

RAS Institute of Philosophy
Tibetan Culture and Information Center in Moscow

First International Conference “Buddhism and Phenomenology”

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RAS Institute of Philosophy, Moscow



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CONCEPTION OF THE CONFERENCE

Unlike omniscient and all-embracing wisdom, philosophy is always based on doubt, questioning and raising problems. Its very nature is to detect conflicts of ideas and stimulate their rational elaboration. Philosophy takes nothing for granted. Such is philosophical work regardless its civilizational and cultural identity. Therefore contributions to philosophy can be gauged with a good degree of objectivity: Do we see a really new problem? Do we meet a fresh idea or at least a new formulation of a known idea? Are we given an interesting proof or do we have a convincing refutation of an old proof? Whatever the question, philosophical work is ineluctably directed at universally valid rationalia.

In contemporary Russia, the familiarity of philosophical audience with the Buddhist philosophy is complicated by two main factors:

- 1) Eurocentrism that governs both educational system and philosophical discourse.
- 2) Lack of dialogue and interaction between Buddhists, Buddhist scholars, and experts in Western philosophy.

As a result of the dominance of the Hegelian philosophical model, the achievements of Eastern philosophical traditions, Indian Philosophy and Buddhism in particular, remain off agenda for philosophical education. *Not to know Plato is impossible, not to know Dharmakīrti is normal.*

This is the reason why the overwhelming majority of Russian philosophers nowadays consider Buddhism an exotic wisdom having nothing to do with philosophy in its “real” Western sense. However, today in the West, in spite of the Eurocentric mainstream, Buddhism begins to appear in the horizon of contemporary philosophical thought. A particularly promising interaction seems to be between the specialists on Buddhist philosophy and phenomenologists, analytic philosophers and cognitive scientists. Articles on Buddhism are included in many Western textbooks as well as in some fundamental works on consciousness. It also concerns the organization of conferences, writing books by the authors who are not only Western philosophers but also Buddhologists.¹

His Holiness the Dalai Lama plays an important role within this process. He actively cooperates with some leading Western scientists and philosophers within the framework of the annual conferences organized by the *Mind and Life Institute* founded by Him (<https://www.mindandlife.org>). This stimulated among some Western scholars interest in Buddhism and its philosophical heritage.

In Russia, the situation with Indology and Buddhist studies is far from inspiring optimism, and the reason for such situation lies beyond the two factors mentioned above. Buddhist philosophy is being sometimes marginalized due to an oversized attention to the practical aspect of Buddhism with strong emphasis on meditation and yoga. Whatever their nature or level of importance, the latter cannot be considered as the only important features of Buddhism and its unique contribution to World thought. Regrettably, the intellectual and philosophical aspects of Buddhism are viewed among the followers of some Buddhist schools established in Russia as much less important. It leads to a wrong understanding of Buddhism as primarily a practical guide to desirable states of mind and not as a complex philosophical system that deserves to be studied in the same way we study Plato or Descartes.

This may explain the fact that in Russia, although the number of Buddhists continues to grow, the academic Buddhist studies whittle away. Needless to say, without the new generations of the serious scholars, the very existence of Indology and Buddhology for which Russia was so famous at the time of Theodor Stcherbatskoi is brought into question and in future we risk to have nothing more than a number of enthusiastic amateurs.

¹ For example: *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*. Edited by Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi. Oxford University Press, 2010.

Meanwhile, in the modern world the global trend consists in developing a cross-cultural, cosmopolitan philosophy that will incorporate the philosophical achievements of different civilizations. Unfortunately, our philosophy is far from being ready to join this movement. In order to put an end to Russia's self-isolating tendencies and, at the same time, its exclusive orientation towards the West, it is necessary to make steps in another direction. Towards Buddhism, why not? Buddhism is a religion and a worldview historically shared by a number of Russian peoples.

Our project includes a series of conferences, publications and other joint research and training activities involving buddhologists-philosophers, philosophers specializing in different fields of philosophical thought of the West and Russia, as well as traditional Buddhist scholars. The goal of all these activities is to introduce Buddhist thought in the horizon of contemporary Russian philosophical discourse through mutually enriching dialogue and information exchange, starting the process from the first stages of philosophical education. This dialogue can help to show the achievements of Buddhist thinkers who face the same set of fundamental problems one meets in philosophy of mind, epistemology, anthropology, philosophy of language, and cognitive science.

Since the majority of our Russian philosophers, due to their education, is not familiar with Buddhist thought, the first conference is planned to have an educational character. We plan to invite some first-rate Western experts already involved one way or another in a Western-Buddhist dialogue along with authoritative Buddhist scholars and Buddhologists. They are welcome to make key-note presentations and further to dispute with our philosophers at the round table and during general discussion.

Since Buddhist philosophy is most often compared with phenomenology, we decided that the 2016 conference will be dedicated to “**Buddhism and phenomenology.**”

A plenary session **scenario** involves four key-speakers and four key-subjects:

- 1) “Buddhism friendly” phenomenologists,
- 2) “Phenomenology friendly” Buddhologists,
- 3) modern Buddhist philosophers, specializing in Buddhist theory of consciousness and familiar with Western philosophical tradition, as well as
- 4) critics of this project.

This scenario should create an atmosphere of free discussion and open exchange of opinions.

Audience:

- 1) Leading Russian philosophers in the field of phenomenology and philosophy of mind.
- 2) Researchers, especially young ones, having strong interest in the subject.
- 3) Buddhists who wish to plunge into the contemporary debates on the problems of consciousness and comparative philosophy.
- 4) Students, monks, and anyone who loves to think philosophically.

The conference will be divided into two phases:

I. Morning: plenary session before lunch (4 presentations 30 minutes each followed by questions and discussions among key-speakers).

II. Afternoon: round table (short papers from Russian participants – 10-15 minutes) and general discussion.

Topics for discussion:

- 1) Does the expression “Buddhist phenomenology” make sense?
- 2) Phenomenology and Buddhism: main features, identities, and differences.
- 3) Can Buddhism have any heuristic value for the development of phenomenology (Buddhist questions, problems, ideas relevant to phenomenological analysis)?
- 4) Which phenomenological ideas could be of use for Buddhist philosophy?
- 5) Could phenomenology become a soteriological project?

Estimated conference format:

10-14 h. – presentations of the 4 key speakers, questions and discussions.

14-15 h. – lunch

15-16 h. - the papers prepared by Russian scholars

16-18 h. – general discussion

Keynote presentations will be translated into Russian. General discussion will be translated on request.

Programming Committee:

From the Institute of Philosophy

Victoria Lysenko (director) – vglyssenko@yandex.ru

Lubov Karelova – lbkarelova@mail.ru

Lev Titlin – titlus@yandex.ru

From the Tibetan Centre of Culture and Information

Venerable Telo Tulku Rinpoche – <http://www.kalmykia.eu/tag/telo-tulku-rinpoche>
rep.ru@tibet.net

From the Save Tibet Foundation

Julia Zhironkina (director) – savetibetrussia@yahoo.com