternatively, a placing in time can be achieved by indicating that the ensuing event happened “soon after Sunakkhatta Licchaviputta had left this teaching and discipline” or “soon after Devadatta had left.”³⁰ The former refers

to a monk who had been the Buddha's attendant before Ānanda took this role, and the latter positions the event after Devadatta's schism, which would have stood out as a major crisis in the memory of the reciters of the texts. Important deaths can perform a similar function, marked with the indication that the discourse in question should be allocated to the time "soon after Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallāna had attained Final Nirvana."³¹ The same can also be used in relation to the Buddha himself to mark that a particular discourse took place soon after he had attained Final Nirvana.³²

In these and other ways, the first part of a discourse can provide indications that help contextualize the reported teaching event. Such indications are an early form of commentary provided by the reciters, and the intention is to facilitate comprehension of the teaching using whatever information was known about its setting. In fact, introductory narrations can sometimes be quite detailed, and the information they provide can be of considerable help in understanding the import of the relevant teaching. The Pāli term used to refer to such introductory narrations is *nidāna*, and the same term can also convey a causal nuance. In her Pāli dictionary entry on the term, Cone (2010: 561f) lists "preamble; introduction (giving occasion, setting, context)" for the former sense and "cause, ground; underlying determining factor; antecedent; occasion" for the latter. Combining the two senses, the *nidāna* thus gives a context, and this serves to draw attention to the causes or underlying determining factors that informed the delivery of a particular teaching.

The same feature continues with *Vinaya* literature, where narratives reporting the circumstances for the promulgation of rules help understand the rationale behind such promulgations. These narratives can continue beyond the original promulgation by reporting episodes that led to an amendment of a particular rule, and such additions are just as important, since the latest version of a particular rule is the one to be followed. In this way, both discourse and *Vinaya* literature testify

to a pervasive concern with contextualization grounded in a chronological notion of history.

The degree to which these narrative introductions reflect what happened on the ground in ancient India is not necessarily of paramount importance.³³ What matters more for my present discussion is that these narratives demonstrate a clear concern for contextualization among the reciters of the respective texts, reflecting what can safely be assumed to have been of importance for their audiences as well. This provides a model for what I am advocating: based on whatever information is available, one seeks to ascertain when, where, and why a particular teaching or regulation emerged, in order to facilitate its comprehension through an understanding of the network of conditions that influenced its articulation.

In the case of Chinese Buddhism, the relevance of contextualization emerges in a situation that shares several elements with the reception of Buddhism in the West. In both cases, a staggering variety of teachings attributed to the same teacher have arrived in a setting with already well-defined cultural proclivities. In addition to the need to negotiate values and expectations of the host culture, the sheer diversity of Buddhist teachings poses a significant challenge. Simply put, how could the same person have given teachings that are so different in letter and in spirit, at times to the extent of contradicting each other? In the introduction to a detailed study of *panjiao* classification systems, Mun (2005: xvii) explains:

When the body of Buddhist literature was imported into China over several centuries, Chinese scholars were naturally puzzled by numerous discrepancies and contradictions in the translated texts. These discrepancies and contradictions provide the logical beginnings of the *panjiao* (doctrinal classification) system in China. Since all the translated scriptures were considered the words of the Buddha, none of these teachings could be false. To account for diversity without rejecting some texts, Chinese scholars devised various *panjiao* systems.

Alongside an orientation based on the content, already in the early period of the evolution of *panjiao* systems, Chinese scholars from the fourth century onward developed a form of classification that was based on what they believed to have been the chronological order in which the Buddha delivered the respective teachings.³⁴ The same principle is at work when the Tiantai tradition divides the Buddha's teaching career into five periods. Mun (2005: 3) explains that "the system of the five period teachings basically classifies Buddhist teachings according to the temporal progress of what the Buddha taught through his entire life." As an aside, it may be noted that by the seventh to eighth centuries, an articulation of *panjiao* even included non-Buddhist thought within its scope.³⁵

Similar to the case of the introductory narratives in early discourses and the *Vinaya*, the degree to which *panjiao* classifications accurately reflect historical facts is not of paramount importance. What matters is the attempt itself to reconcile different teachings by attributing them to distinct periods of time. Just as Chinese Buddhists applied this basic principle using the information available to them at that time, Western Buddhists could similarly "account for diversity without rejecting some texts" or traditions by adopting a historical perspective based on the information available today.

In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, a distinction according to when teachings were received from India is of such fundamental importance that the Nyingma tradition is named accordingly as the "ancient" (*rnying*) tradition. This ancient tradition is based on teachings received from India during the eighth and ninth centuries, whereas other traditions like the Kagyü and Geluk are based on teachings received later from India. In a detailed study of the history of *mahāmudrā*, Jackson (2019: 67) explains that "[t]raditions that arose in eleventh-century Tibet based primarily on the new tantric texts and translations that began to appear then are generally designated as New Translation schools ... The one tradition that situates its origins in the imperial period, and often follows the tantric texts and translations available then, is designated as the Old

Translation school, the Nyingma.” In this way, a contextual distinction based on the type of teaching available during different historical periods is clearly regarded as important.

The above may help to put into perspective the understandable concern expressed by Avigur and Lesage (2025: 75 and 96) that my advocacy of a need for “contextualization reflects a distinctively modern, scholarly approach—valuable in its own right, yet not the traditional norm by which Buddhist teachers have typically offered practice instructions,” leading to the query whether “[i]n criticizing Burbea for insufficient contextualization, does Bhikkhu Anālayo participate in a form of modernism that filters Buddhist legitimacy through academic historicism, a lens foreign to much of Buddhism’s own adaptive evolution?”³⁶ I believe the above shows that the type of contextualization I hope to encourage is a feature native to Buddhism’s own adaptive evolution rather than being foreign to it. A call for trying to understand particular teachings and practice lineages in relation to their setting is not merely a modern, scholarly approach but rather speaks directly to early Buddhist and Madhyamaka conceptions of emptiness as an insight into conditionality. Following this call can reveal the conditions at work in shaping the views informing particular meditation practices.

In fact, the label of being “a form of modernism” could perhaps more convincingly be applied to the opposite tendency of a failure to attend to contexts. McMahan (2023: 9) introduces a study of the cultural context informing Buddhist meditation practices with the remark that “there is a strong tendency in contemporary discourse on meditation to dismiss such contexts and thereby mistake culturally mediated experiences for achieving a universal view from nowhere.”³⁷ He also quotes comments by David Germano regarding “a dismissive attitude toward culture and context” and the assumption that “meditative experience is primarily about extraordinary individual states, so extraordinary that we might identify and extract a particular practice from all its cultural context, and somehow it might come out clean.”

The type of contextualization that I seek to encourage is meant to counter this tendency. It does not involve, as assumed by Avigur and Lesage (2025: 96f), “setting aside elements that have been significant for Asian Buddhist traditions,” but rather seeks to foster a better understanding of these traditions, based on a form of contextualization that was clearly important from an emic perspective since the time of early Buddhism.

Avigur and Lesage (2025: 97) also reason that “[t]he implication that a ‘correct’ understanding due to historical contextualization offers a more authentic or effective path risks narrowing the richness and diversity of the Dharma ... What matters most is whether a teaching, grounded in tradition, opens the heart and decreases or eradicates suffering.” Yet, as the survey above would have shown, it seems precisely because of a lack of contextualization that Rob Burbea presents a mode of practice that is not properly grounded in the traditions on which he draws. The richness and diversity of the Dharma will only emerge fully when understanding is cultivated.

Conclusion

Western Dharma teachers forging new approaches to Buddhist thought and practice attuned to the exigencies of the twenty-first century need to make a concerted effort to understand properly the Asian traditions on which they draw. A decontextualized approach akin to supermarket shopping will not do. In line with the precedents set by introductory narrations in discourse and *Vinaya* literature, and the *panjiao* systems of Chinese Buddhism, the evolving Western Buddhist traditions can benefit considerably from a more sophisticated engagement with the precious heritages of different Asian forms of Buddhism through contextualizing their teachings in order to gain a better understanding of the conditions—the when, where, and why—influencing their emergence.

Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2)

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Āṅguttara-nikāya</i>
DĀ	<i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> (T 1)
DN	<i>Dīgha-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> (T 125)
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26)
MMK	<i>Mūlamadhyamakakārikā</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i> (T 99)
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association)
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>
Uv	<i>Udānavarga</i>

References

- Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2009: “Vimutti,” in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, W. G. Weeraratne (ed.), 8.3: 615–622, Sri Lanka: Department of Buddhist Affairs.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2011: *A Comparative Study of the Majjhima-nikāya*, Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing Corporation.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2012: “The Case of Sudinna: On the Function of Vinaya Narrative, Based on a Comparative Study of the Background Narration to the First pārājika Rule,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 19: 396–438.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2014: “The Brahmajāla and the Early Buddhist Oral Tradition,” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University*, 17: 41–59.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2024: *Mindfulness Between Early Buddhism and Climate Change*, Barre: Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu 2025: “Emptiness Requires Contextualization: On Rob Burbea’s ‘Seeing That Frees’,” *Insight Journal*, 52: 35–70.
- Avigur, Yahel and Brian Lesage 2025: “Seeing that Frees in Context: A Response to Bhikkhu Anālayo,” *Insight Journal*, 52: 71–99.
- Bernhard, Franz 1965: *Udānavarga*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Bielefeldt, Carl 1986: “Ch’ang-lu Tsung-tse’s Tso-ch’an I and the ‘Secret’ of Zen Meditation,” in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, Peter N. Gregory (ed.), 129–161. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Burbea, Rob 2014: *Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising*, Gaia House, Devon: Hermes Amāra Publications.
- Cone, Margaret 2010: *A Dictionary of Pāli: Part II, g-n*, Bristol: Pali Text Society.

Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2)

- de La Vallée Poussin, Louis 1913: *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās (Mādhyamika-sūtras) de Nāgārjuna avec le Prasannapadā, commentaire de Candrakīrti*, St.-Petersbourg: Imprimerie de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences.
- Garfield, Jay L. 1995: *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harrison, Paul M. 1978: "Buddhānusmṛti in the Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 6: 35–57.
- Jackson, Roger R. 2004: *Tantric Treasures: Three Collections of Mystical Verse from Buddhist India*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, Roger R. 2019: *Mind Seeing Mind: Mahāmudrā and the Geluk Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- McMahan, David L. 2023: *Rethinking Meditation: Buddhist Meditative Practices in Ancient and Modern Worlds*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mun Chanju 2005: *The History of Doctrinal Classification in Chinese Buddhism: A Study of the panjiao System*, Lanham: University Press of America.
- Poceski, Mario 2007: *Ordinary Mind as the Way: The Hongzhou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sanderson, Alexis 1988: "Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions," in *The World's Religions*, Stewart Sutherland, Leslie Houlden, Peter Clarke, and Friedhelm Hardy (ed.), 660–704. London: Routledge.
- Sanderson, Alexis 2009: "The Śaiva Age: The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism During the Early Medieval Period," in *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, Shingo Einoo (ed.), 41–349. Tokyo: Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo.
- Sharf, Robert H. 2014: "Mindfulness and Mindlessness in Early Chan," *Philosophy East and West*, 64.4: 933–964.
- Skilling, Peter 1994: *Mahāsūtras: Great Discourses of the Buddha*, Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Vaidya, P. L. 1961: *Samādhirājasūtra*, Darbhanga: Mithila Institute.
- Wedemeyer, Christian K. 2011: "Locating Tantric Antinomianism: An Essay Toward an Intellectual History of the 'Practices/practice Observance' (caryā/caryāvṛata)," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 34.1/2: 349–419.

Acknowledgement

I am indebted to William Edelglass for editorial suggestions that have substantially improved my form of presentation.

Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2)

Notes

¹ The only reference to a text by Nāgārjuna in Anālayo 2025: 52 serves the purpose of contextualization and the relevant passage is not taken up by me for critical examination.

² Some formulations in Anālayo 2025: 42, 43, 45, and 47 were in fact meant to signal that my intention was not to question the precious Asian heritage as such, such as by acknowledging that “from the more specific viewpoint of Buddhist traditions that are heirs of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought, countering the notion of an inherent existence may indeed appear to be invested with an overarching importance. Without in any way intending to problematize such an inheritance,” followed by clarifying that “[t]his is not to underestimate the importance of the corrective provided by Perfection of Wisdom literature,” particularly “for Mahāyāna *sūtras* and treatises confronted with reifications of ‘the beginning,’ it makes eminent sense to deconstruct these by rejecting such a beginning,” moreover, “my intention is not to criticize engagement with these philosophical positions as an Asian Buddhist cultural practice” (with a reference to the writings by Georges Dreyfus as a Western practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism), leading up to my call for evaluating—rather than either taking for granted or else dismissing in principle—the relevance in the contemporary setting of what I qualify as “in themselves meaningful attempts at exorcising a belief in an inherent existence.”

³ I would like to reiterate a point briefly made in note 1 of my earlier contribution that the rendering “inherent existence” is in my view not the best choice for capturing the significance of *svabhāva*, which emerged in the context of an attempt at identifying what makes one dharma unique in comparison to other dharmas, its “intrinsic nature.”

⁴ Avigur and Lesage 2025: 92f take up the same passage from *Seeing That Frees* and comment that “[h]ere Burbea is explicitly distinguishing different views on emptiness (as opposed to Bhikkhu Anālayo’s contention that diverse views are being read as ‘saying the same thing’). Moreover, Burbea is arguing that in interpreting these different views we need to consider their context.” It is not clear to me if this comment was made in awareness of what I had stated in my note 39.

⁵ See de La Vallée Poussin 1913: 538,3.

⁶ It is perhaps worthy of note that Rob Burbea does not translate *sarva*, “all,” which is in line with a similar lack of translating its Pāli equivalent *sabba* in Burbea 2014: 10, discussed in Anālayo 2025: 53–55. In both cases, the net result appears to be a misunderstanding of the import of the respective passages.

⁷ MMK 4.7, de La Vallée Poussin 1913: 126,13.

⁸ The translation is based on a reference to *saññā* in SN 22.100 at SN III 152,16; see also Burbea 2014: 17n5 for an explanation of what he intends

Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2)

to convey with the rendering “perception,” which would not fit the reference to *upalambha* in MMK 25:24.

⁹ A Pāli quote relevant to the idea of a fading of perception is SN 35.117 at SN IV 98,3, which describes how perception fades, *virajjati*, when the corresponding sense ceases, *nirujjhati*. As correctly explained by Burbea 2014: 251, this intends “the *cessation* of perception—the phenomenon of the six senses do not appear at all.” It follows that this Pāli passage differs significantly from the type of gradual or partial fading of perception described by Burbea 2014: 249 at the outset of the nineteenth chapter, which does not involve an actual cessation of the senses. Instead, the senses must be functioning when “through many of the insight ways of looking the perception of phenomena will *fade* to some degree ... the experience of that object under view begins to soften, blur, and fade,” and “to some extent there begins to be, in meditation, a melting of all appearances, of ‘things,’ of objects of perception” (throughout, italics are found in the original).

¹⁰ Burbea 2014: 252n6 just states: “Translation from the author’s notes.” This is hardly an adequate procedure.

¹¹ The closest match I have been able to locate would be the following passage in *Samādhirāja-sūtra* 31.10, Vaidya 1961: 191,18: *teno sarvi bhavā vibhāvitāḥ sada śūnyāḥ, tasyo samjñā prahīṇa sarvaśo nikhileno*, but this is still quite different from the proposed translation.

¹² MN 37 at MN I 251,28: *so tāsu vedanāsu aniccānupassī viharanto, vi-rāgānupassī viharanto, nirodhānupassī viharanto, paṇinissaggānupassī viharanto na kiñci loke upādiyati*. The parallel EĀ 19.3 at T II 593c20 proceeds differently at this point.

¹³ MN 122 at MN III 114,11, MĀ 191 at T I 739b5, and the Tibetan version in Skilling 1994: 232,6 (on which see the comments in Anālayo 2011: 695n57).

¹⁴ For a survey of different nuances of the term *vimutti* see Anālayo 2009.

¹⁵ MN 11 at MN I 66,1, MĀ 103 at T I 591a20, and EĀ 27.2 at T II 644a15.

¹⁶ MN 45 at MN I 305,25: *sukho imissā paribbājikāya taruṇāya mudukāya lomasāya bāhāya samphasso ti* and MĀ 174 at T I 711b27: 此快莊嚴於女身體樂更樂觸.

¹⁷ MN 75 at MN I 504,32 and MĀ 153 at T I 671a28.

¹⁸ See, e.g., MN 101 at MN II 226,11 and its parallel MĀ 19 at T I 444c6.

¹⁹ The correspondence of an abiding in *brahmavihāra* to the condition and nature of Brahman finds explicit articulation in DN 13 at DN I 251,22 and its parallel DĀ 26 at T I 106c17.

²⁰ Ud 2.2 at Ud 11,22, with the Sanskrit version, Uv 30.31, Bernhard 1965: 399, conveying the same sense.

²¹ <https://hermesamara.org/resources/talk/2017-03-26-the-problem-of-desire>.

²² <https://hermesamara.org/resources/talk/2017-02-14-refractions-of-body-sensuality-and-sexuality-part-2>.

Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2)

²³ <https://hermesamara.org/resources/talk/2017-02-16-eros-and-the-brahmaviharas> .

²⁴ <https://hermesamara.org/resources/talk/2019-05-27-opening-the-sense-of-the-energy-body> .

²⁵ See in more detail Sanderson 1988.

²⁶ See in more detail Sanderson 2009.

²⁷ The degree to which this holds of course depends on what Rob Burbea intends to convey with terms like “eros” and “the erotic-imaginal.”

²⁸ On the relationship between these two parts of the standard introduction see Anālayo 2014: 41–45.

²⁹ The Pāli term used to indicate this is *paṭhamābhisambuddho*; see, e.g., SN 4.1 at SN I 103,6, with its counterpart in 初成正覺 in the parallel SĀ 1094 at T II 287c22.

³⁰ The Pāli terms used respectively are *sunakkhatto licchaviputto acirapakkanto hoti imasmā dhammavinayā* and *acirapakkante devadatte*; see MN 12 at MN I 68,6 for the former and AN 8.7 at AN IV 160,7 for the latter. In the former case, a similar indication of his departure is found in T 757 at T XVII 591c18: 捨離佛法, 其來未久, whereas for the latter case no parallel is known.

³¹ The Pāli phrase is *aciraparinibbutesu sārīputtamoggallānesu*, found in SN 47.14 at SN V 163,27, with the corresponding indication 尊者舍利弗, 目犍連涅槃未久 in the parallel SĀ 639 at T II 177a16.

³² The corresponding Pāli phrase is *aciraparinibbute bhagavati*, found in MN 108 at MN III 7,13, with the corresponding indication 佛般涅槃後不久 in the parallel MĀ 145 at T I 653c22.

³³ For a study of narrative concerns shaping the account of the promulgation of the rule on monastic celibacy see Anālayo 2012.

³⁴ Mun 2005: 2 explains that “[i]n the Southern Dynasties, *panjiao* scholars classified the Buddha’s whole teachings basically according to his diachronic preaching order.”

³⁵ Mun 2005: xxv reports on the *panjiao* of “Huiyan (673? – 743?)” that it “extends its scope to non-Buddhist Indian philosophies and aboriginal Chinese thought.”

³⁶ Avigur and Lesage 2025: 96 perceive my earlier article to be a call for teachings to be “rigorously contextualized.” The qualification of being rigorous is not found in my earlier article, and my intention was rather to call for a more basic type of contextualization that simply tries to ascertain when, where, and why a particular teaching emerged so as to understand it appropriately. An example is my discussion of the verse from the *Udāna* (p. 48f), where the narrative setting provides helpful information. Another example is the case of Huineng, where I noted that the relevant information is easily accessible on Wikipedia (p. 41). Regarding the recognition that different conceptions of emptiness evolved throughout Buddhist history, this much has been made accessible earlier this year in a BCBS online

Emptiness Requires Contextualization (2)

course taught by William Edelglass and titled “Exploring Emptiness Across Buddhist Traditions,” held from July 22 to August 7 of 2025. It is availing oneself of such readily available sources of information, without necessarily having to invest the time needed for an in-depth study of relevant scholarly publications, that I hope to encourage among Western Dharma teachers.

³⁷ Although I wholeheartedly agree with this assessment, I differ from David McMahan in relation to some of the details of his attempt to document it; see Anālayo 2024: 135–160.