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Appropriate Means as an Ethical Doctrine in the *Lotus Sūtra*

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In this paper I claim that *upāya* or *hōben* in the *Lotus Sūtra*, contrary to how it has often been translated and understood, is an ethical doctrine, the central tenet of which is that one should not do what is expedient but rather what is good, the good being what will actually help someone else, which is also known as *bodhisattva* practice. Further, the doctrine of *hōben* is relativistic. No doctrine, teaching, set of words, mode of practice, etc. can claim absoluteness or finality, as all occur within and are relative to some concrete situation. But some things, doing the right thing in the right situation, can be efficacious, sufficient for salvation.

As for the use of “expedients” in translations of *upāya* or *hōben*: in the *Lotus Sūtra* translations Hurvitz uses “expedient devices,” Murano “expedients,” and Watson “expedient means.” In the earlier translation from Sanskrit, Kern used “skillfulness” repeatedly, including in the title for the second chapter, but in a footnote he equates this with “able management, diplomacy, *upāyakaśālya*.” He then goes on to say that “*Upāya* means an expedient,” followed by some other silly things (p.30). Other authorities can be cited. In *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907), D.T. Suzuki says “The term *upāya* literally means expediency,” (p. 64) and later, in reference to the *Lotus Sūtra*, explains that the term “is very difficult to translate into English but “literally means ‘way,’ ‘method,’ or ‘strategy’” (p. 261 n). And then, in another footnote, says that *upāya* means “expedient, “stratagem,” “device” or “craft”(p. 298). Other, more recent authorities can be cited. Franklin Edgerton’s, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* (1953) gives “skill in expedients” for *upāyakaśālya*. Peter N. Gregory, in the glossary of the recent *Inquiry Into the Origin of Humanity* gives “expedient means” for *upāya*, and in the entry for the *Lotus Sūtra* says that it is noted for “its teaching of expedient means” (p.218). It should be clear that the use of “expedient” and its variants for the *Lotus Sūtra*’s *upāya* and *hōben* is well established.

What is wrong with “expedient”? Briefly, it is deeply rooted in an ethical frame of reference which is about as diametrically opposed to the ethical perspective of the *Lotus Sūtra* as one can get. The *Random House*

Unabridged Dictionary has as its second definition of “expedient”: “conducive to advantage or interest, as opposed to right.” Moreover, “expediency” is defined as “a regard for what is polite or advantageous rather than what is right or just; a sense of self-interest.” Though one could argue that this term does not *have* to carry such freight, the fact of the matter is that it is deeply embedded in a Biblical ethics which is essentially deontological because it is rooted in notions of divine commandment and human obedience. In 1 John 11:49-50 for example, we find:

And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. Nor do you consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation perish.”

And in several places in the King James version, Paul uses the term “expedient” to mean “profitable” to oneself. The Bible, of course, has had a major impact on what terms mean in English.

Thus, a very basic meaning of “expedient” is an act that is done despite principle in order to benefit oneself. It is rooted in an ethics and in a vision of reality in which there is a radical, unbridgeable gap between principles and self-interest. Principles, though they may be internalized, are given by God, Nature, or the metaphysical structure of reality. Principles are law-like, and thus disobedience requires just punishment. To do the expedient thing is to ignore or go against what is right in order to gain some selfish benefit.

But this is exactly what, according to the *Lotus Sūtra*, *hōben* cannot be. It is part of the very definition of *hōben* in the *Lotus Sūtra* that it is always for the benefit of someone else. Not in this *sūtra*, or in any other that I know of, is there even a single example of *hōben* in which the doer forsakes some principle for his or her own benefit.

Of course, within a Buddhist utilitarian and teleological ethics the good done for someone else may also benefit the doer. In Christianity

one finds notions of an ideal of completely selfless love, *agapé*. To some extent, such notions are related to Greek ideas of God as being so perfect and complete that he cannot possibly want nor need anything. But from most Buddhist perspectives, certainly from the perspective of the *Lotus Sūtra*, this is a false ideal. For example, in the story of the rich father and poor son, the Buddha-substitute, the father, feels that his own life is incomplete so long as the son is away from him.

If I could only get my son back and entrust my wealth to him,' he thought, 'how contented and happy I would be, with no more anxiety!¹

So, there are at least two things wrong with “expedient” as a translation of *hōben*. On the one hand, use of it presupposes a contrast with principle (law, divine command, etc.) which is not generally applicable in East Asian Buddhism. On the other hand, it carries negative connotations of action for one’s own benefit which are incompatible with the whole thrust of the *Lotus Sūtra*.²

“Expedient” is not, of course, the only translation of *hōben*. The most extensive, and in my opinion best, study of *upāya* is Michael Pye’s *Skilful Means*. But even Pye, after conducting a nearly exhaustive study of the terms *upāya*, *upāyakauśalya*, and *fang pien* and defending “skilful means” as the best translation for these terms, says, “Of course translations of Mahayana texts in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit may want to follow the vocabulary more closely and use simply ‘means’ or ‘expedient’ for *upāya*”.³

I have no major problem with “skillful means” as a translation of *upāya/hōben*. It might even be the best overall translation for Buddhist texts in general, but I am not persuaded that it is the best possible translation for the *hōben* of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The Dharma in Stories

The *Lotus Sūtra* is, perhaps above all, a book of stories. It contains approximately 26 stories that are used as teaching devices. It does not avoid teaching doctrine directly, but if we want to understand what the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches we had better pay attention to its stories, and not merely to lines within them, or to lines which explain them, but also to the overall thrust and function of those stories within a religious tradition.

It is not incidental that the original *Lotus Sūtra* probably began with the chapter on *upāya*, and then, in the next chapter told a story, the parable of the burning house, to illustrate and explain it.⁴ Moreover, this “Parable” chapter is immediately followed by the *adhimukti* chapter.⁵ which is built around another story, the story of the rich father and the poor son. Actually, as we have it now, the whole *sūtra*, or at least the first twenty-two chapters of it, is a story about a time when the Buddha was on the mountain called “Vulture Peak” and preached the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Hōben as Skillful and Appropriate

It is true that in all of these stories in which *hōben* is demonstrated, some skill is involved, sometimes even a special skill. The best illustration of a special skill being utilized is a story, from which the chapter gets its title, about a physician who goes to the Himalayas to collect four special herbs to use in special ways in order to cure a man who has been blind from birth. It is interesting that this story is not included in the Chinese version of the *Sūtra*.⁶

Skill is involved in most of these stories. But what kind of skill? A father gets his children out of a burning house by promising them a reward. Another father gets his kids to take an antidote for poison by pretending to be dead. Still another father guides his unambitious son toward greater and greater responsibility. A tour guide conjures up a phantom city in order to give people a needed resting-place during a hard journey. A man sews a jewel into the garment of his poor friend. A very powerful king holds back an extraordinarily precious and unique jewel

that he kept in the topknot of his hair until he sees a soldier of great merit. None of these acts is especially skillful. They are clever perhaps, but not especially skillful, at least in the sense of requiring some special skill.⁷ And, while some of the characters performing these acts are stand-ins for the Buddha, it is not at all evident that all are. Some think, as does Michael Pye, that it is of prime significance that buddhas use skillful means. And, indeed, it is very often the case in *Lotus Sūtra* stories that it is a Buddha or Buddha stand-in who uses appropriate means. However, I do not think teaching us about Buddhas is what is primary. Rather *bodhisattva* practice, and therefore the practice of appropriate means, is intended primarily for us, the readers. Remember too that the chief example of a doctrine which is a skillful means is the doctrine or story of the Buddha's entry into nirvana—and it is a doctrine or story which, from the perspective of the *Lotus Sūtra*, has misled lots of people into thinking that the Buddha is no more.

What we are told repeatedly in the *sūtra* is not that these acts are skillful, though they may be, but that they are appropriate, appropriate to the condition of the hearers. It is because people are different and their situations are different that the buddhas, as the rain nourishes the great variety of plants according to their different needs, feed the dharma according to what is needed. One could argue, of course, that knowing that an appropriate thing is needed and being able to perceive the situation well enough to figure out an appropriate action is itself skillful. And so it is. However, it is nevertheless the case that what is emphasized is not so much the skill as it is the appropriateness. This is why I think “appropriate means” is the best translation for *hōben* in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

What is it that makes something appropriate? At the end of the story of the burning house, the Buddha asks Śāriputra whether the father has lied or not, and Śāriputra responds that the father had not lied, and would not have lied had he given the children even very tiny carriages. Why? Simply because the device worked. The kids got out of the house in time to save their lives.

Two things are relevant here: the device worked, and it worked at

saving lives.

Hōben as Practical

Apparently, some people think that Buddhist ethics is primarily a matter of what is inside oneself; that it is primarily a matter of consciousness and compassion. Nevertheless, there is hardly a hint of this in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The ideal, in the *Lotus Sūtra* too, is a combination of wisdom or insight, compassion, and practice. The entrance to the Great Sacred Hall at the headquarters of Rissho Kosei Kai, for example, is dominated by huge pictures of three *bodhisattvas*: Mañjuśrī, Maitreya, and Samantabhadra, representing wisdom, compassion, and practice, and the three parts of the *Lotus Sūtra* in which these three are thought to be prominent. In the *Lotus Sūtra* itself and in *Lotus* teaching, the three are interdependent and perhaps in one sense equally important. It can, for example, be said that practice can lead to enhanced wisdom and compassion. But it is clear that the flow has to be primarily the other way, toward practice as a consequence of wisdom and compassion. Thus, in contemporary jargon, the *Lotus Sūtra* is very results oriented. Of course it is important that the father of the kids in the burning house and the father of the poor son are concerned about their children and want to save them, and it is important that they are smart enough to figure out a way to save them, but it is most important that they are successful in saving the children.

The story of Devatta is very instructive here. Its message is that even our enemies, regardless of their intentions, can be *bodhisattvas* for us if we regard them as such. In this *sūtra*, Devatta, the embodiment of evil in so much Buddhist literature outside of the *Lotus Sūtra*, is thanked by the Buddha for being helpful. “Thanks to my good friend Devadatta, I was able to develop fully the six paramitas, with pity, compassion, joy, equanimity,” etc. The Buddha learned from his experiences with Devadatta, making Devadatta a *bodhisattva*, but we are not told that this was in any way a function of what Devadatta himself intended. Good

intentions may be good in their own right, but they are not what are all-important, or even most important in a *bodhisattva*. What is more important is effectiveness, effectiveness in leading others to the Buddha-way, and thus to their salvation.

It is their “only” salvation because outside of the Buddha-way there is, and can be, no other way. If an act is salvific, it is good, if it is good, it is *bodhisattva* practice, and if it is *bodhisattva* practice, it is included in the Buddha-way. Whatever else it is, the Buddha-way is good and includes everything good, that is, everything that leads to salvation.

To say that an act has good consequences, however, is not to say that it is necessarily good in every respect. An act of good consequences may stem from evil motives. The consequence does not make the motive good. The fact that Devadatta became a *bodhisattva* for the Buddha does not mean that Devadatta’s motives are thereby somehow transformed from evil to good. The *Lotus Sūtra* emphasizes consequences and the practice of the *bodhisattva* way for the purpose of saving living beings. But, it also makes repeated reference to the importance of planting good roots—supporting the view that good deeds tend to lead to good ends. In this sense, the ethics of the *Lotus Sūtra* is not purely teleological.

Salvation as the Buddha-way

There is ample ambiguity in the *Lotus Sūtra* about the nature of salvation. We are told that the Buddha has vowed to save all the living. But the nature of that state, variously termed *Buddhahood*, supreme enlightenment, etc., is not unambiguously clear. But if we look at the stories that present themselves as being about salvation, the matter is not, or at least not always,⁸ so complicated. Lives are saved. In some cases, they are saved from fire or poison, literally from death. In other cases, they are saved from a mean existence, from poverty and from an attitude that is complacent about poverty. In all cases, what is involved is a failure to achieve one’s potential to be a *bodhisattva* and Buddha.

What does it mean to be a Buddha?

There are obviously many ways of reading the *Lotus Sūtra*, including, I suppose, several legitimate ways, by which I mean ways reasonably consistent with or based upon the text itself. Without trying to argue for such an interpretation here, I will simply share with you that I see the text as being primarily soteriological. That is, I think its main purpose is not to teach Buddhist doctrines or refute other interpretations or forms of Buddhism, but to affect the readers' heart, and especially behavior, in a particular manner. There are, for example, numberless claims in the *sūtra* to the effect that anyone, be they poor, not very bright, female, even evil, absolutely everyone without exception is destined to become a Buddha. I take it that this is not just a proto-Buddha-nature doctrine, though it is that, and not just a metaphysical assumption, though it does express an underlying metaphysics. What is intended primarily, I think, is that you and I understand that we can become buddha-like because we have that capacity already within us simply by virtue of being alive. This capacity or potential is in everyone. It does not have to be earned and it cannot be taken away. But it does need to be developed.

The Buddha-way as *Bodhisattva* Practice

The way in which you and I can develop a Buddha nature is by following the Buddha-way, doing what Buddhas have always done, namely, the way of *bodhisattva* practice. It is absolutely central to the *Lotus Sūtra*, I think, that Śākyamuni Buddha is, first of all, a *bodhisattva*. We are told that he has been doing *bodhisattva* practice, helping and leading others, for innumerable *kalpas*. Whenever the enormously long life of the Buddha is described, it is not meditation that he has been doing, at least not

primarily, but teaching and leading and changing others, thus turning them into *bodhisattvas*.

Because all the living have various natures, various desires, various activities, various ideas and ways of making distinctions, and because I wanted to lead them to put down roots of goodness, I have used a variety of explanations, parables, and words and preach various teachings. Thus I have never for a moment neglected the Buddha's work.

Thus it is, since I became Buddha a very long time has passed, a lifetime of unquantifiable *asamkhyeya kalpas*, of forever existing and never entering extinction. Good children, the lifetime which I have acquired pursuing the *bodhisattva*-way is not even finished yet, but will be twice the number of *kalpas* already passed.⁹

But the Buddha and those with the title of *Bodhisattva* are not the only *bodhisattvas*. Śrāvakas are also *bodhisattvas*. That is why there are plenty of them in every paradise, or paradise-like Buddha land, described in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Most *śrāvakas*, of course, do not know they are *bodhisattvas*, but they are none-the-less.

What you are practicing
 [the Buddha says to the disciple Kashyapa]
 Is the *bodhisattva*-way.
 As you gradually practice and learn,
 Every one of you should become a Buddha.¹⁰

And, of course, most importantly, you and I are *bodhisattvas*. No matter how tiny our understanding or merit, no matter how trivial our practice, we are, perhaps to some extent, already *bodhisattvas*. And we are called to grow in *bodhisattvahood* by leading others to realize that potential in themselves.

This is why I think so many stories about *bodhisattvas* are taken up in the latter part of the *Lotus Sūtra*, no doubt added later. These stories

round out, so to speak, the teaching of *hōben* with which the *sūtra* begins. The term *hōben* is used sparingly in these chapters, because by the time we encounter it we should already understand that *hōben* is what *bodhisattvas* do.

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is not, as in some texts, just advanced or seventh stage *bodhisattvas* who use *hōben*. Though there are frequent references to the stage of non-regression in the *Lotus Sūtra*, there are none at all to the ten-stage *bodhisattva* doctrine found, for example, in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.

While the doctrine of *hōben* is primarily what makes *Lotus Sūtra* ethics teleological, the understanding of *bodhisattva* practice as doing the work of the Buddha to save all the living is also teleological. If a *bodhisattva* was only trying to improve his own character as an end in itself, he would not be a *bodhisattva*, as the very meaning of “*bodhisattva*” in the *Lotus Sūtra* is one who effectively contributes to the salvation of others. Certainly, rules and principles should guide that practice, but it must finally be judged by the results.

Bodhisattvas as Role Models

I think there can be no question but that many of the stories about *bodhisattvas* are included to provide role models for human beings. They play a role in the ever present tension between what already is and is yet to be. To the extent that we have even lifted a single finger to point to the truth, we are already *bodhisattvas*. But how much more so those who faithfully follow the *Lotus Sūtra*, that is, devote their lives to *bodhisattva* practice. And to encourage us in that direction there are stories of wonderful *bodhisattvas*.

Yes, people do pray to Kwan-yin for help and Kwan-yin takes on whatever form is needed to be helpful. But while that story may present the hope of divine blessing, it is there primarily to show us what we should be. If Kwan-yin has a thousand arms with a thousand different skills with which to help others, we too need to develop a thousand skills with which

to help others.

Bodhisattva Ethics

What, then, does it mean to be a *bodhisattva*? In the *Lotus Sūtra*, it means using appropriate means to help others. And that, finally, for the *Lotus Sūtra*, is what Buddhism itself is. It is an enormous variety of means developed to help people live more fulfilling lives, which can be understood as lives lived in the light of their interdependence. This is what most of the stories are about: someone—father-figure/buddha, or friend/buddha, or guide/buddha—helping someone else gain more responsibility for their own lives.

Even if you search in all directions,
There are no other vehicles,
Except the appropriate means preached by the Buddha.¹¹

Thus, the notion of appropriate means is at once both a description of what Buddhism is, or what Buddhist practice primarily is, and a prescription for what our lives should become. The *Lotus Sūtra*, accordingly, is a prescription of a medicine or religious method for us—at once both extremely imaginative and extremely practical.

It is in this sense that appropriate means is an ethical teaching, a teaching about how we should behave in order to contribute to the good. It is prescriptive not in the sense of a precept of commandment, but in the sense of urging us, for the sake both of our own salvation and that of others, to be intelligent, imaginative, even clever in finding ways to be helpful.

Hōben as Provisional

Ways of being helpful are not, at least primarily, grounded in principles. The *Lotus Sūtra* has very little to say about precepts, though it does not reject them. In chapter fourteen (Carefree Practice) the Buddha provides four sets of prescriptions which *bodhisattvas* should follow, one having to do primarily with outward behavior, one with speech, one with attitudes and one with intentions. But these are to be understood, I think, not as commandments but more like counsel or rules of thumb. Principles, at least in the strongest sense, are eternal, God-given, or at least implanted permanently in the nature of things. The *hōben* of the *Lotus Sūtra*, in contrast, are provisional. Once used, they may no longer be useful, precisely because they were appropriate for some concrete situation. The kids will not return to the burning house to be saved again. Once his children have drunk the antidote to poison, their father need not again tell them that he has died. This is because these stories involve discoveries, made rapidly or gradually. And once something has been seen or discovered, it cannot be un-seen or undiscovered, though it might, of course, be rediscovered or be discovered again independently. So the means by which it is discovered is always provisional, viable in some point in time. Once the father has guided his son to maturity, he can die in peace, no longer needed. Once a raft has been used to cross over to the other shore, we no longer need the raft and we would be seriously burdened by trying to take it with us over land.¹²

In such provisionality, there is a scriptural basis, not so much for a critique of the tradition, but for the continuing development, the continued flowering of the Dharma. And this is why the *Lotus Sūtra* provided an important basis for the transformation of Buddhism in a Chinese context. From the perspective of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the transformation of Avalokiteśvara into Kwan-yin is not a corruption of Buddhism but a flowering.

The story of the conjured city is very instructive here. It is about nirvana, certainly one of the central doctrines of traditional Buddhism. And what does this story say about nirvana? It says that the teaching of

nirvana was a teaching device to enable people to get a bit of rest before continuing on the Buddha-way, like an elegant rest area on a highway. The Buddha did not go away into some extinction. There is no place and no time where the Buddha is not, or where he is not becoming enlightened. The Buddha's entry into nirvana, we are told, is part of a story, used to get people to be more responsible for working out their own salvation.

The *Lotus Sūtra* tells us in many places that it is new, that people who hear and receive it, gain something unprecedented, something they never had before. But the teaching of appropriate means is not so much a new teaching as it is a new way of understanding all Buddhist teachings. Notice that the *Lotus Sūtra* does not propose throwing away the term *nirvana* or the story of the Buddha's nirvana. Rather it puts nirvana in a new light. It relativizes it, making it subordinate to the larger purpose of becoming a Buddha, i.e., of doing *bodhisattva* practice.

The Embodied Dharma

As I understand *hōben* in the *Lotus Sūtra*, it would be a serious mistake to think that *hōben* are lesser teachings which can now be replaced by some higher teaching.¹³ All appropriate and effective teachings are *hōben*, in endless variety. There is a larger purpose that they serve; they are, after all, means not ends. The encompassing purpose or truth that they serve is not another teaching. It is a Dharma that can only be found embodied in concrete teachings, including actions which are instructive, just as the Buddha can only be found embodied in Śākyamuni, and in you and me.

One of the ways, I think, in which the *Lotus Sūtra* and its teaching of *hōben* is ethical is by being radically world affirming. By this, I mean simply that it is this *sahā* world which is Śākyamuni Buddha's world. It is in this world that he is a *bodhisattva* and encourages us to be *bodhisattvas*.¹⁴ This world is our home, and it is the home of Śākyamuni Buddha, precisely because he is embodied, not only as the historical Buddha, but also as the buddha-nature in all things. Thus, things, ordinary

things, including ourselves and our neighbors are not primarily to be seen as empty, though they are; not primarily to be seen as phenomenal, though they are; not primarily to be seen as illusions, though in one sense they are; not primarily to be seen as evil even though they may be in part. It is in *dharmas* (things/"conventional" existence) that the Dharma is. It is in transient, changing things that the Buddha is.¹⁵ They are, therefore, to be treated with as much insight and compassion and respect as we can muster.

It is perhaps something of an irony that the *sūtra* which affirms a cosmic Śākyamuni Buddha, one who is in every world and every time, does so not to reject the historical "Śākyamuni or the temporal world, but to affirm their supreme importance.¹⁶ And their importance is nothing more or less than that this world is where we, having been taught by the historical Buddha, are called to embody the life of the Buddha in our acts and lives. This is why a part of the every day liturgy of Rissho Kosei Kai is the *dōjō-kan*: "Know that this place is where the Buddha attained perfect enlightenment. In this and all places the buddhas accomplish perfect enlightenment...."¹⁷

It is relevant in this connection to notice that there is little use of the notion of emptiness (*śūnya* or *śūnyatā*) in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Of course, all things are empty. But it is because they are empty that there is space, so to speak, for the development of one's buddha-nature. If things were substantial, they could not truly grow or change. But because they are without substantiality, they can be influenced by and have influence on others. Undue emphasis on emptiness is rejected because it can easily become a kind of nihilism in which nothing matters. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, everything matters. The Buddha works to save all beings. Even poor Never Disrespectful *Bodhisattva*, who goes around telling everyone that they are to become Buddhas, though initially not very successful, eventually "converted a multitude of a thousand, ten thousand, millions, enabling them to live in the state of supreme enlightenment".¹⁸ And this is to say nothing of the fact that he later became the Buddha Śākyamuni!

In once sense, I suppose, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not provide us with

an ethics at all. It does not tell us what to do in any particular situation. It suggests that if we devote ourselves to *bodhisattva* practice; take refuge as appropriate in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha; thus entering the Buddha-way; we will find resources within ourselves and in others for dealing creatively with our ethical issues, for working, for example, for world peace, for a better society, for greater cooperation among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions. The *Sūtra* does not say that this way will ever be easy. However, it does claim that in it is to be found great joy.

Notes

¹ Cf. Watson p. 82. Here and elsewhere in this paper quotations from the *Lotus Sūtra* are my own, based primarily on Yukio Sakamoto and Yutaka Iwamoto, *Hokekyoo* 3 vols. (Iwanami, 1989). For convenience, page references are given to *The Lotus Sūtra*, translated by Burton Watson (Columbia U.P., 1993).

² Unfortunately, for my purposes at least, both the Chinese *fang pien* and the Japanese *hōben* can have, especially outside of Buddhism, connotations of convenient for oneself. Perhaps that is a source of the “expedient” translations.

³ Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*. London: Duckworth, 1978, p. 14. There would be ample justification for translating *upāya* as “means.” In which case *upāyakaśālya* would be something like “skill in means.” But, while this distinction apparently is important in the Sanskrit text, there is no comparable distinction in Kumārajīva’s translation into Chinese.

⁴ It is not exactly pertinent here, but I do want to point out that, while there are stories in the *Lotus Sūtra* where it can fairly be said that cheating or deception is advocated as *hōben*, this is not the case in the story of the burning house which is the prime example of *hōben*, that is, it is the story the Buddha uses to explain *hōben*. Usually, I think, this is simply a matter of not paying enough attention to what the text actually says. For example, in an unpublished paper, one scholar says that the father broke his

promise by only giving the children one vehicle after promising them three, and that this is because he only had one vehicle to give. Of course, the text plainly says that he gave them much more than he had promised because he realized that his wealth was so great he could afford to be more generous. And, though the text is not entirely unambiguous on this, the easiest way to read it is that he gave each of them a great vehicle. It clearly does say that the father has countless numbers of such great vehicles. Michael Pye even retells the story in such a way that the father lies by telling the children that the carts they want are waiting for them outside when in fact they are nowhere to be seen (Pye, *op. cit.*, p. 37). The text, on the other hand, does not say that there were no small carriages. Rather, the over-joyed father, reflecting on his great wealth, thinks it would be unfair to give the children small and inferior carts. Someone else, I'm not sure who, to support his view that the story advocates deception, once argued that if I, as a Dean were to offer him a position for \$40,000 and then, after he arrived, told him that since we had just received a large grant would pay him \$140,000 instead, I would be guilty of deception! On any fair reading of the text itself, there are no grounds for saying that this story advocates cheating or deception.

⁵ How *adhimukti* got to be the Chinese *hsin chieh* (*shinge* in Japanese reading), and thus 'faith and understanding' or possibly 'faithful understanding' in English is itself an interesting question. It is generally assumed to be a translation. The trouble with this is that *adhimukti* does not mean faith and understanding, but something more like disposition or attitude. It is a reference to the son's attitude toward his own life. Therefore, it seems that Kumārajīva, rather than translating, may have devised a new chapter title. Though it is used in a scattering of places throughout the *sūtra*, the term does not appear at all in Chapter Four itself.

⁶ While everyone says that there are other translations from Sanskrit to Chinese, especially that of Dharmarakṣa, I have never actually seen one or compared one with the translation of Kumārajīva, on which, so far as I know, all Japanese versions and all English translations are based, save

Kern's. In any case, the influence of Kumārajīva's translation has been so pervasive in East Asia that, from an historical point of view, it is the basic locus of what we call the *Lotus Sūtra*. As far as I am concerned, Kumārajīva's translation is *the* Chinese version, i.e. the only Chinese version we need be concerned about.

⁷ There are, of course, plenty of stories in the later chapters in which special, even magical, skills are required: assembled buddhas display their divine powers by extending their tongues up to the heaven of Brahma and emitting a magnificent, many colored light which illuminated the entire universe from the pores of his bodies; *Bodhisattva* Medicine King rides a platform of seven treasures into the sky to pay tribute to the Buddha who was living there; Gadgadaśvāra (Wonderful-Voice) *Bodhisattva* made eighty-four thousand gold and silver *Lotus* flowers and other valuables appear not far from where Śākyamuni Buddha was sitting on Mount Gridhrakūṭa, and later went to the saḥā-world on a flying platform of seven treasures; the sons of King Śubhavyūha (Wonderfully Adorned) use a variety of wonders in the sky in order to purify their father's mind and enable him to understand the Dharma and practice the Buddha-way; The *Bodhisattva* Samantabhadra rides around in the sky on his six-tusked, white elephant to protect anyone who keeps the *Sūtra* in the five hundred years after the Buddha's extinction.

⁸ One complication for my interpretation is the very important story of the Nāga Princess in Chapter 12. Except for the fact that she has been an excellent teacher and "carried out all of the practices of a *bodhisattva* in an instant," there is not much hint of her being a *bodhisattva*. It is precisely for this reason that Accumulated Wisdom (Prajñākūṭa) *Bodhisattva* has great trouble accepting the girl as a candidate for Buddhahood.

⁹ Cf. Watson 226-27.

¹⁰ Cf. Watson 106.

¹¹ Cf. Watson 71. This is why I think Pye is quite correct in insisting that "Buddhism' as a specific religion identifiable in human history, is a skill-

ful means” (Pye, op. cit., p. 5), or “Almost anything in the whole range of Buddhist teaching and practice can be described as *fang-pien* or skilful means” (Pye, op. cit., p. 36).

¹² But it is never the case, as Pye claims, that we are told to turn around and destroy the raft. “The idea [of skillful means] entails that every item of Buddhist communication has incorporated within it the requirement that it should eventually be dismantled” (Pye, op. cit., p. 130).

¹³ I am well aware of the fact that many have read the *Lotus Sūtra* through the eyes of Nāgārjuna. It seems quite clear that T’ien-T’ai Chih-i did this to some extent. (See Paul L. Swanson, *Foundations of T’ien-T’ai Philosophy: The Flowering Of The Two Truths Theory In Chinese Buddhism* (Asian Humanities Press, 1989)). It is also the case that there are a few, but only a few, passages in the *Lotus Sūtra* that can be cited to support such a reading. Though this is not the place to argue for it, I think there is an abundance of evidence, taking the *sūtra* as a whole, that it is viewed as much more pluralistic than this. In it it’s view there are many, many truths, all of which serve, more or less well or badly, the one purpose of leading people to salvation. But that one purpose is not another truth, not a different kind of truth, and certainly not a higher form of truth. Its superiority lies solely in its great inclusiveness, not as some kind of higher truth or reality, but as the Dharma that is always and everywhere embodied in many concrete teachings, practices and acts. As far as I can tell, Nāgārjuna virtually never uses the term *upāya*. For him there are two kinds of truth: relative truth (*samvṛiti-satya*) on the one hand and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) on the other. The Chinese equivalent of this ultimate truth, *chen ti* (*shintai* in Japanese pronunciation), does not appear anywhere in the *Lotus Sūtra*, I think.

¹⁴ Elsewhere I have tried to show that the *Lotus Sūtra* is almost entirely indifferent to cosmology as such, but uses traditional Buddhist cosmology to elevate Śākyamuni Buddha to cosmic status and making him central to the entire cosmos, which in turn elevates the status of his *sahā* world, which is the world in which we, along with all of his *bodhisattvas*,

are called upon to do his work of saving the living. Thus, in this *Sūtra*, even cosmology serves a soteriological and, in that sense, ethical purpose. Our acts are cosmic in scope because they are in the world of the Śākyamuni Buddha who is cosmically influential.

One wonders whether it was the *Lotus Sūtra* which Kenneth Inada had in mind when he wrote: “Be it said once and for all that Buddhist philosophy cannot admit or submit to any ideas with cosmic dimensions. If such were ever the case, then it would be . . . [a] certain outlandish and corrupted form of Buddhism which in all eventuality would have little or no real meaning for those who earnestly pursue the true basic doctrines” (*Nagarjuna* (Sri Satguru Publications, 1993) p. 11)).

¹⁵ Though he fails to understand why “emptiness” does not have a prominent role in the *Lotus Sūtra*, this kind of affirmation of the concrete is well described by William LaFleur in a discussion of medieval Japanese poets in “Symbol and Yūgen: Shunzei’s Use of Tendai Buddhism” in *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (U. of Calif. P., 1983). This can also be seen very clearly in the storyteller and poet Kenji Miyazawa. See, for example, *A Future of Ice: Poems and Stories of a Japanese Buddhist: Miyazawa Kenji*, translated by Hiroaki Sato (North Point Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Part of what world affirmation involves in the *Lotus Sūtra* is, as Nichiren correctly saw, what we might call ‘taking time and history seriously.’ See, “The Selection of the Time” in *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* Vol. 3 (Nichiren Shoshu International Center, 1985) 79ff., or in *Selected Writings of Nichiren*, Philip B. Yampolsky ed. (Columbia U.P., 1990) 181ff.

¹⁷ *Kyōden: Sūtra Readings*. (Risshō Koosei Kai, 1994) p. 9.

¹⁸ Cf. Watson 268.