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# Translating the Lotus Sūtra into Social Action: Hermeneutics and Public Dharmology

Bee Scherer

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I investigate the principles and possible applications of scriptural exegesis of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* (SDP, *Lotus Sūtra*)—a core Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture—for social advocacy and activism. I approach this process of emic-critical interpretation in dialogue with Christian *Public Theology as Public Dharmology* and suggest utilizing the principles of established in Christian 'theological hermeneutics' (Klemm 1986). By adducing the existentialist philosophical theology of Paul Tillich (*Systematic Theology* 1951-1963) and Martin Buber's theology of relationality (*I and Thou* [1923] 1970), a Buddhist dharmological *prius* can be analogously established. An applied scriptural dharmology emerges in dialogue with Christian theologies, in particular Latin-American Liberation Theology (*La Teología de la Liberación Latinoamericana*),<sup>2</sup> Feminist,<sup>3</sup> Queer<sup>4</sup> and 'Crip'<sup>5</sup> Theology. The latter becomes the focus of a case study; on textual, literary, philosophical and theological levels ableist language and imagery in the SDP are scrutinized and the potential of translating the Lotus Sūtra for 'crip liberation' is gauged.

Scriptural translation into *Social Activism* implies an understanding of 'translation' in this context, which is akin to constructivist social theory semiotics found, e.g., in the works of Michel Foucault (discourse and power), Deleuze & Guattari (*becoming* and rhizomatics), in Feminist writers such as Donna Haraway, and in contemporary intersectional queer theory and critical disability studies.<sup>6</sup> Prominently, the 'new sociology of knowledge' (Law 1986) proposes a non-essentialist social-constructivist understanding of 'translation.' Hence, *Actor-network theory* (Callon 1986, Latour 1986, see Latour 2005) focusses on the transformative negotiations of issues at the heart of the social building blocks (networks as

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<sup>1</sup> A first version of this paper was given at the *International Lotus Sutra Seminar* hosted by Risshō Kōsei Kai 立正佼成会 in Tokyo, 12-16 June 2018.

<sup>2</sup> See Hennelly 1997 and De La Torre, ed. 2015; among celebrated Liberation Theologians (such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino) particularly important inroads into liberatory scriptural hermeneutics were made by Juan Luis Segundo and José Severino Croatto, see Córdova Quero 2010: 208.

<sup>3</sup> See Isherwood and McEwan 2001, and Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See Althaus-Reid 2000; Goss 2002; Cheng 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See Eiesland 1994; on the usage of 'crip' in critical theory see McRuer 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Cp. Scherer 2019.

relational groups, movements, and organizations) of our temporally and spatially ever moving societies. Of course, taking context, discourse and relationality serious in the study of texts is not a new thing and philologists, philosophers and theologians stand in the long tradition of those who recognized linguistic transferal as only one aspect of a much wider and much more complex process of temporal-spatial cultural transferal. The SDP is a prime example of a text (and 'scripture', see below) fruitfully impacting on and enculturating into new and changing contexts.

The methodological and hermeneutical background, however, of such broader translations deserves elucidating and robust reflection, in particular when the translation consists of 'theological' (see below) or 'activist' transferal into Buddhist 'praxes'.<sup>7</sup> Examples of inroads towards a Buddhist Social Theory or a theory of Buddhist activism can be found, for example, in the writings of Peter Hershock (e.g. 1999; 2000) and David Loy (e.g. 2003). This means, we need to reflect on hermeneutics, application & advocacy, and—in dialogue with Christian Theology/-ies—on the contested notion of 'theology' within academic Buddhist Studies and Buddhist communities.

### *Hermeneutics*

Starting with textual translations, philology usually utilizes three often interpellated spheres of working with texts:

- 1) establishing the basis of translation as the **text** itself by collecting sources (manuscripts etc.), reading sources (paleography etc.), applying textual criticism and producing, where appropriate, critical editions of texts.
  
- 2) preparing a translation by focus on **language** paying attention to de Saussure's famous differentiation of *parole* (language as vehicle of communication and meaning) from *langue* (language as linguistic system). This stage includes works on the levels of the nexus of sound and meaning; grammar (phonetics, morphology, syntax) and context (diachronic: the historical development of Language; synchronic: the diversity of register such as standard,

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<sup>7</sup> The term 'praxis' denotes the inextricable nexus of thought system and practices, see Payne 2004, 3-5.

religious, or 'High' language vs. *Vulgärsprache*; literary *genus*; regional/dialectal features etc.

3) The third sphere refers to **understanding**. Text and language in form and context are transferred (translated) into dialectical interpretation of meaning reflected at the end of a translation process in a different language version (*versio, recensio, interpretatio*) of a text.

Methodologically, hence, hermeneutics is foremost theory of interpretation; yet, as we will see later, the remit of philosophical hermeneutics opens up to 'practical philosophy', 'speculative ontology' and 'theological hermeneutics' (Klemm 1986): Hermeneutics is both methodology and innate to epistemic insights and human sciences '(1) inasmuch as their object displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of...text-interpretation' (Ricoeur 1971: 529).

Translation and interpretation contain interesting ambiguities reflected in the origin and genealogy of the word hermeneutics: the Greek *hermēneuō* (ἑρμηνεύω, 'to translate, to interpret') is derived from the Greek messenger of the Gods, Ἑρμῆς *Hermes*, who 'translates' the will of gods for the Humans. Plato (424-348 BCE) identified texts and communications as imitations (μίμησις, *mimesis*) of true reality (Plato). In his (middle period?) dialogue Κρατύλος *Cratylus*, god Hermes is all that: messenger, interpreter, thief and liar—inventor of language. Hence, for Plato, duplicity is the precondition of signification.

Language (*parole*) is a system of signs carrying of multivalent meanings. Communication itself is a process of translation and interpretation. *Meaning* of a communication/text (ἐξήγησις *exēgēsis*) can differ from *significance* of a text for a reader (εἰσήγησις *eisēgēsis*). Any hermeneutical inquiry therefore must be aware of the philological circle regarding isolated elements vs. the contextual whole. Elements of meaning can be pre-conceptualized, but they must be confirmed or modified during the process of interpretation. Expanding to philosophical hermeneutics, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Wahrheit und Methode [Truth and Method]* 1960) sees *exegesis* (textual interpretation) as

part of the text itself: any text is 'open' for interpretation, asks for interpretation; understanding is achieved and mediated by language (linguisticity of interpretation) and interpretation can be seen as the melting of two 'horizons': the horizon of the *text* and horizon of the *reader*. It is important to note that an ultimate, objective, extractable meaning (*sensus efferendus*) is unachievable since such a process would try to abstract translation / interpretation from its own contexts and from the contexts of the subject(s) (translator).

Already Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) critiqued the myth of objectivity, the notion of objective positivism of science as the last residue of—as he saw it—monotheism's irrational ultimate truth claim. For Nietzsche, truth is

a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they *are* illusions.<sup>8</sup>

(tr. Gilman et al. 1989: 250)

Critical theorist Jürgen Habermas therefore points to particular contextual interests and power dynamics, as does Foucauldian and Critical Discourse Analysis. The Ciceronian *Cui bono?* (from his criminal defense oration *Pro Roscio*, 80BCE) proves pertinent. The Religionist Thomas A. Tweed calls for 'exegetical fussiness' pointing to the fact that not only objects and processes of academic investigations are in constant flux but also the subject of the investigators themselves (Tweed 2006).

Text, reading and reader are caught in a net of temporal and spatial contexts of understanding: translation is determined by the horizons of experience and understanding and the nexus of socio-historical conditionality of text, reading and reader. Every translation

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<sup>8</sup> *Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauch einem Volke fest, kanonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, daß sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind, Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münzen, in Betracht kommen* (Nietzsche 1873).

is a contingent interpretation (*exegesis*). Wider exegesis explicates the contingent understanding by different modes such as didactics (taking into consideration the previous knowledge and understanding of the recipient), descriptive and explanatory (e.g. in preaching/homiletics) or by academic analysis. In applied modes there is room for the usage of explicative exegesis for transference into context-alien semantic nexus and the application to contemporary issues according to e.g. factual content; historical value as source, treatment of a problems.

### *Theology*

Following David. E Klemm (1986), we can talk about *hermeneutics* as interpretative discourses variably focused on object (theory of interpretation, e.g. text-centered), activity (Practical Philosophy) and/or subject (Speculative Ontology) of understanding. Such translation into interpretative discourse becomes ‘theological’

when the whole structure of understanding is overturned within any of the three types. It primarily asks about the depth dimension of understood meanings, the understanding process, and the whole of being; it seeks to understand appearances of the divine. (Klemm 1986: 34)

Klemm uses ‘depth’ in the tradition of the post-Kantian, existentialist philosophical theology of Paul Tillich (1951-1963) and of Martin Buber's theology of relationality ([1923] 1970); the term points to the unconditioned *prius* to subject-object dualism, as ground and ‘abyss’, “not caught in a definition, literal picture, or reflection on the whole” (ibid. 46). In the Christian tradition this is God (Greek θεός *theos*). In the absence of a creator god in Buddhism, Buddhist contexts necessitate us to speak differently of ‘grounds and abysses’ in theological hermeneutics. While we can point to *nirvāṇa* ('cessation') such an—albeit arguably non-ontological—abyss in Early and Theravāda Buddhist soteriologies; in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophies such a ground is variously denotable as *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *citta* (mind), *tathātā* (thusness), *dharmadhātu* (realm of [ultimate] reality), or anthropomorphized in the eternal Śākyamuni of the SDP or in the various Adhi-Buddhas of tantric Buddhist systems such as (Mahā-)Vairocana, Samantabhadra and Vajradhara.

In this way, the term 'theology' can be divorced from a literalist, etymological meaning that points to the belief in a creator god as its ground and reference point; instead, 'theology' can be used fruitfully for interpretative-critical reflections relating to the various Buddhist reference frames of existential 'abysses.'

Still, introducing the term 'theology' into Buddhist academic discourse is regularly met with unnecessary suspicion fortified by, to a degree, tedious, literalist pedantry. This is infelicitous, not only in the context of interfaith dialogue: 'theology' as a term functions as a pragmatic short-hand for emic-religious academic inquiries and critical reflections, and is certainly a defensible choice from a global-western perspective (see Cabezón 2000; Gross 2000): using 'theology' for Buddhist academic reflections does not necessarily imply endorsing western ethnocentrism or colonialism nor does it necessarily show ignorance of the terms' etymology (including the allusion to a creator God, the Christian *theos*) or history; instead the term 'theology' can appear as a clear and plain marker of a discursive locus that is both emic-religious and academic-critical. Alternative terms such as 'Buddhist Constructive-Critical Reflection' (Makransky 2008) or 'dharmology' (Corless 2000, see below) can appear stilted and / or inaccessible. Critique on the level of *parole* is often a discursive strategy to avoid engaging on the level of *langue*.<sup>9</sup> Buddhist 'theology' is certainly not a less valid scholarly reflection by the lack of a creator god (*theos*) in Buddhism. The usage of the term is particularly fruitful for Comparative Theology: Buddhist academic reflection can benefit from reflecting on emic-religious modes of critical engagements predominantly developed with (Judeo-)Christian contexts. 'Liberation Theology', 'Practical' or 'Public Theology', 'Feminist', 'Queer', and 'Crip Theology' can inform parallel emic-critical reflections of Buddhist thinkers.

As a Buddhist scholar, I have started exploring and using these modes and I do not mind being called a 'Buddhist theologian'; given the tediousness of terminological contestations of the term theology within academic circles I tend to use Roger Corless' term 'dharmology' instead (coined by Taitetsu Unno, see Corless 2000: 105n1). Yet, as José I. Cabezón remarks, ultimately, neologisms are established or rejected by usage consensus (Cabezón 2000: 25). My own positioning as a queer-feminist Buddhist scholar and thinker is important to lend authenticity and integrity to my inquiries as one of the three ever-changing, *crossings and*

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. 'antisemitism' is not less toxic by virtue of the fact that Arabs are also Semites; islamophobia is not less real by virtue of haters not being 'afraid' [φόβος *phobos*, fear] of Islam).



*dwelling*s in Tweed's terms, i.e. the factors of scholarly forming of understanding and translation as interpretation: subject-(inter)action-object.

Just as Public Theology in Christianity aims to develop applications of Christian thought for social justice and the public good, I have become more and more interested and involved in Buddhist Theology and Buddhist practice as intimately linked to charitable work, advocacy and social activism; we can describe these fields as global Socially Engaged Buddhism—a term coined by Thich Nhat Hanh (Thích Nhất Hạnh); or as 'Humanistic Buddhism' (人生佛教, *rénshēng fójiào*) focusing more on the lineage of Chinese Buddhist modernist thinkers such as Taixu (太虛; Tàixū, 1890–1947), Yin Shun (印順, Yìnshùn 1906–2005), Tzu Chi 慈濟 (Cíjì)'s master Cheng Yen 證嚴 (Zhèngyán, 1937–) and Fo Guang Shan 佛光山's master Hsing Yun 星雲 (Xīngyún, 1927–). Or we may want to call this 'Practical' or 'Public Dharmology' in analogy to Christian theological usage. In the Asian contexts, some fruitful inroads have been made for a Buddhist-Christian cross-pollination within comparative Public Theology/Dharmology (e.g. Chung 2006).

Practical or Public Dharmology practiced in academia is subject to the same rules and limits of scholarly engagements as any Humanities and Social Science subject. As Christian Theologians, Buddhist 'Dharmologists' navigate the same tensions of (dialectically blurred and disentangled) insider-outsider positionality and reflexivity. A Buddhist theologian is not the same as a preacher or a 'Dharma Teacher'<sup>10</sup> although a scholar can also be a Buddhist teacher and vice versa. Buddhist theologians 'expound' (*saṃgrāhiṣyanti*)<sup>11</sup> scripture just as dharma teachers, but as Theologians they apply critical thinking and analysis upon their tradition within their religious thought-frame but outside of primarily devotional, contemplative or propagating contexts. (Of course, Buddhist thinkers might argue that using the academic methods can be skillful means—or 'appropriate means': Reeves 2002—in themselves for spreading the dharma)!

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<sup>10</sup> dharmabhāṇaka, chos smra ba, fāshī pǐn 法師品 SDP ch. 10.

<sup>11</sup> ya ito dharmapa | ryāyādantaśa ekagāthāmapī dhārayiṣyanti vācayiṣyanti prakāṣayiṣyanti **saṃgrāhayiṣyanti** li | khiṣyanti, likhitvā cānusmariṣyanti, SDP 10, 225.4 Kern; but the Kashgar recension reads *saṃgāyiṣyamti* 'recite' (213 a4 Toda 1981), Kumārajīva has 解說 jiěshuō 'explain/comment' T. 262 30c18 (乃至一句, 受持、讀誦、解說、書寫 nǎizhì yījù, shòu chí, dú sòng, jiěshuō, shūxiě) same as Jñānagupta and Dharmagupta (c. 600 CE) T. 264 165b4-5. The Tibetan has *bshad* (Lhasa H 116 mdo sde. ja 133b3 Vol. 53 ACIP; Derge D 113 Vol. 51 mdo sde, ja 84b3 [p. 168 line 3 TBRC scan], Lithang J 58 Vol. 46, 94a10) gang gis chos kyi rnam grangs 'di las tha na | tshig bzhi pa'i tshigs su bcad pa gcig tsam yang 'dzin tam thos par byed dam **bshad** dam chos kyi rnam grangs 'di la ri mo byed na.

As I have elaborated elsewhere (Scherer 2014: 106-108), the insider-outsider dichotomy is still a favored binary within some circles of Religious Studies who are historically uncomfortable with the genealogy of their academic field from Theology. An unbridgeable insider-outsider binarism, however, is a contested and, ultimately, untenable concept: all scholars are (in ever shifting ways) positioned and scholarship can only claim rigor and authenticity by including transparency of positionalities and careful self-reflexivity. For the scholar-cum-practitioner, particular dilemmas can arise in blurred and hybrid insider-outsider spaces; as theologians, working textual, philosophical-conceptual and/or as ethnographers, Buddhist scholars and their writings are noted and scrutinized by Buddhist communities and, in turn, the scholarship co-shapes religious discourses. In result, a Buddhist theologian can attract hostility from both sides—the academic world by supposed ‘more objective’, outsider peers, and from within Buddhist communities. Negotiating these double audiences with intellectual and spiritual integrity is a demanding task, indeed.

#### *The Lotus Sūtra in Context: Crossings and Dwellings*

Theological approaches take religious texts as *scripture* serious. Notably, Wilfred Cantwell Smith postulates ‘scripture’ as a bilateral term, intrinsically relational:

[N]o text is a scripture in itself and as such. People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way.

I suggest: *scripture is a human activity*. (Smith 1993: 16, italics in the original)

The SDP as one of the most influential Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures—a fact particularly evident in its reception throughout East Asia. As such, one would expect the sūtra to lend itself *par excellence* for Historical, Systematic and Practical Dharmology. With Cole (2005: 167) we can accept that the SDP as a scripture and text “is not merely an inert container or storehouse for Mahāyāna wisdom—wisdom that supposedly exists apart from language and literature—but rather that the text is the tool for creating the image of such a self-standing wisdom and, more important, creating desire for that wisdom” (p. 167). The dharmology of the SDP centers around a message of *ekayāna* exceptionalism and self-proclamation as the

ultimate truth at the pinnacle of all other Buddhist teachings, which, as the SDP claims, express various degrees of skillful means. The necessity of the *upāya-kauśalya* / 方便 *fāngbiàn* / hōben is expressed in a series of famous similes/parables such as *Burning House* (ch. 3) and *Prodigious Son* (ch. 4) that extend the core metaphor<sup>12</sup> of the Buddha as Father of all beings<sup>13</sup> which we will encounter further on in our case study on SDP based liberation Dharmology. The scripture expressed the unity and universality of the dharma as Buddhist Teaching and truth as *ekayāna*, among others, in the simile of the *Herbs* which are all nourished by the *dharma rain* (ch.5). The epiphany of the eternal Śākyamuni in ch. 16 (15 Skt, i.e. in the Sanskrit recensions) and its docetism make the SDP particularly problematic for Śrāvakayāna audiences. Core elements of Mahāyāna thought including the generation of *bodhicitta* and the Bodhisattva path are explicitly mentioned but not distinctly elaborated in the SDP. The concept of Buddha nature is clearly implied but the various terms for Buddha nature are not explicitly used (Reeves 2001: 358). The nature of the scripture that could be described as ‘mythic’, ‘poetic’ and ‘ambiguous’ in its core messages (Stone 2003: 640) has arguably rendered it an open text (Tanabe and Tanabe 1989: 2-3)—a scripture suitable for *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*. This includes action *eisegesis* such as the long tradition of the controversial performance of self-immolations from the blueprint of Ch. 23 (22 Skt) (Benn 2009).

Donal Lopez’ recent ‘biography’ of the scripture sketches the SDPs ‘life and afterlife’, dwellings and crossings through 2000 years of its history (Lopez 2016)—leaving gaps around the scripture’s non-Tibetan Central Asian (Khotanese, Tocharian [?], Old Uyghur, Tangut, Mongolian),<sup>14</sup> Korean and Vietnamese ‘lives’. The SDP crossed languages and countries and dwelled by means ornamentations, commentaries and rituals, and attracted learned and pious receptions and, in particularly evident in China and Japan, spawned influential Buddhist movements with millions of followers. Still, there is a relative lack of (extant) Indic and Tibetan commentarial literature on the sutra; is this “due to its dearth of explicit philosophical content” (Lopez 2016: 26)? The attribution of an Indic commentary to Vasubandhu is questionable; the only extant commentary in Tibetan is a translation of the Chinese commentary by Kuījī (窺基, 632-682), student of Xuánzàng 玄奘, 602?-664). In

<sup>12</sup> On metaphors within Buddhist discourses see Scherer and Waistell (2018).

<sup>13</sup> See Klimkeit 1985; Keown 2002; and Cole 2005.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview see Mochizuki 2018.

contrast, surviving East Asian commentarial literature on the SDP abounds (ibid.), in particular by adepts of the explicitly SDP-oriented schools: Tiāntái 天台 (founded by Zhìyǐ 智顓 [538-597]) and Japanese Tendai 天台 (founded by Saichō 最澄 [767-822]); Korean Cheontae/ Ch'önt'ae 천태/ 天台 was established as an independent school in Korea only in the 11<sup>th</sup> c. CE by Uicheon 王煦/ 왕후 [1055-1101]).

Among the most radical and influential interpreters of the SDP features Nichiren 日蓮 (1222-1282) anchored his SDP-centric dharmology in his belief that the SDP was the one true dharma in the degenerate age of the decline (*mappō* 末法); Nichiren's SDP *eisegesis* centered around the interpretation of his own lifetime, life and challenges as prefigured in the SDP (Habito 1999: 295-297; 2009: 196-199). In fact, Nichiren intimated being an incarnation of Viśiṣṭacāritra (Habito 2009: 199; Lopez 2016: 55; 上行 shàngxíng, Jōgyō), the named Bodhisattva entrusted to uphold and propagate in SDP ch. 22 (27 Skt, see chapters 15 [14 Skt] and 21 [20 Skt]). “Nichiren was from the beginning concerned with impact of the Buddhist faith and practice on the larger society”—despite the apparent lack of any clear social ethics or theory in the SDP (Stone 2003: 64).

Yet, as Stone shows, the three eminent examples of contemporary Japanese Socially Engaged Buddhism are all SDP and Nichiren-derived New Japanese Buddhist Movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, Risshō Kōsei Kai (RKK) 立正佼成会 and Nipponzan Myōhōji Daisanga 日本山妙法寺大僧伽). They utilize both the SDP and Nichiren's writings in complex, distinct and divergent ways for their activism (Stone 2003).

Highly influential modern Buddhist thinkers such as Nikkyō Niwano 庭野日敬 (1906–1999), the founder of RKK, translated the Sūtra for the world today (1976; 1981). Acclaimed Humanistic Buddhist masters such as Hsing Yun 星雲 and Cheng Yen 證嚴 prominently include the Lotus Sūtra in their teaching: Hsing Yun wrote, among others, a detailed commentary on the *Universal Gate Chapter*—i.e. ch. 25 (24 Skt) in Kumārajīva's translation (Hsing Yun [1953] 2011) while frequently pointing to example of Sadāparibhuta (ch. 20 [19 Skt]) for his pure view and never-changing respect (e.g. Hsing Yun 2008: 88).

For Tzu Chi 慈濟's master Cheng Yen the Lotus Sūtra is even more central; influenced by Japanese Lotus Sūtra devotion and quite possibly by Niwano and Risshō Kōsei Kai (Yao 2014: 151) she has made the SDP one corner stone of her dharma teachings (see the vast amount of video teachings collected in Cheng Yen 2014).

For instance, preaching in Taiwanese language (with subtitles in traditional Chinese characters and in English) on the *Da Ai TV's* 靜思晨語 *jìngsī chényǔ Wisdom at Dawn* program, master Cheng Yen states:

The Lotus Sutra is very lengthy but we need to adapt it to modern times, modern places, and modern interpersonal relationships. Compare the world population of 200 million people more than 2000 years ago to today's almost 7 billion people; the levels of complications are exponentially different. But if more people can learn about the wondrous Lotus Sutra, everyone's minds may remain undefiled in the Evil World of Five Turbidities.<sup>15</sup>

(Cheng Yen 2013: 21'13''–22'06'', English translation as shown in the subtitles)

The popular Vietnamese Zen modernizer Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-) of the community of interbeing—arguably a figurehead of Socially Engaged Buddhism—published his own modern 'commentary' (in a rather loose sense) on the scripture (2003 and 2009). In his exegesis, Nhat Hanh triangulates the conventional ('historical') and the 'ultimate dimension' of the dharma in the SDP with the 'action dimension' (Nhat Hanh 2009: 11). Nhat Hanh includes his interpretation of the *Universal Gate* and the Bodhisattva Sadāparibhuta chapters (25 [24 Skt] and 20 [19 Skt]) within this action dimension.

Among Western SDP theologians, RKK's Gene Reeves is arguably the most influential: he made the scripture further accessible by usage of plain language (Reeves 2009) and by form of scholarly responsible general exegesis (Reeves 2010).

### *From the Lotus Sūtra to Buddhist Advocacy*

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<sup>15</sup> 所以《法華經》其實是很長，因為我們要適應現代的時代，還要適應現在的空間，還要適應現代人與人之間，這和佛陀二千多年前，世界二億的人口，和現在將近七十億的人口，這種人與人之間的複雜性，真的是距離很遠，不過我們若能愈多的人，來認識妙法華，大家的心，都能在五濁惡世而不染。

Suǒyǐ “fǎhuá jīng” qíshí shì hěn zhǎng, yīnwèi wǒmen yào shìyìng xiàndài de shí dài, hái yào shìyìng xiànzài de kōngjiān, hái yào shìyìng xiàndài rén yǔ rén zhī jiān, zhè hé fótuó èrqiān duō nián qián, shìjiè èr yì de rénkǒu, hé xiànzài jiāngjìn qīshí yì de rénkǒu, zhè zhǒng rén yǔ rén zhī jiān de fùzá xìng, zhēn de shì jùlí hěn yuǎn, bùguò wǒmen ruò néng yù duō de rén, lái rènshí miào fǎ huá, dàjiā de xīn, dōu néng zài wǔ zhuó è shì ér bù rǎn. The 'five turbidities' (五濁 wǔ zhuó *pañcakaṣāya*) describe stages of deterioration within the 住劫 zhù jié (*vivartasthāyī-kalpa* 'kalpa of abiding', the second of the 四劫 sì jié)

Primarily, the SDP appears to promote its own propagation as its ‘action dharmology’: its action in conditioned reality or ‘the human world’ (人間 *rénjiān*), ‘human life’ (人生 *rénshēng*) in terms of Taixu, Yin Shun and their heirs. Spreading the true dharma is the ultimate altruism. The centrality of this SDP advocacy perspective is clear from the early quotation of the pertinent verses 26-29 and 32-35 from Ch. 14 (13 Skt, pp. 283-284 Kern-Nanjio) in Śāntideva’s *Śīkṣāsamuccaya* ch. 19 including the verse 35 (p. 354 Bendall):

anyatra cinteya sadā vicakṣaṇaḥ<sup>16</sup> bhaveya buddho 'hamime ca sat{t}va{ḥ} |

etac ca me<sup>17</sup> sarvasukhopadhānaṃ yaṃ dharma<sup>18</sup> śrāvemi hitāya loke<sup>19</sup>

*In another manner the wise shall always think ‘I shall be a Buddha and so (all) these beings. / I will preach that very<sup>20</sup> dharma that is the foundation of my happiness for the benefit of the world.<sup>21</sup> (tr. Scherer)*

<sup>16</sup> SDP vicakṣaṇo (Kern-Nanjio p. 284 p. Toda p. 138 Karashima p. 41)

<sup>17</sup> SDP evam mama (Kern-Nanjio p. 284 Toda p. 138 as the Kashgar and Farhād Bēg recensions); but most Gilgit/Nepalese point to etam mama see Karashima Trilingual (2) p. 70 note 51.

<sup>18</sup> SDP v.l. yad/yam dharmu (=prakritism); saddharma Kern-Nanjio p. 284 without record, see Karashima Trilingual (2) p. 70 note 54.

<sup>19</sup> SDP Kern-Nanjio/ Gilgit/Nepalese Karashima and Tibetan/Old Tibetan, cf. Chinese Kumārajīva’s T. 262 38a23 ‘for great benefit’ (大利 dàlì). The Kashgar and Farhād Bēg recension has *śraveya / śrāveya ‘tha sarvaprāṇināṃ* ‘Thus, I shall preach the dharma that is the foundation of my happiness, indeed, among all living beings’ (Toda p. 138, Karashima trilingual [2] pp. 41-42) cf. Chinese Dharmarakṣa T. 263 108c23 一切人 yīqiè rén.

<sup>20</sup> SDP: Thus [Kern-Nanjio], I will preach the dharma / I will preach that [Karashima] dharma....

<sup>21</sup> Kashgar recension ‘I shall preach ... indeed, among all living beings’, cf. Chinese Dharmarakṣa T. 263 108c23. Tib. gzhan du mkhas pa rtag tu bdag nyid dang// sems can 'di dag sangs rgyas grub par shog // phan phyir 'jig rten chos gang bstan pa de // bdag gi bde ba'i yo byad kun snyam sems // T. 135ab Karashima trilingual (2) p. 43.

Old Tib. mkhas pas rtag tu bsam ba 'di ma gtogs // bdag dang sems can 'di dag sangs rgyas 'gyurd // bdag gi bde ba'i yo byad kun 'di\_ste // 'jig rten phan phyir chos gang bsgrags pa'o // Karashima ed. (1) pp. 207-208 [= trilingual ed. (2) p. 45].

Dharmarakṣa T. 263 108c22-24 除其瞻勞 住廟精舍 欲令衆庶 / 悉解佛道 若一切人 來聽經法 / 我乃嘉豫 如獲大安 chú qí zhān láo zhù miào jīng shě yù lìng zhòng shù/xī jiě fú dào ruò yīqiè rén lái tīng jīng fǎ/ wǒ nǎi jiā yù rú huò dà'ān

‘Having rid himself of the fatigue from observing (?; 除其瞻勞 chú qí zhān láo), he stays in a monastery, desiring to cause many people to comprehend the Buddha path. (He thinks:) ‘If all people come to listen to the scriptural Dharma, I shall, then, be very pleased as if I had attained great happiness.’ (Karashima trilingual (2), p. 76).

Kumārajīva T. 262 38a22-24 但一心念 / 說法因緣 願成佛道 令衆亦爾 是則大利 / 安樂供養 Dàn yīxīn niàn/ shuōfǎ yīnyuán yuàn chéng fó dào lìng zhòng yì ér shì zé dàlì / ānlè gòngyǎng ‘Just with a single mind, he thinks of causes and conditions for preaching the Dharma, desiring to accomplish the Buddha path and to cause others to do the same. This is an offering which brings great benefit and ease’ (Karashima trilingual (2), p. 76).

This understanding of *hitāya loke* ('for the benefit of the world') sheds light on Nichiren's uncompromising *shakubuku* (折伏) propagation of the SDP as ultimate altruistic advocacy. Yet, there is also the possibility to take SDPs affirmation of the Bodhisattva ideal in combination with its propagation of skillful means as the basis for social engagement and social justice advocacy in a staged approach to propagating the ultimate truth.

For instance, it is no coincidence that the EcoBuddhist anthology *Dharma Rain* (Kaza and Kraft 2000) refers to the famous simile of the herbs in SDP Ch. 5 and starts with a translation of this passage; doing so, the simile is 'mined' for a new, eco-advocacy context. In terms of gender equality, the SDP has contributed insightful discussions, in particular on the basis of the narrative of the 8-year old *nāgā* princess in ch. 12 (second half of 11 in the Sanskrit version) and in the prediction narrative in Ch. 13 (12 Skt). But the findings are indeed mixed (Peach 2002; see also Levering 2002; Scherer 2006: 72; Nattier 2009; Reeves 2009: 108-109) and SDP *after Patriarchy*—with a nod to Rita Gross' ground-breaking 1993 volume—still seems a long way off.

#### *Re-turning (to) the Lotus Sūtra: Public Dharmology of Social Justice*

Indeed, the SDP's radical focus on the ultimate dharma exposes contextual social justice deficits within the scripture in terms of ableist (Scherer 2016b: 255), (hetero)sexist, and gender binarist content (Scherer 2016a: 256). As Reeves recognizes, the scripture "arose in a particular historical context and was composed and translated within particular social settings", making it "not free from perspectives that we now regard as deficient or even morally wrong." (Reeves 2010: 308)

Latin-American Liberation Theologies exemplify how scriptural hermeneutics can be in aid of giving voice to marginalized groups and translate scripture into social action. An example of approaching the SDP from a Public Dharmology or 'liberation theology' will start by not avoiding the cultural-temporal contingencies of the scripture but by acknowledging them. A re-contextualization will be possible through a process of careful, closer-to-wider reading and re-translating of the wider dharmology of the scripture into the smaller contingent details. In the case of scriptural ableism, Christian Liberation Theology of Disability, trailblazed by Nancy Eiesland (1994), demonstrates the potential of liberatory narratives

grounded in religious experience and scripture that counter religious abjection and prejudice. For example, Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus show how both Christians and Buddhists living with chronic illness and dis/ability utilize their faith and practices for meaning-making and transformation (Schumm and Stoltzfus 2007). Further, Buddhist practitioners and thinkers with dis/ability are also utilizing their experiences and praxis as basis for liberation dharmology (Tollifson 1996; Milam 1997).

For scriptural hermeneutics, ableist content and language can be closely scrutinized on the (con)textual level, for elements of poetic/literary ‘over-structuring’ texts (cp. Roman Jakobson’s formalism) and modes<sup>22</sup> they contain; the contextual (pluri)function(ality); and the underlying dharmological syllogisms such as popular mono-causal reductionism of karma theory and moral determinism.

E.g., in chapter 3 we read:

puruṣātmabhāvaṃ ca yada labhante te kuṅṭhakā<sup>23</sup> laṅgaka bhonti tatra / kubjātha  
kāṇā ca jaḍā jaghanyā aśraddadhantā ima sūtra mahyam (122)

na cāpi so dharma śṛṇoti bālo badhiraśca so bhoti acetanaśca (129ab)

manuṣyabhāvatvamupetya cāpi andhatva badhiratva jaḍatvameti / parapreṣya so  
bhoti daridra nityaṃ (132a-c)<sup>24</sup>

*Those who do not have faith in this my scripture, when they are born human again  
are then born idiots, lame, crooked, blind and dull (3.122)*

*[The blasphemer] foolish and deaf, does not hear the dharma (3.129ab)*

<sup>22</sup> such as emotive (expressive, commissive), appellative (vocative, directive) referential (indicative, declarative) and metalingual (interpretative, normative). The SDP is often communicating on the ‘should’ levels of commissive, declarative and normative modes.

<sup>23</sup> kuṅḍakā (‘pots’) Kern-Nanjio p. 95 v.l. khuḍḍakā (‘small’) as in Kashgar p. 50 Toda

<sup>24</sup> pp. 95-96 Kern-Nanjio; Kashgar reads: *manujātmabhāvaṃ <ca> yada labhanti te khuḍḍakā laṅgaka bhaunti tatra / kubjaśca kāṇāndha jaghanya jaḍḍā aśraddadhivā ima sūtra mahyam (122) na jātu te dharma śṛṇoti bālā badhirāśca te bhonti acetanaśca (129ab) manuṣyabhāvatva yadā upeti andhatva badhiratva jaḍāmbhāvam parapreṣya so bhoti daridra nityaṃ (132a-c)* Toda p. 50-51.

Passage text not extant in the Gilgit ms. (p. 42 Watanabe).

nam zhig mi lus thob par gyur pa na/ / nga yi mdo sde 'di la ma dad pas/ /de na de dag lus gnag 'theng por 'gyur/ /sgur po zhar ba ldongs pa glen zhing smad (122) D 37b

byis pa des ni chos kyang mi thos te/ /de dag sems pa med cing 'on par 'gyur (129ab)

de dag mi yi lus su gyur na yang / /ldongs pa dang ni 'on pa glen pa ste/ /rtag tu dbul zhing gzhan gyis mngag par 'gyur (132a-c) D 38a

Kumārajīva T. 262 16a2-3 若得為人 | 聾盲瘖瘂, 貧窮諸衰 ruò dé wéi rén, lóng máng yīn yǎ, pínqióng zhū shuāi (132). Cf. Dharmarakṣa T. 263 78c20-79a16 (no exact parallels).



*And when he obtains human birth he becomes blind, deaf and idiotic; he is a slave,  
always poor (3.132a-c) (tr. Scherer)*

In the dharmology of ‘crip liberation’ the variable embodiments enumerated could be first recognized as poetic over-structuring—as elements of stylistic ‘polarization’ for the message that *durgati*, difficult (re)birth, awaits those who reject the SDP. The contextual function of the passage is the warning against any rejection or slander of SDP—a potent theme that provides a consolation for, and reassurance to, SDP devotees against their (internal and external) critics; indeed, as the example of Nichiren’s bodily reading (色読 *shikidoku*) of the SDP shows (Habito 1999; 2009), this apologetic strategy has become vitally productive in the history of reception of the scripture.

The enumerated elements of physio-social impairments and impediments correlate to the Buddhist “physiomoral discourse of the body” (Mrozik 2007, Ch. 4) as a poetic and narratorial construction of embodiment in Buddhist ethicizing and devotional literature: the Buddhist body is always a field of virtue and demerit. The Buddha, “that what enlivens all beings at all times”, is not a punishing or rewarding god:

man brings it upon himself. His own illusion brings it upon him. Illusion is like a dark cloud that covers our intrinsic buddha-nature. When the light of our buddha-nature is covered with illusions, darkness arises in our minds and various unpleasant things happen to us. (Niwano 1976: 51)

E.g., beyond any literalism, an element such as embodied blindness (*andhatva*) is hence constructed as the *Realsymbol* of delusion/ignorance (*moha*, *ajñāna*). This is made abundantly clear at the end of the *Samantabhadrotsāhanaparivarta* SDP Ch. 28 (26 Skt, p. 481 l. 3-4 Kern-Nanjio):

*ya evaṃ sūtrāntadhāraṅkāṇāṃ dharmabhāṅakānāṃ bhikṣūṇāṃ moham<sup>25</sup> dāsyanti,  
jātyandhāste sattvā bhaviṣyanti*

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<sup>25</sup> *sammoho* Kashgar (s. Maue-Röhrborn 1980: 268 Note 21) cf. *ajñāna* below in ch.5 v. 59-60.

All those who ever lead **into delusion** any of those dharma-preaching Bhikṣus who keep the *sūtrānta* will be born **blind**. (tr. Scherer)

This important point got lost in translation e.g. in the Tibetan version that reads/interprets ‘slander’ (smod pa) for moha (\*gti mug) as the cause for becoming blind (dmus long du [’]gyur, H 282b [D 179a]). Similarly, the correlation is lost in the Chinese versions: In Dharmarakṣa’s rendering, intelligence and ‘never (deaf-)blind’ (未曾聾盲 wèicéng lóng máng T. 263 134a6) are retributions for upholding the SDP from age to age (世世 shìshì a5). Kumārajīva’s translation (T. 262 62a14-18) has blindness (a18 ‘eyelessness’ 無眼 wú yǎn) as the karmic retribution for slander ‘from lifetime to lifetime’ (當世世 dāngshìshì a17-18).<sup>26</sup> Further, a long list of afflictions and deformities is presented, drastically illustrating the admonitions.<sup>27</sup>

Also, the simile of the healed blind in ch. 5 (not in the Chinese versions) explicates the correlations of spiritual and physio-moral impairment clearly:

evam sattvā mahājñānāj<sup>28</sup> jātyandhāḥ saṃsaranti hi |  
pratītyotpādacakrasya<sup>29</sup> ajñānād duḥkhavartmanaḥ<sup>30</sup> || 59 (Kern-Nanjio p.139)  
evamajñānasamūḍhe loke sarvaviduttamaḥ |  
tathāgato mahāvaidya utpannaḥ karuṇātmakaḥ || 60 (Kern-Nanjio p. 140)<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The Sanskrit vulgata and Tib. do not show any correlating expression for 當世世 dāngshìshì; the Kashgar Sanskrit recension reads here *dr̥ṣṭaiva dharme* ‘in this lifetime’. This phrase is later found in the Sanskrit vulgata, Kashgar and Tib. (tshe 'di nyid la lus la): in the subsequent passage on (white) lepra. There, Kumārajīva also has again 當世世 (a21) and this recension is supported there by the Old Uyghur fragment (*ažun ažunta* [“žwn “žwnt’ in Sogdian script] ‘from life to life’, ‘in every life’ s. Maue-Röhrborn 1980: 258, 262; not extant for the earlier passage). NB in his loose translation Kumārajīva uses 今世 jīnshì (‘in this life’, a18) in the passage immediately following his mention of eyelessness for the karmic award awaiting anyone who praises the SDP.

<sup>27</sup> See the detailed textual comparison in Maue-Röhrborn 1980, *Anhang 1* pp. 265-267.

<sup>28</sup> *mahājñānā* Vaidya with Dutt (p. 66); Gilgit *mahājñānajātyandhāḥ saṃsarantīha* (p. 65 Watanabe). The Kashgar manuscript reads *mahājñānajātyandhās saṃpata(m)ti hi*. The ablative is suggested by the temporal interpretation in Tibetan mi shes tshe ‘since their (state of) ignorance’.

<sup>29</sup> -cakrāma ajñānā(d) Kashgar p. 69 Toda.

<sup>30</sup> Given as a v.l. in Kern-Nanjio (who record -dharmanāḥ as the vulgata and conject -dharmināḥ); vartmanaḥ confirmed as vulgata by Gilgit, Kashgar; the Tibetan appears to suggest \*mārgataḥ (lam du gyur) adding chu bo’i ‘en route in the stream of samsara’).

<sup>31</sup> de bzhin sems can mi shes tshe | dmus long 'dra dag 'di na 'khor | rten 'byung 'khor lo mi shes pas | sdug bsngal chu bo'i lam du gyur [54] de bzhin mi shes rmongs pa yi | 'jig rten du ni kun gyi mchog | | sman pa chen po de bzhin gshegs | snying rje bdag nyid 'dir byung ste | D. 53b-54a1 = H 84a.

*Thus, all beings cycle around **blind** due to their **great ignorance**, due to their ignorance of the wheel of conditionality they revolve in suffering.*

*Thus, in the world dulled by ignorance has arisen the omniscient highest Tathāgata, the great physician, whose essence is compassion. (tr. Scherer)*

Hence, in contrast to the earlier passages which appear to contain physio-moral warnings about apparent future punitive impairments, no onto-ethical judgement is made about impaired—here: blind—people as such; and just as well, since in Buddhist philosophy/-ies the more sophisticated karma theories and No-self non-essentialism would not allow such reductionism. Rather spiritual blindness is the focus, spiritual impairment becomes an extended metaphor. Such extended metaphors in religious discourse as ‘act as tools of persuasion and motivate by leading to the performance, in the Buddhist case, of good deeds’ (Deegalle 2006, 16).

Scriptural admonition is literary (not philosophical) in genre and as such uses literary exemplification and, arguably, popular ableist language.

The literary function of variable embodiment continues to be clear in the passage from ch. 28 (26 Skt), where defaming (=making ugly) of the SDP results in visible ugliness—as corporeal inscribing of *pāpakam karma* (p. 481 l. 2 Kern-Nanjio<sup>32</sup>; *sdig pa’i las H 282b*).

Reeves’ exegesis recognizes the warning lists in their admonitional function and de-literalizes the underlying reductionist karma theory:

[T]he context makes it clear that what is being talked about primarily is not evil-doers but followers of the Lotus Sutra. ... The purpose of the passage is not ... an attempt to describe consequences of evil actions; rather, it is to urge that special respect be given to those who embrace the Sutra.

Second, the passage does not point to supernatural intervention or action to punish evil-doers. It is not about literal punishment at all. At most, it should be taken to mean, again, that actions have consequences. (Reeves 2010, p, 307)

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<sup>32</sup> *pāpakarma* Kashgar (s. Maue-Röhrborn 1980: 270 Note 43)

The wider framework of the SDP clearly points to unwavering altruism and care (see also Florida 1998). With Reeves we can point to the scripture’s revelation of Avalokiteśvara (Ch. 25 [24 Skt]) as the scripture’s model for unconditional, universal Buddhist love and compassion “that will encourage us to be rooted in the suffering and misery of this world, shunning no one. ... this might mean, not only not avoiding those who are despised by the society in which we live ... , but actively being with and supporting such people.” (Reeves 2010: 309). Thich Nhat Hanh adds to a fundamental reading of the multi-armed embodiment of compassion who looks down (verbal root: *ava-v/lok*) with loving eyes upon the world of suffering: “The hands of the bodhisattva symbolize action, but our actions must be guided well by the eyes of understanding” (Hanh 2003: 133).

The Buddha himself is a ‘skillful physician’ (Ch.16 [15 Skt]), looking after the world as a ‘father’ (Ch. 3 and 4). As the eternal Buddha proclaim in SDP 16 (15 Skt), verse 21ab:

*evam eva haṃ<sup>33</sup> lokapitā svayaṃbhūḥ cikitsakah sarvaprajāna nāthaḥ*  
 de bzhin nga yang rang 'byung 'jig rten pha/ skye dgu kun gyi gso byed mgon po ste<sup>34</sup>  
 Thus, I am the father of the world, self-arisen physician, the protector of all beings.  
 (tr. Scherer)

The summary in Late Khotanese from Dunhuang (=Pelliot 2782) points to this very passage in its only allusion to the sūtra's extended father metaphor (38-39):

*pyāsti sarvaṃñā baysä parinārvūṃ pūryau | vijī māññamdä vaṃñā*  
 Quoth the omniscient Buddha: My sons! I— (who is) resembling a physician—am  
 going to enter *parinirvāṇa* now. (tr. Scherer)

This declarative (revelation speech) passage echoes the revelation in the earliest layer of the scripture (Ch. 3, verse 85 ed. Kern-Nanjio p. 89; D 36a):

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<sup>33</sup> *emeva haṃ* Kern-Nanjio p. 326 and Gilgit Watanabe p. 118 no Central Asian recension attested; v.l. according to Kern-Nanjio: *emevāhaṃ* and *evamevāhaṃ*. Vaidya *yameva haṃ*. Tib. de bzhin supports *evaṃ*  
<sup>34</sup> D 122a H 193b cp. Kumārajīva T. 262 43c26 我亦為世父，救諸苦患者 wǒ yì wèi shì fù, jiù zhū kǔ huànzhě  
 ‘Indeed, just like this, do I, the father of the world, save those who suffer.’ (no clear equivalent in Dharmarakṣa T. 263 115ab).

*evam eva haṃ<sup>35</sup> śārisutā maharṣī sattvāna trāṇaṃ ca pitā ca bhomi |  
putrās ca te<sup>36</sup> prāṇina sarvi<sup>37</sup> mahyaṃ traidhātuke kāmavilagna bālāḥ<sup>38</sup>*

de bzhin drang srong nga yang shA ri'i bu | sems can rnams kyi skyabs dang pha yin  
te |srog chags 'di dag thams cad nga yi bu |byis pa dag ni khams gsum 'dod la chags  
告舍利弗|大仙如是, 為諸群生, 救護父母。|一切眾庶, 皆是我子, 為三界欲, |所見纏縛。  
(Dharmarakṣa T. 263 77c22-25)<sup>39</sup>

告舍利弗: 『我亦如是|眾聖中尊, 世間之父。一切眾生, |皆是吾子, 深著世樂, 無有慧心。|  
三界無安 (Kumārajīva T. 262 14 c19-2)<sup>40</sup>

*Thus, Śārisuta, I am the Great Sage, Salvation [Tib. Refuge Chin. Rescuer/-ing] and  
Father of (all) Beings. And all beings, fools who are bound by desires in the triple  
world, are my children. (tr. Scherer)*

Rather than taking these examples of paternalism or ‘paternal seductions’ (Cole 2005) as  
problematic elements “images of authority that come to fruition in the reading experience”  
(p. 1), produced in “bad faith” (p. 341), the core extended metaphor FATHER is an excellent

<sup>35</sup> Similar text variations to 16 (15 Skt), 21, see above.

<sup>36</sup> vulgata and Kashgar v.l. *me* Kern-Nanjio p. 89; Gilgit *putrā ime* Watanabe p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> *sarva* Kashgar Toda p. 48

<sup>38</sup> cf. verse 97 (ed. Kern-Nanjio p. 91; Gilgit ed. Watanabe p. 41; [Kashgar ed. Toda p. 49])

*putrā mama yūyamahaṃ pitā vo mayā ca niṣkāṣita yūya duḥkhāt |  
paridāhyamānā bahukalpakoṭyastraidhātukāto bhayabhairavātaḥ*

*[putrā mama yusmi pitā 'ha tusmi mayā ca niṣkāṣita yusmi duḥkha(h) |  
paridāhyamānā bahuduḥkha~~koṭi~~bhis traidhā(tukā)tu bhayabhairavātu]*

khyod kyi pha nga khyed kyang nga yi bu | khyed rnams khams gsum rab tu 'jig pa na |  
bskal pa bye ba mang por bsregs pa yi | sdug bsngal dag las ngas ni rab tu bton D. 36b  
*You are my children, I am your father; and by me you are expelled from the suffering  
(in which you have been) burning for many million aeons in the fright-fierciful three realms.*

<sup>39</sup> Gào shèlì fú |dàxiān rúshì, wèi zhū qúnshēng, jiùhù fùmǔ. |Yīqiè zhòng shù, jiē shì wǒ zì, wèi sānjiè yù, |  
suǒjiàn chán fù.

<sup>40</sup> gào shèlì fú: “Wǒ yì rúshì |zhòng shèng zhōng zūn, shìjiān zhī fù. Yīqiè zhòngshēng, |jiē shì wúzi, shēnzhe shì  
lè, wú yǒu huìxīn. | Sānjiè wú ān.

Cp. Kumārajīva v. 97 T. 262 15a15-18

告舍利弗|汝諸人等, 皆是吾子, 我則是父。|汝等累劫, 眾苦所燒, 我皆濟拔, |令出三界。

gào shèlì fú |rǔ zhū rén děng, jiē shì wúzi, wǒ zé shì fù. | Rǔ děng lèi jié, zhòng kǔ suǒ shāo, wǒ jiē jì  
bá, |lìng chū sānjiè

Cp. Dharmarakṣa T. 263 78b2-5 常示大道, 取者增減, 佛則於彼, |諸人者父。我常觀者, 眾庶苦惱 |

無數億劫, 而見燒煮。三界之中, |恐畏之難, 佛為唱, 使得滅度。

cháng shì dàdào, qǔ zhě zēng jiǎn, fú zé yú bǐ, | zhū rén zhě fù. Wǒ cháng guān zhě, zhòng shù kǔnǎo |  
wúshù yìjié, ér jiàn shāo zhǔ. Sānjiè zhī zhōng, | kǒng wèi zhī nán, fú wèi chàng, shìdé miè dù.

basis for a Public Dharmological Social Justice reading of all-inclusive love beyond contingently produced social values.

Reeves comments on SDP's father imagery as follows:

Over and over, the Lotus Sutra uses personal language to speak of an ultimately important reality. ... [T]he Buddha of the Dharma Flower Sutra is someone who is very concerned for his children. This means, in effect, that the happiness of the Buddha, the fulfillment of the Buddha's purpose, depends-again-on us. ... | We should think of ourselves as collaborators with the Buddha, help-ing to do Buddha-work, both within ourselves and in the world (Reeves 2010: 55-56).

### *Conclusion*

The theological hermeneutics of the SDP takes as 'grounds' (Klemm 1986) the revelation of both the universally salvific compassion of Avalokiteśvara and of the Eternal Buddha Śākyamuni. As discussed above, the latter is introduced with the extended metaphor of the all-loving father who utilizes appropriate means for spiritual transformation and liberation. Just as Christian liberation theologies center around the suffering of Jesus and the struggle of the marginalized, SDP liberation dharmology can focus on the universal compassion of the 'the Lord who looks loving upon all' and the all-embracing care of the Eternal Śākyamuni. Saṃsāra and nirvāṇa being two sides of the same reality, liberating all beings from the suffering becomes an imminent and urgent social activism of inclusiveness that transcends the cultural-contextual closedness of literalist readings.

The semiotic structure of SDP as scripture is open to centripetal (mystical) and centrifugal (activist) modes of readings. Its wide influence in contemporary Chinese and Japanese socially engaged/humanistic Buddhist traditions exemplifies how its core messages and revelation can be successfully applied for Buddhist welfare praxes.

Yet the SDP contains temporal-spatial context contingencies. Reading of the SDP *into* a specific time—one of the three key elements of Nichiren’s dharmology<sup>41</sup>—must be accompanied by reading the SDP *out of* its specific time. As Gene Reeves reminds us:

We can, I believe, love the Dharma Flower Sutra and seek to follow its important teachings while still recognizing that, like everything else, it has its limitations. We should not forget that the Sutra itself teaches that all Buddhist teachings are skillful means, relative to their time and circumstance, including the details of the Dharma Flower Sutra. In this sense, though ahead of its time in most ways, in some other ways the Lotus Sutra reflects the limitations of the culture and time in which it arose. (Reeves 2009: 109)

SDP Public dharmology can acknowledge elements in need of feminist critique, ‘queering’ and ‘cripping’, while respecting and leaving untouched what could be called ‘the eternal Lotus Sutra’ in its self-representation as the ultimate dharma, an appropriate-means revelation of transformative meaning beyond language (*langue* and *parole*).

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<sup>41</sup> The other two key points are: 1) reading the SDP is meeting the Buddha; 2) reading even a single verse/phrase is a guarantee for future enlightenment (Habito 1999:293).

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