

## *One*

# INTRODUCTION

### *Texts in Context*

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No one today would dismiss the importance of “scripture” as a significant category of understanding in the study of world religions. Exactly what is meant by “scripture,” however, is a serious question—not just what should count from any specific theological perspective (although that too is a serious question, as we shall see), but rather what is meant from the standpoint of the academic study of religion. This question is a major subtext of the present volume, which brings together a wide range of scholarship on the diverse sacred-text traditions in South Asia.

By way of introduction two matters must be considered. The first part of this introduction places the present work in context, with a brief overview of recent Western scholarship on “sacred text” in the religious traditions of South Asia. The second part reviews the contents of the volume, chapter by chapter, touching on the major themes considered and approaches taken. Looking carefully at individual instances of hermeneutical reflection by native exegetes, this volume reveals a complex diversity of text traditions: how texts are utilized and understood in their individual hermeneutical contexts. Through this diversity each chapter raises particular issues that resonate elsewhere in the volume. These “harmonic resonances” sounding within and across traditions indicate elaborate, multidimensional family resemblances, to use Wittgenstein’s expression, rather than any set of universal characteristics. Thus, the present volume stands as a challenge to any approach to scripture in South Asian traditions asserting a static definition or valorizing any single methodological approach.

Although contemporary scholars have made great progress in learning to recognize and avoid unhelpful reductionisms, the crucial task of assessing

the authenticity of inherited presuppositions remains an ongoing concern. What are these inherited presuppositions? A full retrospective analysis is hardly possible in this brief introduction. Suffice it to say that the Western view of sacred text in South Asia was strongly influenced by early scholars like F. Max Müller and Georg Bühler, whose translation and editorial work purported to identify the “Bibles” of the Indian traditions. The presumption at work here was that the Other is like us; the major sacred text of each tradition, once identified, was supposed to function in much the same way the Bible functioned for Christianity (usually understood as European Protestantism). The use of the scholarly category “scripture” in this manner promoted a false essentialism that was unable to stand the test of time. The fact is that the practitioners of South Asian traditions did not, by and large, understand their holy books in a manner analogous to the Christian West, so it is not surprising that this approach to scripture failed to do justice to the text traditions it claimed to reveal.

A corrective to this early approach to Asian sacred text traditions that gained currency after the Second World War emphasized what we might call “basic” religion. Stationing themselves within the discipline of the “history of religions,” scholars dissatisfied with the limitations of the “textual” approach to the study of religion shifted the primary focus onto the so-called primitive or archaic forms of religious expression, downplaying the importance of the scriptural and commentarial traditions in favor of uncovering foundational categories and motifs through which they hoped to reveal the universal patterns and qualities of human religious expression. Although distancing itself from the false essentialism of earlier understandings of scripture, this history-of-religions approach often led to a different problem: the procrustean marginalization of scripture and commentary traditions. South Asian religious traditions play host to a wide range of sacred-text genres, utilizing and understanding these text traditions in a variety of ways central to the tradition’s self-understanding. How is this textual diversity to be understood? What is the most productive and authentic approach to the dynamic complexity of South Asian sacred text traditions that emerged over four millennia? Today some scholars are grappling with this question from a number of perspectives.

Miriam Levering is a good example of such a scholar. In the introduction of her book *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, she writes, “Clearly there are problems with defining the category [scripture or sacred text] by trying to arrive at lists of characterizing features. If instead we attend principally to the dynamics of the relations that people have had with texts, their ways of receiving texts in the context of their religious projects, then the whole matter becomes more hopeful” (p. 11). Levering’s work follows this insight in the search for a generic concept

of scripture, identifying dynamic polarities and relationships rather than seeking static universal characteristics. The present volume both supports and challenges the major contribution made by *Rethinking Scripture*. Levering's emphasis on scriptural dynamism and relationship is supported throughout the present work; the search for a "generic definition" is not. The approach of traditional hermeneutics would be jeopardized by an *a priori*, wholesale adoption of any framework, despite its dynamism. My overarching concern in the present work is not to develop a generic concept of scripture; rather, it is to allow a multiplicity of hermeneutical traditions to emerge, to enable the voice of the Other—the native exegete—to be heard.

The inspiration for this concern finds expression in a seminal work read by each author involved in this project, and quoted by many: Jonathan Z. Smith's essay, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in his book *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982). Like Levering, Smith suggests that a history of religions that is exclusively preoccupied with the primitive or the archaic is limited. He claims that such preoccupation has "given the historians of religion license for ultimate acts of imperialism, the removal of all rights to interpretation from the native, and the arrogation of all such rights to themselves" (p. 43). Smith calls for the reassessment of such an approach and "look[s] forward to the day when courses and monographs will exist in both comparative exegesis and comparative theology, comparing not so much conclusions as strategies through which the [native] exegete seeks to interpret and translate his received tradition to his contemporaries" (p. 52). It is this inquiry into the native exegete's strategies of interpretation and translation that I am calling "traditional hermeneutics."

Scholarship over the past ten years has laid the foundation for a serious attempt to apply Smith's program and formulate a meaningful, scholarly presentation of traditional hermeneutical problems and strategies. The last decade has seen a real shift in thinking about the "the holy book." In 1979 the Berkeley Religious Studies Series published Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's volume *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts*. This volume focuses heavily on Christian text critical work, but it also includes contributions by Roger Corless and Lewis Lancaster, who consider texts in the Asian context by challenging certain presuppositions about the meaning and contour of text traditions in Indian religions. In her introduction to the volume O'Flaherty describes the overarching concern like this: "For surely the ultimate task of the true textual critic is the interpretation and understanding of the *text in its context*" (p. xiii, italics mine). She goes on to describe this task as a "chicken-and-egg" enterprise, her way of referring to the difficulty of entering the hermeneutical circle of an alien text tradition. Such entry is the explicit goal of the present study in traditional hermeneutics.

The well-known work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith has had a profound impact on the study of religion. During the last ten years he has become increasingly concerned with the understandings of scripture in world religions. (I understand he will soon publish a book on this topic.) As director of two related NEH Humanities Summer Seminars, one in 1982 on "Scripture as Form and Content," he has facilitated much scholarly thinking on this topic. Levering's volume is a direct product of the Smith seminars, as is the 1984 publication of Thomas B. Coburn's "'Scripture' in India: Towards a Typology of the Word in Hindu Life" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Coburn offers important insight into fundamental questions of orality and canonicity in the Hindu context, providing the most valuable typology of Hindu sacred texts presently available, but his own final observations suggest the serious limitation of a typological approach. The very concept of "Hindu" is late, and its use can support a misleading reification. As Coburn points out, "The development of the narrowly 'Hindu' phenomena of scripture has often been intertwined with non-'Hindu' matters" (p. 454). It is just this intertwining (further vitiating any straightforward typology) that the present volume seeks to reveal, even while supporting much of what Coburn says about the fluidity of canon and the primacy of the oral.

The centrality of oral tradition, of recitation in its performative, liturgical, ritual, and aesthetic dimensions, cannot be overemphasized in the context of South Asian religion. The central role played by the oral text has been clearly demonstrated in William A. Graham's *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*. In a brief chapter called "Scripture as Spoken Word: The Indian Paradigm," Graham covers some significant ground by focusing on Vedic and non-Vedic recitation, the latter illustrated by a recent study done on the *mānasa* recitation tradition of modern North Central India. The central role of oral texts in Indian religion is not exhausted by Graham's succinct treatment; several authors in the present volume build upon Graham's seminal work.

Finally, an important contribution to the fuller understanding of scripture in South Asia is found in Harold Coward's *Sacred Word and Sacred Text*. Coward devotes one chapter each to Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, giving a general overview of these religious traditions through a sustained discussion of oral and written texts, concepts of language, and canonicity. As an introduction to the scriptural traditions of South Asia, these chapters are exemplary in their concern to recognize the real differences that exist between South Asian and Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Coward is careful to qualify all of his generalizations, but as the scholarship of the present volume indicates, even the most sensitive generalizations tend to valorize particular perspectives or hermeneutical moments from

within the tradition. (Compare, for example, Coward's observation that in Hinduism "once the full enlightenment experience is achieved, the 'ladder of scripture' is no longer needed" (p. 106) with Vallabha's concept of scriptural realism examined in chapter 8 of the present volume.)

The most recent scholarship on scripture, coupled with J. Z. Smith's urgings to listen to the voice of native exegetical traditions, has shaped each chapter in the present volume. In one manner or another, from the standpoint of varied interests and diverse methodological sensibilities, each author is committed to the view that traditional hermeneutical perspectives may no longer be ignored if something meaningful is to be said about sacred texts in the South Asian context.

Each contributor is a scholar of religion whose linguistic training and area of current research provides direct access to the scriptural and commentarial traditions of at least one South Asian religion. And, crucial to the concept of this volume, each has explored the special ways in which particular traditions delineate, think about, understand, and utilize their sacred texts. In an important sense each chapter may be viewed as a collaboration with the native exegete, giving voice to our traditional counterparts who themselves engaged in a self-conscious reflection on the sacred words of their own text traditions.

David Carpenter's "Bhartṛhari and the Veda" (chapter 2) begins this study. The central question posed by Carpenter is whether Bhartṛhari understands the *Veda* as a "canonical text." Contrasting this fifth-century grammarian's view of the *Veda* with Western notions of religious canon and text, Carpenter shows that the general Western presuppositions about the nature and goal of a religious hermeneutical enterprise are incommensurable with Bhartṛhari's understanding of the *Veda*. Carpenter writes, "The *Veda* is understood to be a manifestation of the ultimate Word (*śabda*) that underlies phenomenal existence . . . [and] is more important for what it *is* and what it *does* than for what it 'means' " (pp. 19–20). Carpenter links the dynamic, nonreferential character of the *Veda* directly to Bhartṛhari's philosophy of language, which asserts the ontological primacy of the "verb" over "substance" that has been central in the Western subject-predicate analysis of language. Hermeneutics, for Bhartṛhari, at least in the context of the *Veda*, has little to do with elucidating the meaning of canonical texts for a religious community.

The next two chapters examine the traditional hermeneutics of Śāṅkara (eighth? century C.E.), the founder of one of the most influential schools of Vedānta. Anantanand Rambachan, in his contribution (chapter 3), unfolds the significance of the *Upaniṣads* according to Śāṅkara, situating Advaita Vedānta's hermeneutics in the context of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā's marginalization

of the *Upaniṣads* as ancillary to the *Vedas* and not independently authoritative. Śāṅkara rejected this marginalization by presenting philosophical arguments that purport to show the *Upaniṣads* as the logical, adequate, and productive source of knowledge about ultimate reality (*brahman*). In his examination Rambachan shows that philosophical arguments about the nature of *brahman*—often extracted from the hermeneutical context by Western scholars—are employed to help establish the claim of independent Upaniṣadic scriptural authority contra Pūrva Mīmāṃsā.

Taking a slightly different tack to establish the mutuality of philosophical and exegetical concerns in Advaita Vedānta, Francis Clooney (chapter 4) exposes a foundation for this mutuality by focusing on terminology found in the *Brahma Sūtra* differentiating two major approaches to Upaniṣadic texts. The first is “coherence” (*samanvaya*), concerned to show that all contested Upaniṣadic passages support the Vedāntic reading of the *Upaniṣads*’ overall theme; the second is “combination” (*upasaṁhāra*), concerned with the appropriate handling of intratextual multiplicity in the context of meditation. These two approaches to the *Upaniṣads* serve as complementary foci for understanding Advaita Vedānta as an interplay of philosophy and exegesis. According to Clooney, “by *samanvaya*, the multiplicity of texts is understood to point to a single topic, *brahman*; by *upasaṁhāra*, it is understood how that single topic, *brahman*, can be known through . . . meditation on the multiple texts” (p. 55). Clooney goes on to show how an increasing reliance on the ritual/exegetical principles of Pūrva Mīmāṃsā (notwithstanding the serious disagreement regarding the authority of the *Upaniṣads* described by Rambachan) inexorably weds Advaita Vedānta’s philosophical program with its scriptural context.

The next four chapters continue an investigation of traditional hermeneutics in Vedānta, shifting from Advaita to the devotional schools. Chapters by Patricia Mumme and Vasudha Narayanan provide two very different windows to Śrīvaiṣṇavism, the community associated with Rāmānuja (eleventh century C.E.). For her contribution, Mumme (chapter 5) focuses on the exegesis of a single half-verse, *Bhagavad Gītā* 18:66a, which fueled a major schism of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community. The central issue at stake is whether this scripture enjoins surrender (taking refuge in the Lord) as an independent and superior means of liberation. If so, the established path of devotion is relegated to a provisional and ultimately illusory status to be abandoned with the advent of true surrender. Mumme compares this hermeneutical strategy with the Advaita Vedānta depreciation of devotionism as provisional to the path of knowledge, and argues that Vedānta Deśika, a major Śrīvaiṣṇava thinker, rejected this understanding in favor of a contextual approach that he believed protected Śrīvaiṣṇavism from the Advaita-like hermeneutic of his rivals.

Considering a completely different dimension of the Śrīvaiṣṇava hermeneutic, Narayanan (chapter 6) examines the development of the oral and written commentarial tradition based on the *Tiruvāymoli*, a Tamil poem written by Nammālvār, a poet-saint of the ninth century C.E. Piḷḷān's commentary on the *Tiruvāymoli* written in the eleventh century—the first commentary ever composed on a vernacular religious work—utilized a hybrid language that blended Sanskrit with Tamil. This commentarial medium itself stood as a challenge to Sanskritic exclusivity. From the start, commentaries on the *Tiruvāymoli* provided an avenue for innovation, challenging social and religious norms through both the form and the content of the commentarial genre. In her examination of this commentarial tradition, Narayanan reveals that the conscious decision to *write* commentaries must be understood in the context of a soteriological valorization of oral commentary, the salvific efficacy grounded in a process of transmitting sacred teachings orally from teacher to disciple that continues up to today.

The basis of commentarial authority is an issue taken up in Daniel Sheridan's chapter on Madhva's interpretation of scripture (chapter 7). By considering the contemporaneous biography of Madhva (thirteenth century C.E.), the *Sumadhvavijaya* written by Paṇḍitācārya, alongside Madhva's own writings, Sheridan argues that genealogical claims, such as the presentation of Madhva as the incarnation (*avatārā*) of Vāyu, should not be dismissed as "dispensable, mythological overlay." Coming to grips with the interpretation of sacred texts, as well as the composition of commentaries, may not be detached from the biographical and theological context that explains the commentator's interpretive authority. In the case of Madhva this authority stems from his encounter with Vyāsa, the legendary seer who is responsible for the compilation of the Vedas, as well as the composition of the *Mahāpurānas* and other foundational religious texts. According to the *Sumadhvavijaya*, Vyāsa is Madhva's guru and Vyāsa is the *avatar* of Viṣṇu. These claims are crucial for establishing Madhva's preeminent hermeneutical authority. Understanding the centrality of the Vyāsa–Madhva relationship enables us, according to Sheridan, to recognize Madhva not as a philosopher burdened with mythic accretions, but as a theological interpreter and commentator whose mind—according to the tradition's self-understanding—is informed directly by the mind of God.

In the final consideration of the Vedāntic context, Jeffrey Timm (chapter 8) examines Vallabha's view of scripture. Vallabha, the fifteenth-century founder of an influential form of devotional Vedānta in North India, engaged in sophisticated arguments about the nature of scripture while maintaining the absolute primacy of scriptural revelation over all other means to knowledge. His hermeneutic melds together a fundamentalism that serves to exclude views that conflict with his designated canon, with a contextualism

that affirms God as the author of all teachings. The apparent contradiction between the fundamentalist and contextualist approaches is resolved through a consideration of the ontological foundation of his theology, which explores the “logic” of his hermeneutic of scriptural realism.

Bringing the first part of this volume to a close is Madhu Wangu’s consideration (chapter 9) of the social and political forces shaping the emergence of a new text tradition in Jammu-Kashmir during the nineteenth century. Dogri Rajputs, the rulers of Jammu for centuries, extended their control over Kashmir in the mid-nineteenth century, bringing political and social stability to a previously tempestuous region. The political integration of two states that were religiously, ethnically, and geographically distinct was facilitated by the emergence of new text traditions that reflected a deliberate infusion of the Dogri Rāma cult into the pantheon of Kashmiri Tantric Śaiva deities. Illustrating the way scriptural text traditions emerge and evolve in response to unique patterns of political and social circumstances, Wangu describes and analyzes the *Śrī Śrī Mahārājñī Pradhurbhāva* written to extol the splendor of the Kashmiri goddess Khīr Bhavāni, to establish Khīr Bhavāni’s association with Rāma, and to influence the political and religious loyalties of the Dogri rulers’ Śaivite subjects.

Shifting the focus to the non-Hindu South Asian religions, the second part of this volume includes five chapters considering traditional hermeneutics in Jain, Buddhist, Islamic, and Sikh traditions. John Cort’s examination (chapter 10) of Jain scripture in a performative context begins by developing a distinction between two notions of canon, which he calls “Canon-near” and “Canon-far,” interpretive categories distinguishing the locus of primacy and authority in a given scripture. By presenting three instances of contemporary Jain understandings of their own scripture—recitation of the *Kalpa Sūtra*, “scripture worship,” and the relative-authority of religious texts—Cort exposes the nineteenth-century error of first-generation Western scholars of Jainism who assumed the preeminence of Biblical-style canon (Canon-far) and seized on a single fixed Jain canon in the form of the forty-five Āgamas. Instead, Cort reveals the existence of multiple, contextual interpretations of scripture and canon in the contemporary Jain understanding.

Frank Hoffman’s contribution (chapter 11) to this volume considers the implications of recognizing the importance of the oral “text” in the Pali Buddhist tradition. Deviating somewhat from the program of presenting a moment of traditional hermeneutics, Hoffman reviews some of the latest scholarship on orality in general and on Buddhist hermeneutics in particular. As a philosopher, he is keen to maintain the centrality of a contemporary philosophical engagement with Buddhism, yet his analysis of the written text as only one sort of text breaks down a pervasive and misleading



dichotomy between elite (textual) traditions and popular (oral) traditions operating in much contemporary Western scholarship.

The second Buddhist contribution is José Cabezón's study (chapter 12) of Vasubandhu's text, the *Vyākhyāyukti*, a self-conscious effort to justify the authenticity of early Mahāyāna Sūtras. When these Sūtras first appeared, they were not accepted by many in the Buddhist community; hence, commentators like Vasubandhu developed various hermeneutical strategies in an effort to authenticate these scriptures. In mapping out the various forms that these arguments for authenticity took, Cabezón reveals Vasubandhu's concept of scripture, canon, and authenticity. This Mahāyāna program of defending scripture against outside criticism is rooted in a rejection of the opponent's historical and philological criteria in the determination of canonicity. In place of such criteria Vasubandhu asserts a philosophical principle, "accordance with reality," arguing for an broader intercanonical definition of the Buddha's word that allows for the authenticity of Mahāyāna Sūtras.

Nikky Singh's contribution on Sikh hermeneutics (chapter 13) examines the poetry of Bhāi Vīr Singh, the nineteenth-century interpreter of the *Gurū Granth*. In this chapter Bhāi Vīr Singh's poetic exegesis of Sikhism's most important scripture is examined in the context of the intellectual and cultural ferment of the day.

Finally shifting to the context of Islam in South Asia, Carl Ernst (chapter 14) considers the emergence of a new literary form within the Chishtī Sufi community in the fourteenth century. This new genre, called *malfūzāt*, was the recording of the oral teachings of the Sufi master. Ernst's detailed description offers insight into the process of a developing text tradition that begins with poet Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī Dihlawī's *Morals of the Heart*, an account of the oral teachings of his master. The immediate popularity of this work as an exposition of Sufi teachings led to a number of imitative efforts, and eventually to the establishment of a *malfūzāt* genre and rivalries among texts for canonical status in the community. In his analysis, Ernst takes up the question of the "inauthentic" *malfūzāt*, texts shown to be fabrications on the basis of Western textual criticism, but that have been generally accepted by the Chishtī community as authentic.

By now the perceptive reader will have recognized that this volume, or the approach of traditional hermeneutics itself for that matter, is not about to neatly synthesize such diversity to provide "useful" definitions of scripture, sacred text, canon, orality, and so on. Each contributor to this volume provides a window onto how texts are used and understood in the context of a single South Asian religious community. Unlike the blind men in the parable about the elephant, even after sharing our individual discoveries we

may be no closer to answering, once and for all, the question, “What is scripture *really*?” For this is the wrong question to ask. According to the insight of the traditional hermeneutical approach, any conclusion of this order is more or less problematic, at worst asserting a false essentialism and at best suggesting a typology of universal characteristics that, when misused, becomes a procrustean bed.

Better at this point, at least, take seriously the advice of Wittgenstein that we stop, look, and see. And instead of assuming that there must be something common, we see a whole series of intricate relationships, complex interconnections, similarities of detail and approach between diverse traditions, disparate avenues taken by traditions claiming the same foundational texts, a continuous overlapping and crisscrossing of shared features along with simultaneous discontinuities. This, of course, does not mean that we are limited to nothing more than descriptive analysis, unable to make judgments or come to theoretical conclusions, but it does mean that as we look toward the Other, in our effort to understand, our conclusions must be provisional, our methodological approaches tentative. Anything less is a return to the often unselfconscious exegetical imperialism that has at times marred Western scholarship on South Asian religious traditions.

This book attempts to embody a sensitivity to the Other, giving voice to the Other through representative, in-depth analysis of hermeneutical moments from India’s major religious traditions. Such a program depends on a shared belief that much more significant hermeneutical insights may emerge from the traditions themselves than from an appeal to some unifying, extra-traditional, theoretical construct. For this reason the volume repudiates exegetical imperialism and its implicit judgment that traditional exegetes are capable of little more than naive, superficial, or formulaic encounters with their own text traditions. Quite the contrary is the case, as the following chapters will show. Traditional thinkers encountered scripture in a sophisticated process of understanding their inherited text tradition, grappling with issues of canon and creativity, concerns with text and meaning, issues familiar to students of contemporary Western hermeneutics.

Finally a note on method. Approaching the sacred texts of South Asian religions with a sensitivity to traditional hermeneutics is, by necessity, polymethodic. This methodological diversity mirrors the complexity of sacred texts, a category that is fantastically fluid. In each essay the respective author’s empathy for the traditional understanding of the text acts as a tether allowing freedom to consider the historical, theological, exegetical, and socio-political vistas of South Asia’s diverse religious landscape without arrogation of all interpretive authority. Connecting sacred texts with the panorama of religious projects supports Levering’s claim that any generalization about scripture—when it is defined as a fixed body of written material carrying

normative, prescriptive status for a given religious community—is woefully inadequate. This study of traditional hermeneutics in South Asia reveals a formulation and interpretation of text traditions driven by the entire spectrum of human concerns: soteriological, theological, philosophical, socio-political, liturgical, ethical, legal, ontological, epistemological, aesthetic, and nearly every combination thereof.

In a volume of this sort—a collaboration in which a variety of languages play such a central role—the question of consistency poses some difficult choices. In some matters I have chosen to exercise an editor's prerogative, making changes contributing to uniformity and consistency. In no instance did I make such changes at the expense of the authors' meaning, I hope.

To the degree possible I have tried to maintain consistency in the use of italics. This is difficult in the case of the "holy book," which is typically not graced with italics according to current style sheets. Transposing this rule of thumb to the diversity of text traditions and the various valorizations and hierarchies of scripture did not make much sense. In fact, indiscriminately applying such a rule of style may even reflect the sort of false essentialism that this volume is keen to avoid. For the most part I have simply followed the individual author's preferences when it seemed appropriate to override my decision to italicize the titles of all texts. For example, in Carpenter's chapter we see *Veda*, not *Veda*. This should in no way be taken to imply that the *Veda* is a sacred text equivalent to the Bible, while the *Bhagavad Gītā*, because it is italicized, is not. Another issue concerns the pluralization of foreign terms (for example, *dharmas*, *ācāryas*, and so forth). Although technically incorrect, this manner of pluralization seems preferable to any alternative. Finally, the question of transliteration and diacritical marks looms large in a volume of this sort. Here the guideline suggested to authors was this: When in doubt, provide the transliteration and diacritical marks according to the appropriate convention. Since there is no common guide applicable to the diversity of languages employed herein, I left all matters of transliteration up to the individual authors, who are the experts in their respective language areas. The possible inconsistencies between chapters that might result from such an approach seemed preferable to any sort of editorial control I could imagine.

This book is a collaborative effort that has taken shape over two years through panel presentations at the annual meetings of the Association of Asian Studies (1988) and the American Academy of Religion (1988 and 1989), and during a 1988 Harvard NEH Summer Institute, "Teaching Comparative Religion." Many individuals have contributed in different ways, too many to properly acknowledge individually. My job as editor was

greatly facilitated by the intelligence and cheerful diligence of each contributor. Two authors require special recognition: José Cabezón, who helped me to formulate the first AAS panel that led to the conception of this book, and Patricia Mumme, who graciously invited me to join a 1988 AAR panel, "Text and Commentary," she had organized. Four of the five papers presented at that latter panel find their latest incarnations in this volume.

Editing a volume of this sort for the first time was a learning experience. Miriam Levering's advice saved me from some early false steps. John Carman was one of the very first people I spoke to about my idea to formulate this book; his words of encouragement along the way did more to carry things forward than he probably imagines. And a special recognition is due Harold Coward, whose contribution to this volume in the form of encouragement and intelligent criticism was invaluable.

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