

Palladium: The Emerald Buddha and the Scope of The Real¹

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Abstract

To talk about ‘the real’ is to talk about those things that constitute our reality. Although such a set might seem universally obvious, certain items have the power to destabilize that basic metaphysical footing. This article presents an inductive exploration of the limits of reality through the analysis of one of those items: the Emerald Buddha [พระแก้วมรกต], palladium of Thailand. Drawing on landmarks of European philosophy and Theravada thinking regarding metaphysics, the argument confronts the theoretical approach to reality with the practical intricacies of *cosmic understanding*, as found in contemporary Thai society. It is argued that a comprehensive picture of reality demands a way of thinking based on personal perspective, where the predominance of the *persona* over the collective does not hinder, but reframes, the fundamental sense of togetherness.

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Introduction

Reality is a topic consistently studied and debated from many different perspectives inside and outside academia. The thought process devoted to the matter throughout time has rendered a wide spectrum of viewpoints, with nuances fluctuating in general between realism and idealism. Because of the excluding tension between these two positions, concepts of reality hardly ever manage to explain the whole gamut of human experience in a satisfactory fashion, which highlights a peculiar dissociation between the real and what happens to us. In the quest for a unifying grasp, this article inquires on the overall limits of such a concept, by raising the question: *what is the scope of reality?* The argument develops through the study of the Emerald Buddha [พระแก้วมรกต], the sacred sculpture that has been the palladium of Thailand for more than two hundred years. The reality status of this unique piece is a subject that is worthy of contemplation.

The selection of the Emerald Buddha is indebted to the peculiar manner it mingles with practically in all orders of Thai people's life, resulting in a powerful example of the multiple characters of the real and its contradictions. The Emerald Buddha is the central element of Wat Phra Kaeo [วัดพระแก้ว], one of the most important Buddhist complexes in Southeast Asia. The relevance of both the image and the site transcends, by far, the sphere of religion, also reaching anthropological, political and artistic dimensions. It is the image in the context of that manifold that our examination focuses on.

The methodology of this article is based on philosophical argumentation, aided on the one hand by a dialectical building up of the theoretical background, and on the other hand by a contextual analysis of the item in light of disciplines, such as anthropology, history and literary studies. These procedures are distributed along nine sections. The first section aims to define the secondary questions that determine the nature of the inquiry, based on our main concern as to what the scope of reality is. Such an argumentative process is to allow the identification of the crucial problems related to the common sense picture of the real. Sections two and three take those problems to the academic arena, by first, presenting an overview of realism and idealism, and later, discussing their principles in light of Theravada

philosophy. On such basis, sections four, five and six draw attention to the challenge the Emerald Buddha represents for metaphysics, using contextual analysis as a counterpoint to the purely philosophical stand. Finally, the proposed thesis of this study is introduced in sections seven and eight, as an alternative to deal with cases such as the Emerald Buddha. Concluding remarks are presented in section nine, where I posit that the understanding of the real must be based on a *personal perspective* from which the relevance of individual experience be preserved, but still securing a common ground that may account for, and enhance, human interactions.

Questions and Answers

Inquiring about something means asking questions. Since the Emerald Buddha is our object of study, the manner of asking will be framed about it and against it, constituting the inductive strategy leading this article. However, we will not question whether or not it is real. We are to discern the scope of reality by showing how the sculpture extends itself along its domains. This implies the acceptance of a concept of reality to be measured, as though dropping a stone into a well to realize its depth. To travel the void, the measurer must be real. That will be our primary directive: whatever interrogatives to be implemented in what follows are to adjoin the root assertion ‘the Emerald Buddha is real’.

I wish to consider two possibilities: *why* and *how*. The former presents a double sense. It may ask about causal relations, in which case it would not do because reality is neither a cause nor an effect. The other connotation is related to the grounds for an assertion, where the question ‘why is it real?’ turns into ‘why is it said to be real?’ This is a more promising option that demands consistent definitions. The latter interrogative, i.e., *how*, refers to the way in which the sculpture is real, or more precisely, the manner in which it takes part in reality. This is not about what it looks like, but about the nature of its being real. A curious insinuation underlies this question: there must be more than one mode of joining reality. We will address this issue in subsequent sections.

We are posing questions about reality in relation to the Emerald Buddha, based on a concept we have declared to accept. But what concept is that? What is reality? Asking the question this way is not consistent with our primary directive, so let us rephrase: why are we so sure that the Emerald Buddha is real? Thus, we come across a variant of the question *why* that was raised earlier. The only way to tackle it is to introduce the ground category (reality) and then subsume the item under it. That would allow us to treat the riddle of reality not as a research question, but as the retrieval of a datum with authoritative power. Unfortunately, the solution is not so simple. The problem lies in the difficulty of making the notion of reality coherently explicit; it is more a *feeling* rather than a concept. This is a serious issue, to the extent of raising doubts about how our root claim (the Emerald Buddha is real) can be taken seriously. We maintain that the way out of this predicament consists in jealously sticking to induction. Sorting out this problem is precisely the reason behind our strategy. Instead of categorical subsuming, the idea is to explore the feeling of reality through the particular experience of the sculpture, and see *where the stone takes us to, once thrown into the well*. Of course, the question arises as to how that exploration works.

What is this feeling of reality about? We have stated that the Emerald Buddha is real. At first glance, that may seem a truism that need not be explained. Such an impression comes, I suppose, from a common sense definition of reality shared as a collective good. That is precisely the non-explicit feeling that troubles us. The ideal sources utilized in finding out about that kind of definition are standard dictionaries. A review of the entries on the matter in from such sources make it possible to generalize that reality is concerned with: (1) the way things effectively are (in contrast with appearance and fantasy) and (2) their existence.³ Thus, reality is defined in terms of 'that what is' and/or 'that what exists'. As expected though, dictionaries quickly reveal their helplessness for strict purposes, because of their irremediable circularity. Reality, being, and existence;

³ "Reality," *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (n.d. Web); "Realidad," *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* (24th ed. n.d. Web).

each of these concepts is defined in terms of the other two.⁴ The hostility of the feeling makes itself evident. There is nothing wrong with the accounts of the dictionaries because their purpose is not philosophical, but practical. Rather, they reveal the complexity of our enterprise: praxis is so embedded in the concept of reality that treating the latter becomes arduous. Yet, it is important to bear in mind the connection between the three key concepts (reality, being, and existence), and the antagonistic role of appearance and ideation.

The first part of the definition posits that reality is the actual state of affairs concerning something. Thus regarded, the kinship between reality and truth is evident. One can assert, for instance, that the *ubosot* enshrining the Emerald Buddha is *really* fifty-five meters in length and twenty-four meters in width.⁵ This holds true independently from its appearing, or our imagining it, otherwise. Now in order to advance considerations of that sort, the building must necessarily be real. The truth-reality connection is important; it demands a thorough approach that falls out of the reach of this article. For our ends, do recall that our interest lies on reality rather than on truth; therefore, the argument will focus on the former, for it encloses a more fundamental issue upon which the problem of truth can be better tackled.

If not concerned with actual states of affairs, the inquiry ought to focus on the second part of the definition. ‘That what exists’ becomes the level of analysis. Thus we hit upon and disclose the nature of the *reality* feeling underlying our exposition from the beginning, since the very framing of the main question in terms of scope. *That* what exist, as an abstraction, means *all* that exists, from which follows that reality, in principle, refers to the gathering of all existent individuals. Ergo, reality is a set. This idea puts forward the categorical dimension of the term once more. For reality to be a set, it must have certain limits defined by conditionality. In other words, real things must fulfill minimum requirements to be thus considered. Here the question *why*

⁴ “Exist,” “Being,” *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (n.d. Web); “Existir,” “Ser,” *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* (24th ed. n.d. Web).

⁵ Steve Van Beek and Luca Invernizzi, *The Arts of Thailand* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1999) 169.

shines forth with its actual relevance. The reason why the Emerald Buddha is real lies on its compliance with the conditions that grant it a seat in the gathering of all real things. If that is so, asking *why* means asking for conditions, namely the categorical grounds for reality as existence. Yet, we must be careful about the way this categorical dimension is understood. We have claimed that subsuming the Emerald Buddha under a concept is a fruitless deed. Nonetheless, the feeling of reality harboured in the common-sense definition has provided us with clues that allow, at least, a preliminary examination of its conditional limits, namely, the companion and antagonist concepts. There lies our hope. Through a survey into the conflicting ideas that furnish the feeling, we wish to grasp reality's unsteady boundaries, striving not to conceptualize, but to discern the nature of its inner contradictions. Once we have managed to jut into the proverbial well this way, the Emerald Buddha will be thrown and the inductive exploration shall begin.

The Well: Realism and Idealism

This study departs from the claim that conceptions of the real vary between realism and idealism, and that because of their incompatibility the isthmus connecting reality and experience is broken. Realism and idealism are terms of art in the European philosophical tradition, which might suggest an eminently European understanding of the problem, or even that the problem itself is a European issue. That is not the case. Admittedly, I am referring to them in the awareness of their historical weight, but their deployment is indeed strategic. It is my aim to show their intellectual rhymes with Theravada thinking, in order to reconsider them in a wider context and reframe them accordingly. In so doing, I expect such coincidences to unveil the pillars of reality, as a feeling people deal and work with, in a context where suspicions of cultural specificity are at least reduced. Let us then start by introducing the principles of realism and idealism that we will elaborate on.

The realistic standpoint is that there is an external world that exists and holds properties independently from the mind. Conversely, idealists claim that existence and properties are mind-dependent.

These views are based on common ontological principles, where 'being' may express 'that something is such and such' (properties and essence), or 'that something simply is' (existence). Here the latter is prior to the former, which distinguishes between the claims 'what something is' and 'that something is'. 'Being' is an umbrella under which existence lies alongside predicative claiming.

Realism grants existence to ideas in the mind and bodies in the world, but observes that the former are real only when corresponding to the latter. Although mental content is our immediate object of perception, they come up because of the power of things to produce them. The external world is, hence, the foundation of reality. Ideas disconnected from real things also exist, but as fruits of fantastical ideation. Note that ideas exist because of their "appearing", whereas things exist in terms of their mind-independent "there-being", which we discern through the sensory ideas they generate. In turn, idealism posits that, since ideas are the only object of perception, nothing but ideas and cognising minds can exist. Granted mental content is all there is for us, conceiving it in the absence of minds is nonsense, and figuring something in things beyond it is a groundless speculation. In short, things are ideas.

Realism and idealism differ as to the existence of the thing in itself, but stay together at the existence of mental content. All ideas appear and therefore exist. Does it mean that all ideas are real for idealists? George Berkeley (1685-1753), a landmark philosopher in idealism, tackles the question as follows: Things are mind-dependent, but independent from human volition and perception. Human minds do not determine the existence of the world; items exist in them, not because of them. Now keeping with the mind-dependency principle, there needs to be a higher mind where this independence lies. In the context of the author, such a unifying ground of the manifold is consistent with the Christian God. Divine ideas affect all humans at every moment; they are perceived by the senses and are more distinct, strong and permanent than mortal fancy. As we see, the external world founds reality for both views. Moreover, it plays an anchoring role for experience, for without such universal points of intersection there would be no way to explain social life.

Thus far, we have differentiated 'being' from existence and the latter from reality, making plain that existence is the pivotal notion that amalgamates the other two around itself within the feeling of reality. Coming into appearance has been found crucial, since that is the evidence of existence. That is to say, *whatever appears does exist, and whatever exists can appear*. I shall call this the maxim of existence. In relation to reality a similar maxim applies, but with a difference: *whatever is real does exist, but not whatever exists is real*. That is so because fanciful ideas also exist but are not real. Unreal mental content lacks the proper link to the external world, which constitutes the ultimate reality. In light of this, two signs suitable to the theories hitherto presented can be pointed as conditional principles of reality: *independence* and *universality*. The former refers to the causal disconnection between perception and volition, on the one hand, and the existence of the external world on the other hand. The latter expresses the possibility of human interaction based on sensory performance, for perception makes existent items evident to all human beings. The two maxims and the two principles constitute what I will call the *outward conditional limits* of reality.

The Well: Theravada Buddhism

However universal and independent, reality can never be wholly comprehended by human beings, nor is it the source of a standardised experience. It exceeds by far what the human mind can process, and regarding our contact with it, results differ from one person to another. Individual experiences are neither universal nor independent. The reasons behind are not to be found in disquisitions devoted to reality as existence, because under that outlook the external world prevails as ultimate reality. In order to shift from existence to what happens to us, other paths must be followed. In the context of Theravada thinking, the reflections to be addressed will explore the claims contrary to the inward principles: *reality is not universal* and *reality is not independent*.

It is characteristic of Theravada Buddhism not to deal with metaphysics. Rather, this tradition aims at mastering the knowledge

required for reaching spiritual perfection.⁶ Such a process takes place in praxis, and, hence, attention focuses on experience from an ethical standpoint. This position can be traced back to canonical texts such as the *Udana*.⁷ This text contains a series of solemn utterances of the Buddha preceded by narratives that provide them with proper context. In the sixth chapter, discourses four to six make clear the Theravada position on metaphysics.

The background story goes as follows: one morning the disciples of the Buddha informed him that heretical monks were in town quarrelling about issues such as eternity, infiniteness, origin and causality in respect of the world, the soul, the self, etc. As a reply, the Buddha told the story of a great king who had all the blind men of the city gathered, and after confronting them with an elephant, raised the question as to what it was like. Since every blind man had tactile contact with a different body part of the animal, opinions differed. The general disagreement led to a nonsensical discussion where the ideas raised were whether an elephant was like a broom, a plough, a basket and the like. The Buddha observed that those monks in town were led astray by their lack of insight just as the blind men were, for their claims were based on rather insufficient grounds, and that such an obstinate attachment to methods of analysis brings about pointless disagreement and hinders spiritual perfection.⁸ Only a Buddha has that ultimate knowledge. Hence, from a Theravada viewpoint, thinking about that sort of metaphysics is not a good idea. Here ends the canonical teaching contained in the discourses.

The metaphor of the Buddha illustrates the extent to which our access to the world is limited enough to turn any authoritative claim impracticable. Importantly, it means not only that experience falls short of what metaphysical certainty demands, but that the external world is not the sole factor that determines *our reality*, and that our

⁶ Hajime Nakamura, "Knowledge and Reality in Buddhism," *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, eds. B. Carr and I. Mahalingam (London, New York: Routledge, 1997) 435-436.

⁷ The *Udana* belongs to the Sutta Pitaka's Khuddaka Nikaya.

⁸ *The Udana: The Solemn Utterances of the Buddha*, trans. G. Strong (Charleston: Forgotten Books, 2007) 95-101.

remaining in touch with it does not guarantee that *our real experiences* be universal. That authoritative claims should be distrusted derives from this basic awareness. Now then, one should pose the question as to what *our reality* and *our real experiences* mean. The tale of the blind men is not about perception, but about metaphysical doctrines. Thus, the elephant represents the world as a whole, not a sample of the set. Nevertheless, I will move away from the canonical teaching and analyse the story as a case of perception, in order to advance further explanation on the matter.

I would like to draw attention to the source of equivocation that turns the debate of the blind into nonsense. The problem with them is not related to their will or their enacting perception, nor has it to do with any misunderstanding. The disagreement is indebted to two limitations. First, the subjects were presented different body parts of the beast; they had no choice in that sense. Second, they are plainly blind, which rules out the kind of choice blindfolded subjects would have had. No inquiring effort could subvert those limitations. That means the process of perception happened as efficiently as it could have got. In this vein, the scripture does not deny the principles of independence and universality. The beast was simply there independently from their touching hands, and provided them all with sensuous impressions (however diverse) that informed them about that fact. The existence of the elephant is not the issue here. What the equivocation reveals is that reality is not a meaningless absolute lying out there, but rather, something people experience. The blind men's disagreement comes from the different claims they made about the item, which are supported by different experiences. Certainly, all of them remain real insofar as linked to the animal; they are not universal, nonetheless. The failure of the blind consists in believing the contrary.

One might say the blind could have gone around the elephant. Thus, they would have counted on similar experiences and, therefore, reached agreement. However, that would be missing the point of the teaching, for there is no more freedom for them to embrace the whole of the animal than for us to grasp the gamut of the world. Granting that free round would be to accept that the whole world is discernible;

while, indeed, they have no other reference to support their claims than their partial impressions, as much as we do. In the everyday perceptual sense, however, that free round is possible. Indeed, it is feasible to complete efficient and shareable pictures of things around us, out of and despite our perceptual partiality. Still, that is not always the case. The possibility of irreconcilably disagreeing about our perceptions suffices to rule out the universality of our experiences. However, what is the nature of that possible disagreement?

Still supported by the existence of an external world, the outcome of perception is always different from being to being. Variations among sensuous impressions may come about because of differences in the cognitive structure of individuals. Yet, those are not much relevant. Apart from them, it is not *that it is*, but *what it is*, that varies the most. Thus far, we have been focusing on existence. However, *what-it-is* stands out now as a crucial issue that cannot be ignored. Whatever exists is always 'some thing'. In terms of language, in the expression 'X exists', missing 'X' would be absurd. What exists is the elephant; what exists is the Emerald Buddha; or in case of total blurriness, what exists is something. What is the elephant like? That depends not only on the elephant, but on the relation between the person and the animal. In this vein, perception must be understood here as including the cognition (that it is) and recognition (what it is) of the item. The similes articulated by the blind are mere attempts to capture their diverging experiences into words. Consequently, the real cannot be deemed independent from them. The separation of 'that it is' from 'what it is', latent in the realism-idealism debate, is indeed impossible.

Our individual experience constitutes *our* reality. An experience is a relation gauged from the perspective of one of the related. It is primordially an event. However, if our argument on ideas is right, namely that they are the direct object of perception, then the role of experience must be no other than reality itself as a belonging, for it encompasses the external world and the individual within the interplay of the relation. Neither the individual, nor the external world, is granted supremacy. The perspective of the former crystallises in the ideas arising from the relation to the latter. In that sense, the word

experience also denotes those ideas determined by the relational event. If equating the concepts of owned reality and experience is allowed, universality and independence ought to be ruled out.

This argument compels us to rethink our previous findings. The external world remains universal and independent, but changes from ultimate reality to ultimate source. Owned reality prevails, amalgamating cognition and recognition. Experience, free from universality and independence, becomes the relational principle of reality. The maxims remain untouched. This I shall call the *inward conditional limits of reality*.

Thai Cosmology

Our approach to Theravada Buddhism has revolved around the tale of the blind men introduced in the *Udana*. The analysis has gone beyond the explicit teaching on the pointlessness of metaphysical “head-scratching” intended by the Buddha, opting for a reformulation of the conditional limits in our own terms. With such findings in hand, we head back to Theravada Buddhism, specifically as developed in Thailand, in order to analyse the singular picture of reality implied by its cosmological elaborations. In so doing, we start the confrontation between the generalities of philosophical metaphysics and the contextual particularities of the Emerald Buddha.

According to Reynolds, the theoretical development of Theravada orthodoxy can be understood as the elaboration on the supernatural sciences attained by the Buddha during enlightenment: (1) the knowledge about all his previous lives; (2) the knowledge of the conditions and activities of everything that exists; (3) the knowledge of the principle of co-dependent origination. Accordingly, the three theoretical lines of Theravada Buddhism are: (1) buddhology, or the study of the Jatakas and the life of the Buddha; (2) cosmology, or the study of the universe; (3) the doctrine of Nibbāna.⁹ Despite the argued metaphysical disinterest of the Theravada

⁹ Lithai, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, trans. Frank Reynolds and Mani Reynolds (Berkeley: U of California, Asian Humanities P/Motilal Banarsidass, 1982) 11-13.

orthodoxy, the cosmological tradition organizes, describes and explains the cosmic strata referred to everywhere in the Pāli Canon, including detailed accounts on duration, extension, origin and causality of everything that exists. Such a task clearly involves metaphysical thinking.

One of the most important examples of this cosmological tradition is the Thai work *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, known in English as *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, written by Phya Lithai, together with a notable advisory council circa 1345 AD. The text presents a well-defined structure of the universe, dividing our world system into three worlds: the one of sensual desire, the one with only a remnant of material factors and the one without material factors. They are in turn constituted by 31 realms altogether, superimposed vertically one above the other. Several sorts of creatures inhabit those lands, composing a colourful mythology where human beings are but a small part of the inventory of living things. Every realm has a peculiar geographical constitution and features that distinguish it from the rest, in accordance with its being a realm of woe, happiness or meditation. The cycle of birth, death and rebirth, the equally cyclic destruction and creation of the world system, and the laws that determine such processes, are also explained in the text.

It might be difficult to understand how this work and the *Udana* can belong within the same theoretical corpus, for the former seems to devote itself to the reflections condemned by the latter. By the same token, the mere existence of a cosmological tradition as a branch of Theravada might look unfathomable. I believe the most profitable way of grasping cosmology is from a metaphorical standpoint. In this vein, texts on the matter must be thought of as poetical images closely intermingled with the other branches of Theravada orthodoxy. How do the branches mingle? On the one hand, Buddhist narratives are pervaded by beings belonging to realms other than the human, as well as setting their locales all over the three worlds. There are abundant examples confirming that cosmology is organically integrated to the tales and the teachings therein. Cosmology provides a common diegesis to all stories and brings them into the unity of a single compound, granting them internal coherence and external continuity.

On the other hand, the doctrine of Nibbāna demands in-depth knowledge of reality in order to find the way towards salvation. The subject matter of cosmology is the world, which is not only the far-away scenery of the Buddhist narratives, but also the stage of real human existence, where spiritual perfection is reached. Thus, it must be taken into consideration.

Indeed, both the doctrinal and the cosmological branches deal with reality, but the former explains it internally while the latter does it externally. The *Abhidhamma Pitaka* concentrates most of Buddhist doctrinal sources, and is considered to contain the teachings about ultimate human reality in psychological terms.¹⁰ From this canonical section, I will focus on the *Compendium of States or Phenomena* (*Dammasangani*), the first work of the series. Confronted with the parable of the *Udana*, it may be said to describe the owned reality the blind lived up in facing the elephant. Along the *Compendium*, in surveying the states of consciousness that originate mental content, the recount stresses the sourcing role of experience as relation, as widely articulated as to include even fruits of representative imagination as objects of interaction.¹¹ Moreover, perception is just one mental state among a large repertoire, which also contemplates wrong views of the kind the heretical and the blind held in the aforementioned story.¹²

This position matches the utterances of the *Udana*, for it scrutinizes reality at a human scale, in order to work out praxis and, eventually, achieve liberation from worldly attachment. In terms of the relation to the external world, what we have here is a definitive location of the object of contact inside the mind. However, the external world continues to be ultimately sourcing, for even ideation remains within the range of the senses, and the inwardness of the objects of sensuous cognition is not substantial but experiential. In light of this, our inward conditional limits and the Nibbanic doctrine are compatible.

¹⁰ *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*, trans. Caroline R. Davids (London: Royal Asiatic Soc., 1900) XXVI

¹¹ *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics* 2 (see footnotes 1 and 3).

¹² *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics* 98-99.

Where does cosmology stand here? I will answer by setting the *Three Worlds* in place. The description of reality given by Phya Lithai consists in a spatiotemporal world picture where physicality prevails. Apart from the world without material factors, all other strata are substantially material. Yet, even where the matter is absent, the spatial notion of emptiness remains; all its realms are distinctive places with a specific location. Celestial creatures above the human realm, as well as suffering entities below it, exist and join reality the same way we do. No parallel dimensions are found in the text. The existence of things in nature is based on indistinct material factors, which provide them with the independent and universal existence proper of external reality. The physical world picture goes further in specificities, rendering detailed cosmographical and geographical accounts. Likewise, the vertical stratification of the realms goes on to dispose inhabitable layers at measurable distances. In this vein, the inaccessibility to other realms for humans is put in terms of physical far-ness. Moreover, an account of the celestial mechanics is also presented.

Allowing that the cosmos matches the external world is not feasible, for its instances are not available in external reality. If we deem academia reliable regarding geography, topography, and astronomy, let alone life sciences, we cannot grant any correspondence between the text and reality, neither external nor internal, neither in the past nor in the present. My suggestion is that cosmological texts offer this seemingly external explanation as a vivid metaphor of human experience,¹³ with the purpose 'to enhance the usefulness of the *Abhidhamma*'¹⁴ by making the teaching more understandable. In this vein, something that calls my attention about the *Three Worlds* is that cosmic realms are always 'of somebody': the dwelling beings determine the realms they experience. Although plenty of observations could be made about this, I will limit myself to what is probably the most obvious one.

¹³ Lithai 30.

¹⁴ Lithai 45.

The two worlds of only a remnant of material factors and the world without material factors are attainable solely by means of meditation. Those who succeed at mastering one of the five levels of meditative absorption are destined to be reborn in one of those realms. Mastering meditation means entering and enduring certain states of detachment from the sensuous world. The higher the level of meditation, the more radical the rapt becomes. Meditation is carefully explained in the *Compendium*, and interestingly, the increasing abstraction required for advancing the practice corresponds with the progression towards emptiness that signifies ascending through the realms of the *Three Worlds*. From the standpoint of that correspondence, coming into existence in the higher realms seems like a metaphor of meditative achievements here and now. The following clues may bring the point home. First, celestial dwellers are reborn only by instantaneous birth, which is consistent with their entering such domains without biological (only mental) intervention. Second, experiences held by these beings ought to be emptied in the process of detachment. Thus, their reality dissolves in abstraction, and so does their cosmic realm. These poetics are *inward* in nature. We can say that sentient beings symbolise human beings, that indistinct material factors represent the substance of the external world (which blurs away experientially in the process of spiritual perfecting), and that cosmic realms are elaborations on our possible experiences.

Cosmic Understanding

Thus read, the *Three Worlds* is consistent with the inward conditional limits of reality. Nevertheless, there is a peculiar entity in the text that was not accounted for in our exposition, one that brings along serious problems to our thesis: the Cakkaratana, the gem wheel that reveals the identity of the universal king. This magical artefact comes into being on its own at the dawn of every cosmic age because of the merits accumulated by the king-to-be. The gem wheel waits in the depth of the ocean until his birth, and when the propitious moment comes, it emerges from the water and cuts across the sky to meet its owner. Thus, the gem wheel shows his people that he is the universal ruler, the Cakkavatti king. The power of the wheel is immense:

The gem wheel has great and splendid supranormal power. If any come to pay their respects to the gem wheel, to prostrate themselves before it, and to venerate with popped rice and flowers, the gem wheel will cure their fever or sickness, enable them to live well and to eat well, bring them great prosperity and much progress in gaining wealth, riches, and prosperity.¹⁵

How would inward poetics account for this? The sort of metaphor I have argued for binds up the cosmological structures and the manifold of experience; it is not related to single narrative elements, unless directly concerned with that binding. Not everything in the text is necessarily metaphorical. Some things are there for aesthetic purposes, structural reasons, etc. It could be the case that the Cakkaratana does not fit inward poetics. However, this is too important an entity as to dismiss its poetical nature just like that.

What is the image of the gem wheel representative of? The poetics therein has to do with a *cosmic understanding* of this cosmology not as a metaphor of experience, but as a structural framework of reality, proper of times when even geography had cosmographical bases.¹⁶ In Thailand, royal artefacts similar to the gem wheel were part of everyday life in ancient eras. Archaeological investigation demonstrates that unanimated items were believed to warrant the prosperity of rulers and their cities, to cure illnesses, to bring the rain, and so on.¹⁷ In that distant past, the story of the great ruler and his wheel seems to have helped in legitimating the animistic cults involved, as well as securing the Royal Throne onto a solid politico-religious ground, granted the king is the source of all mystical power.

The magic of the gem wheel is not a thing of bygone eras. We have argued that the reality status of the *Three Worlds* is unsustainable for us nowadays. Nonetheless, as Reynolds explains, cosmic

¹⁵ Lithai 139.

¹⁶ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1997) 29-30; Yves Bonnefoy, *Asian Mythologies* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 155-157.

¹⁷ Clarence Aasen, *Architecture of Siam* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1998) 92.

understanding in Thai society took the back seat in modern times, but it never disappeared.¹⁸ From the background, it continues to be an important influence. Cosmic understanding here means: the boundaries between micro- and macrocosm become blurred, Thailand and the universe of the *Three Worlds* find an important overlap, and thus Cakkavatti and Cakkaratana earn a possible place in real life. Grounded on cosmic understanding, there exists the belief that their instantiation in reality are as the King of Thailand and the palladium of the nation, i.e., the Emerald Buddha.¹⁹ Notwithstanding, the counter-argument based on inward conditional limits, non-cosmic in nature, remains flawless: the reality status of such cosmic things is unsustainable for us. The question arises: who are *us*?

In principle, 'us' was meant to harbour the world population of the present age, demarking a point in time rather than a human group. In a more restricted sense, 'us' refers to those with the minimum background on geography, topography, astronomy and life sciences to recognise the fantastical nature of Lithai's account, as cosmic things lack instances. In any case, 'us' intended to articulate our conclusion as a universal claim. But cosmic understanding, if rightly attributed to Thai society, makes the *Three World*'s diegesis and reality diegesis different, but related grounds of possibility, 'operating in different domains of human conception and practice.'²⁰ Cosmological and non-cosmological understandings can, therefore, coexist without blocking each other. Hence, the set here termed 'us' cannot embrace the Thai, which is a very odd conclusion given that the cosmology, the King and the palladium in question are Thai. Even rarer, the underlying non-cosmic claims are: the palladium of Thailand is not real,

¹⁸ Lithai 26.

¹⁹ This correspondence has been observed by Reynolds in Lithai and Frank Reynolds "Ramayana, Rama Jataka, and Ramakien: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Buddhist Traditions," *Many Rāmāyanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 50-59; Aasen; Barbara Leitch LePoer, *Thailand: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO Library of Congress, 1987) [0]15 Jul 2011 < <http://countrystudies.us/thailand/>>; Fred Kleiner and Mamiya Christin, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: Non-Western Perspectives* (Florence, KY: Cengage Learning, 2009); among others.

²⁰ Thongchai 30.

fundamental institutions of Thai society make no sense, and practices related to them are outside reality. That would be just offensive, and I am not to support them by any means. However, I have no arguments to give up and say that the Cakkavatti and Cakkaratana are real.

Why is the palladium not real? The gem wheel is not a physical item, but an idea. Therefore, its reality is to be granted or denied in virtue of its connection to the external world – to the Emerald Buddha. As for the latter, I suggest a non-cosmic approach based on our findings. Let us recall what the inward conditional limits are about. Reality involves a unique relation between an individual and the external world. The relation is ruled by two maxims that state the primary conditions for existence and reality, respectively. The external world is the ultimate source of reality; its existence is independent and universal. Experience has a double meaning: (1) the happening of the relation; and (2) its outcome, given as owned reality. The latter constitutes all there is for human experience, always dependent and never universal. This account limits itself to the awareness of reality engaged with perception as the level of analysis, i.e., the cognition and recognition of items. Further stages of ontological relation transcend the simplicity of this delimitation. Following these guidelines, let us begin the examination, based on my own experience of the Emerald Buddha.

On the impressive altar, under a solemn multi-storeyed parasol, and backed by the murals depicting the three worlds, the sixty-six-centimeter high image of green jasper comes into appearance.²¹ Thus the item satisfies the maxim of existence: whatever appears does exist, and whatever exists can appear. The possibility of its being real is granted, in accordance with the maxim of reality: whatever is real does exist, but not whatever exists is real. The piece that completes the puzzle lies in the linkage of the appearance with the external world, which is confirmed by the sensory foundation of the mental content at issue. As a definite source of certainty, other observers present in the *ubosot* of Wat Phra Kaeo corroborate the appearing of the item. I ask

²¹ Eric Roeder, "The Origin and Significance of the Emerald Buddha," *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* 3 (Fall 1999: n.p. Web. 20 Jun 2011).

around; we all recognise it as the Emerald Buddha. After all, the image is real despite the alleged unreality of the palladium. But are they not the same? Perhaps they are not.

Our discussion on the reality status of the Emerald Buddha calls for clarification about the poetics behind the gem wheel. Although inward poetics cannot manage the case, we can still conceive the linkage between the Cakkaratana and the palladium as metaphorical, but in a different sense. A metaphor is a figure of speech that involves the setting forth of something as something else. Even the most unusual metaphorical encounters are based on a poetic hinge, something common to the objects in relation. For example, we have said that being reborn in the world without material factors is a metaphor of meditative achievement. The metaphor is: reincarnation as detachment. The hinge is the change of state involved in both cases, and it is what vibrates in the foreground of the poetic gesture. The twofold nature it displays (cosmic/mental) makes plain the categories gathered together by the inward poetics. The relation proposed thereof can be summarised in a single metaphor: cosmic structure as owned-reality structure. The poetics related to the gem wheel is not inward, but *outward*: cosmic items as external items. From this standpoint, the relation between the wheel and the statue is not anymore of instantiation, but metaphoric, which could make room for a reading of the item as a symbol without paranormal implications. However, under cosmic understanding, the gem wheel is a metaphor of the Thai palladium, and the hinge is inevitably twofold: the kinship with the king and the display of supernatural qualities.

The Supernatural

The first component of the poetical hinge is sufficiently documented; I will not elaborate on that. The second, on the other hand, is much more important, for it what calls the reality status of the item into question. My position is that the royal link of the palladium becomes meaningful because of its paranormal efficacy, and that the kinship between it and the gem wheel is based on their consonances regarding benign magical agency. As an example of such consonance, we can cite the occasion when the Emerald Buddha was believed to

spread its curative wellness in times of public health crisis during the epidemic of cholera of 1820 in Bangkok.²² But why should we take this anecdote as a case in point? Why are the magical qualities of the palladium inevitable? Because the case we are tackling exceeds the borders of outward poetics; the qualities of Thai palladiums are intermingled with a tradition of animism broader than the *Three Worlds* and the Emerald Buddha.

The agency attributed to unanimated items has always been part of the Thai world picture, and continues to determine the complex panorama of 21st century Thai religion. The cosmologic understanding is by no means sourced exclusively by the work of Lithai. Cosmic understanding is the context of the *Three Worlds*, not the other way around. Although our approach to Buddhism has been chiefly philosophical here, the system of beliefs and practices at issue is much more intricate.²³ The Emerald Buddha joins that cultural fabric, where other items are also believed to hold like qualities.

A good example is the case of spirits cults. Tradition has it that the city pillars in the proximity of the Grand Palace in Bangkok provide the guardian spirits of the metropolis (Phi Muang) with a material substance to inhabit, which serves as the focal point of veneration. As a reward, they keep the city safe and prosperous. Pillars of that kind, as well as other sorts of physical receptacles, fulfill similar purposes all over Thailand.²⁴ Indigenous spirits are also referred to in the *Three Worlds*, as part of the inventory of beings dwelling the realm of suffering ghosts. Here we see how the inward and the outward poetics coexist: the ghostly realm as a mental state (where ghosts are people in such psychic conditions) versus the *Trai Phum* ghosts as the Thai ghosts. These practices intermingle with the well settled spirit-medium cult in Thailand, which also contemplates the magical efficacy of monastic and royal spirits (e.g., the Luang Po,

²² Kenneth Wells, *Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities* (Bangkok: Bangkok Times P, 1960) 38; Roeder.

²³ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36 (3 Oct 2005): 461–487

²⁴ LePoer; Aasen 88.

King Chulalongkorn), as well as Indian and Chinese deities,²⁵ exerted through the supernatural utilisation of the medium's body.

To complete this picture, Buddha images have their own place within this landscape, and their features differ significantly from the ones of the Cakkaratana. Distinct from the latter, of which is said to have no mind,²⁶ consecrated Buddha images are considered to have a kind of knowledge or intelligence, viz. *ñāṇa*. Sacred Thai sculptures undergo a ceremony called *suat poek*, after which the eyes of the images, being previously covered in wax, are opened to the light of the rising sun, thus becoming possessed of such mystic intelligence.²⁷ Seemly, *ñāṇa* might account for temperamental dislikes among them, cause of a big deal of troubles, as the alleged conflict between the Phra Bāng image and the Emerald Buddha of 1782 may well illustrate.²⁸ Thai palladiums are embedded in this complexity, towering as a distinctive category themselves. It is this dimension of the Emerald Buddha that is under revision. That is why the statue is found to be real without granting its reality as a palladium.

The Thai concept of palladium involves supernatural qualities by definition, as much as the Cakkaratana. The problem with the qualities is serious, and compels us to re-examine our claims on owned reality. To what extent does the unique happening of experience determine reality? To what extent do claims on brooms, ploughs or baskets, on spirits or palladiums, acceptable? Once more, what is the scope of reality? We are back to our first question. Owned reality involves variations in the definition of what something is. We discern the what-it-is through the concept behind it, which is the key for the recognition of the item. Thus we acknowledge the Emerald Buddha as a sculpture, a Buddha image, etc. At this ontological level, recognition only demands the previous knowledge of the concept and the subsuming of the item under it. For example, upon agreement as to the concept of sculpture, the Emerald Buddha is a sculpture for everybody, plainly real without a doubt. However, in cases of disagreement where the

²⁵ Kitiarsa; Bonnefoy.

²⁶ "[N]evertheless appears as if it does." Lithai 139.

²⁷ Wells 76-80.

²⁸ Wells 35-36.

concept is deemed impossible, ontological grasping shrinks to nothing.

Our issue is not only with the sculpture, but with the concept of the palladium that makes it what it is. We have explained that what is real is always something; that in the claim 'X is real', X cannot be overlooked. 'The palladium of Thailand' is indeed our X, for the Emerald Buddha *is* the palladium of Thailand. Ruling out spirits' reality status would be an easier move, because there is a substantial difference between real things and the spirits themselves striped from their physical receptacles (the pillar, the medium). No instances can stand for their existence. That would suffice to make a strong case against their reality without having to deal with paranormal qualities. The palladium of Thailand, on the other hand, does not possess the Emerald Buddha; it *is* the statue sitting before us. The tricky part is dealing with the magic qualities that furnish the identity of the item. The case becomes all the more difficult when considering that supernatural qualities are not secondary in the sense of depending on primary ones. Events such as recovering from illness can be deemed indebted to the agency of palladiums, conclusions that are supported by cosmic understanding and the chronological relation between facts, e.g., making the plea and feeling better afterwards; then the believer believes. Of course, causes other than magical agency can be proven to be behind dying or surviving illness, but there is always room for accommodating the efficacy of the supernatural where infallibility is lacking, where uncertainty prevails. Contemporary developments in science have rendered abundant theories where randomness and chance play a crucial role. The Theravada argument of insufficient metaphysical insight comes to support the case for the existence of the supernatural. The conditions for cosmic understanding are propitious.

The room for the supranormal in reality is, therefore, based on cultural background, on cosmic understanding, which strictly speaking provides people with the same kind of certainty that, for instance, astronomy offers about the sphere-like shape of the earth. We just believe in that account without experiencing its instantiation in full, let alone taking part in the long chain of experiments and calculations that have built up that piece of knowledge over time. Except for

astronomers and astronauts, we (*us*) simply and wholeheartedly believe. This is the tension between realism and idealism announced at the outset, one not concerned with the history of philosophy, but with the fact that experience can be seriously dissociated from the ideas in our mind. Both cosmic and non-cosmic views fail to keep with reality as the level of analysis. Instead, we have been shifted from existence to truth without alternative, for the discussion has abruptly landed on the fields of knowing and believing. The cosmic outlook is: the palladium is real for it is truly there in the fullness of its mighty existence. The position of *us* is: the palladium is unreal because it is not the case that such things exist, i.e. because the proposition is not true.

The Model

I am convinced that contradictions of this kind are not inherent in reality, but a matter of perspective. In what follows, I will introduce a reformulation of the conditional limits of reality under the distinctive model of this research, which I call the Heart of God (Figure 1).

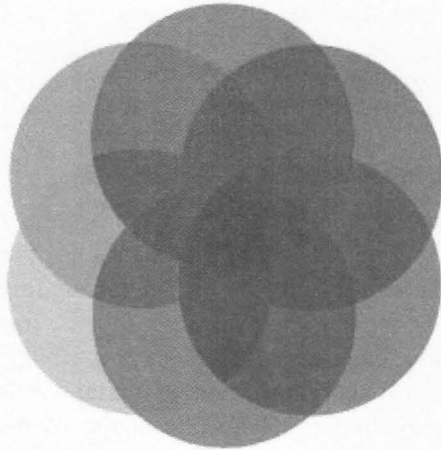


Figure 1: Heart of God

Reality happens, and the dimension in which it happens is manifold. When dwelling on the real, when facing the incontestable, wondering beyond the evident is the natural move of human intelligence. One must always ask, "Who should bring the answers?" "Who should bring the rain as ancient palladiums did to cosmic kingdoms out of mercy?" Questions of importance force the wise to kneel; then only silence stands as revelation. If the inquiry is fair, silence becomes intelligible and unveils. Thus one recalls the archaic way of sapience that we are essentially made of. Naturally, betrayal is unavoidable. It is imperious to set silence into language in order to share its fruits. When presented with such voices, the mood can be no other than distrustful, in the sense of reluctance to the illusion of truth they bring about, towards an understanding of them as a retrograde vehicle that leads the hearer, again, back to silence. Questions of importance are elusive. Proper questioning demands asking what one is meant to ask, what one veritably wishes to know, and nothing else. We ask: what is the scope of the real? The answers we may receive from silence will not, therefore, speak of the truth. The real and the truth are two different things; that is not to be forgotten. But again, who should bring the answers? I wish to pose the question on reality to the Heart of God.

The Heart of God is the gathering of everything that is. That means the gathering of us, for it is within us that the real blossoms. Who are those we call us? Who are *us*? This has been asked before, in a manner that highlighted more rifts than unity. This time, however, the definition opens up itself and embraces the totality of human beings at every point in time, i.e., the dead, the living, and those-to-be. In the visual rendering of the argument, there are circles of light superposed to each other, bound up in the middle of a Black Centre. Those spectres of varied tones are the men and women dwelling in the world and sharing the experiences of being alive. They are *us*. Insofar as a metaphor, the six circles in the image conjure the uncountable single lights leading the long-lasting pulse of the Heart of God. Actually, they are not precisely circles, for their expansions and contractions, i.e., the convergences and divergences of their paths, are unfixable in a finite visual image. All models are limited, and this is

not the exception. Still, a metaphoric understanding of the visual rendering will bring us closer to its essential source.

Reality appears. That is the backbone of the model. It is appearance that ultimately defines the conditional limits of the real. That what appears, in whatever way, is undisputedly real; its coming to our presence in an effective way testifies to that. Effectiveness means having the power to determine, in one way or another, the experience of our life. This is the essential quality of appearance. From such claims follows the maxim: whatever appears is real, and whatever is real appears. To illustrate the maxim of appearance, let us think of the Emerald Buddha once more. It is a real sculpture and a real palladium; the Devatās involved in its making are as real as the mortal artists who skilfully formed it out of rough jasper, and the heavenly dwellings of the former are not less real than the earthly houses of the latter. How can this be? The scope of reality is inseparable from the particular way things are real; it is what makes the idea of reality sensible. How can this be? That is a fair wondering indeed, which hits upon the nucleus of the problem. The question *how* stands out, at last, as the key to the riddle. Similar to ancient cosmologies, there are realms of beings in the Heart of God where reality takes place. The location of that happening defines how things are real.

The Black Centre of the Heart of God is the spring of reality. In this realm lies the *experiential place* each individual holds, where things of all sorts do appear. The darkness of the Black Centre is indebted to the total absence of language in the confluence of all lights, which makes this one the realm where understanding has no room. It is from darkness we all come from. The reality of neonates is characterised by the fact that everything is covered in black, and the differences between the self and the other are blurred. That means, no recognition and no making sense of what appears. Still, experience happens as the bare coming into appearance of the item. The darkness endures for some time, but language eventually comes. Thus, the spectral light of the young new being expands itself towards the periphery as to become a distinct beam of light.

For those already engaged in language, the duration of this indeterminate state is negligible and its metaphysical weight minimal. The appearing of the item is a flashing blast in the darkness that immediately describes a line towards the outer extreme of the spectral beam. The destination of the blast is the region of monochromatic Solitude, the farthest from the Black Centre, where spectral lights stand without overlaps. Before getting there, the blast must cut across the realm of the Crucible Ring, which is the never-homogeneous colourful fabric of relations where the spectres mingle. Language starts here, where darkness ends.

In the Crucible Ring something astounding occurs: we do share. It is in this realm where we can point at the jasper statue as the same item, where the recognition and verbalisation of its qualities happen in ways that provide us with a common ground regarding *what things are*. Survival of humankind is based on that, for it allows offender and defender, friend and friend, lover and loved, to dwell together. Here a great portion of life happens: we agree and disagree, understand and misunderstand, discuss and conclude. Politics, business, research, and many other human activities of the utmost importance come to pass in this realm. This is a fundamental plane we can never lose sight of.

A great deal of philosophical elaboration has been devoted over time to what I term the Crucible Ring. Our glance over the well made it clear. Realism and idealism fused it with the Black Centre under what we called outward conditional limits, founded on two conditional principles, namely universality and independence, in radical dissociation from productive ideation. The external world was thus granted primacy. The standpoint of the Heart of God renders the issue differently. Following the maxim of appearance, reality is not characterised by the conditional principles, but by appearance. Universal independent reality is not to be neglected, but it is just a part of the whole. Still, the conditional principles allow for the common ground regarding *that things are* in the external world, so that we can share them as *what they are*.

Universality and independence grant reality status to what does not appear, e.g., to what we are told about. That seems to contradict the maxim of appearance, as well as our claim about effectiveness, for

nothing can hold effect if not there. This may sound scandalous, because it seems to stand against the reality status of what is not directly experienced through the senses. That is certainly not the case. Let us examine my own case: before arriving in Bangkok for the first time, the Emerald Buddha was already part of my reality. How can we explain that? I was not there to perceive it and allow for its appearance. We could argue: the item was real because someone was there to see it. However, that would not do, for it does not change the fact that I did not perceive it myself. Now then, as soon as I arrived on Thai soil and stood before it, it became part of my reality. Then I could discern that it was there before my arrival and foresee that it would continue to be afterwards. Note that we moved from reality to existence. The conflict at issue here is between the maxim of appearance and the ones of reality and existence. The sense of reality as existence pervades in the latter two, which is the source of the confusion. My position is that the Emerald Buddha existed before and after my being there. To account for that claim, we abandon the maxim of reality and keep with the maxim of existence as a formula: *whatever appears does exist, and whatever exists can appear*. The meaning of the terms must be reframed, though: existence is the possibility of the item to appear, while reality is the happening of appearing.

I am not saying that the Emerald Buddha is unreal *a priori*. The Buddhist method presents an efficient device to deal with this kind of issues. For example, we said the *Three Worlds* offers an account of meditation based on inward poetics. There, the highest achievement is symbolised by the realm of 'neither perception nor non-perception,'²⁹ which breaks with dichotomy as the nature of perceptive activity. I will borrow the neither/nor device and assert that before my arrival in Bangkok, the Emerald Buddha was neither real nor non-real, as long as my reality is concerned, because for fitting either category, the item must appear. Yet, I can discern its universal and independent existence *a posteriori*, based on my experience of the item, i.e. once it lies within my reality.

²⁹ Lithai 261-262.

Personal Perspective

There is a gap in the reasoning. For something to be real it ought to appear. However, before experiencing the Emerald Buddha, I devoted a great deal of thought about it, as to finally embark myself in the present research. Is not that exerting an effect over my life? How could it do so without appearing? What I experienced in reality was not the item, but the ideas about them and the relation of those ideas with me as a person. The idea concentrates my experiences before, during and after every sensuous contact and unites them in a single compound. The idea does not require the item to exist, nor to be real, for it is an item in its own right. Images coming from books and videos, information about significance, aesthetics, history and so on, together with all memories and previsions involved, constitute the nucleus of innumerable connections of which the idea is made of. That belongs in my reality insofar as it appears. The connection of the idea with the statue is something completely different, which regards the problem of truth, but that link has nothing to do with the existence or the reality status of the items involved. Statues can exist or not, and so can true or false ideas.

The philosophical observations about the universality and independence of reality are plausible regarding sensuous items. Following that view, we could term that region of the Crucible Ring the *universe*, in which echoes the observable character of its phenomena. Hence, the distinction here is made between *universal reality* and *owned reality*. Next, we will focus on the latter, because there rests the incompatibility between cosmic and non-cosmic understanding that puzzles our approach to the Emerald Buddha as the palladium of Thailand. Besides, reality in absence of individual human beings is nonsense, as we have discussed throughout. That makes owned reality, I claim, the necessary starting point of all thought. I shall call this the truthfulness of the *personal perspective*. In order to sharpen the terminology, I will choose the word *persona* to nominate what the spectral lights in the Heart of God intend to express.

Ideas exist. They are real and shareable. This sharing is never as universal as it is regarding sensuous items. It is words that are at issue,

and the extent to which their meanings change from *persona* to *persona* is notorious. There is a point of coincidence, to be sure, where shallow definitions of 'what it is' occurs. Where general concepts prevail, a match is possible, although at a low level of ontological commitment. That performance is necessary, though. The other extreme of the relation to being is the intimate and essential standing of the item within the plexus of connections of the whole world of a *persona*. That is not necessary for, say, buying tomatoes in the market. I request two ripe tomatoes and the seller gives me what I asked for, end of the story. That shallowness is the point of departure towards the deepness of the essential. For our purposes, that path we need not walk, for our question is of a different tenor. What is important is that the idea, be it the fruit of passive or active ideation, does exist and is real, for it appears and determines in a strong manner the course of life.

There are very populated areas in the Crucible Ring, where plenty of spectral lights overlap. They share idioms, worldviews, experiences, and everything that can be shared with different levels of intensity. However, the closer the blast gets to the Solitude, the less numerous the coincidences become. The ontological shallowness is left behind more and more, resulting in increasingly exclusive regions of sharing. From the global to the local, from acquaintances to friends, the blast brings together less people as it extends across the Heart of God. There the palladium exists and grants existence to its universal instance – the Emerald Buddha. Behind has been left the obviousness of universal reality. Hence, cultural context, religion, formal education, what mom and dad said, acquire a singular power. It is not my task to determine here the solidness of the connection between universal and owned realities. Instead, we must pay heed to the following: in the case of the Emerald Buddha, the concept of palladium prevails over sensuous experience. It has the power of directing the lives of whole populations comprised of *personae* in which spectral lights the palladium is real. If a *persona* is not at all related to Thai culture the palladium of Thailand is not there; therefore, they cannot share it with, say, a fervent Thai monk. From such a disconnection does not follow that the palladium is not real; it

is just in a different region of the Heart of God. In light of this rationale, the contradiction between cosmic and non-cosmic melts away. From a personal perspective open to the Heart of God, the scope of the real is immeasurable. This peculiar feeling of reality has been caught in flight by Venezuelan poet Wilfredo Machado. His 'Fable of an Invisible Animal' renders it with elegance in a single sentence on empty canvas:

The fact – particular and unimportant – that you do not see it, does not mean that it does not exist, nor that it is not here, watching you from somewhere in the blank page, ready and eager to jump on your blindness.³⁰

Towards a Concluding Remark

I wish not to repeat the partial conclusions presented throughout this study. Indeed, the last section synthesises the resolution of all partial findings into a single theoretical compound. Instead, I want to reflect on the import of the model and the ideas here presented. Therefore, I will address the subsidiary questions of this article, i.e. *why* and *how*.

Let us further our insight through the contrast between the monk and the non-believer. The palladium of Thailand, crystallised through the existence of the Emerald Buddha, is real all along the spectral light of the Thai monk. The image blasts in the Black Centre, and cuts across all the way through the Crucible Ring to reach his Solitude. The non-believer, after the inception of the concept in his owned reality (once he knows it), shares as much with the monk as their overlapping allows, namely the shallow concept, the perception and recognition of the image, and so on. However, at a certain point, upon the exhaustion of the consonance, the palladium will become something different from what it is in the light of the monk. Thus the same item in the universe will be two different things. Both outcomes

³⁰ 'El hecho – particular y sin importancia – de que no lo veas, no significa que no exista, o que no esté aquí, acechándote desde algún lugar de la página en blanco, preparado y ansioso de saltar sobre tu ceguera'. Wilfredo Machado, *Libro de Animales* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1994) 49, (translation is that of the author).

are nevertheless real. The totality of the Heart of God, where things find actualization, I will call the omnipresent realm of *The Real*, in order to distinguish it from universal and owned reality. The latter strata are subsidiaries of the real, in a relation of interplay that brings about the dynamics of human interactions.

The question arises: if everything is real, what is the point of a notion that adds nothing? The answer is contained in the subsidiary questions we posed at the beginning, although reframed in a more general vein. Universal items and ideas are uncontrovertibly real. Why are they said to be real? The reason is of an experiential nature: they appear in an effective way in the world of a *persona* (maxim of appearance). As to how they exist and are real, that is determined by where, among the different regions of the Heart of God, they happen to appear (personal perspective). That makes the notion of The Real sensible, for it allows us to distinguish neither/nor cases on the one hand, and disconnection cases on the other hand. About the first case, the lack of contact with a physical item does not rule out its being real in the universe, although it implies the absence of the thing in the owned reality. The adjective 'real' applies as to signal particular modes of coming into appearance, i.e., one reality from another. Items such as palladiums are real, and their way of being real is to stand in one region or another of the Heart of God. This metaphysical location depends on the position of the *persona* engaged in the relation: the human being as ontological venue.

In a sense more concerned with praxis, understanding of the Emerald Buddha in the way proposed here offers a profound insight into Thai society and culture in the global context of The Real, from which an open conception of togetherness is drawn, hopefully to the benefit of nationals and foreigners. When it comes to relate with *personae* from different regions of the planet, from different areas of the Heart of God, authentic *respect* for their reality must transcend a 'live and let live' attitude. Upon disagreement, for the sake of a hollow respect for other people, the so-deemed unreality of their reality might be simply bypassed. Respect demands deference not only to *personae*, but more fundamentally to the world we dwell together, to The Real itself. It seems beneficial to discern the reality of

things that are far from our spectral light, so that business, diplomacy, politics, personal relations, and whatever other interactions can develop properly, for things beyond our reality, as brought into appearance by the word or the gesture of the other, are absolutely real. Otherwise, the picture of reality turns into a lamentable monochromy where only one spectral tone prevails. That is the danger of totalitarianism and isolation.

One last remark: it is clear that interactions cannot be supported only on the blind acceptance of the real in its whole extension. It demands, very importantly, truthfulness. I am persuaded that the question concerning truth can be better tackled from the perspective that was introduced here, although, and perhaps precisely because of it, it poses a big deal of questions. Dealing with the problem of truth in a comprehensive way is in order.

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