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Reflections on the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra*

by

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The *Threefold Lotus Sūtra* provides some very illuminating insights with respect to many of the debates and oppositions which take place in late twentieth-century Western philosophy. The present paper represents reflections on how this Mahāyāna text is applicable to issues in contemporary philosophy.

One of the central debates in metaphysics and especially in ethical theory is the question of foundation. The position labelled ‘foundationalist’ is the more traditional Western philosophical stance. It is tantamount to belief in a permanent universal truth from which norms can be deduced or inferred.

Views or actions not based on this ‘foundation’ are held to be simply erroneous and ones that could be corrected. Post-moderns argue against foundationalism, maintaining that belief in a universal truth or an absolute norm inevitably leads the proponent to being committed sincerely, but arrogantly, to the notion that his own position is based on the ‘foundation’ which makes it necessarily true, and any other position is either merely trivially different from his own, or else in error. Emmanuel Levinas has persuasively argued that belief in an absolute truth is a ‘closed’ view, in contrast to an ‘open’ one, leading to intolerance and a will to impose one’s own commitments on unwilling others. Thus foundationalism is deeply related to violent notions such as imperialism, aggression, ethnicism, and racism, the recurrent features of the history of those who are committed to the notion of an absolute. Rather, Levinas advocates an ‘open’ universe in which radically diverse views are embraced by different people. It is diversity which makes an ethical claim on all of us. In Levinas’ view, the proper ethical mode is to let the demands of the other take precedence even over our very deepest commitments; the mere fact that there are such others is the basis of rationally unharmonizable, incommensurable beliefs, claims, lifestyles, and values, each making a mute claim on us to sacrifice, compromise, and hierarchically subject what is ‘our own’ to the demands made by ‘the other.’ This leads to an ‘ethics without rules,’ since the very notion of ‘rules’ is to overrule differences and not give sufficient recognition to the individuality and particularity of every con-

text of decision-making. Thus 'rules' are oppressive, and hence, unethical.

The countercharge is that anti-foundationalism is tantamount to an 'anything goes' nihilism, a radical relativism, which demands tolerance even of oppression, exploitation, indifference, cruelty, wickedness, and abuse. Levinas' critics argue that a willing abdication from one's own commitments cannot be generally accepted, nor should it be idealized. A radically anti-foundationalist view, while it discloses the dangers of foundationalism, must wallow in the simply unacceptable relativist position that Hitler and Mother Theresa are, as it happens, different in their respective commitments, and the fact that we might sympathize more with one rather than the other is irrelevant. Indeed, if we buy into Levinas' ethics, we might end up claiming that we should be obliging the Hitlers around us, exactly because we share the commitments of the Mother Therasas.

So foundationalists and anti-foundationalists both make persuasive arguments for our acceptance of their respective stances, each having something strongly persuasive about its own position and revealing something repugnant about the other. Each position implies unacceptable consequences. This leaves the reader-spectator stymied and adrift as regards the outcome of the debate.

To further complicate matters, the dispute of the foundationalists and anti-foundationalists is sequential to another deep division in moral and ethical theory in the West. This is the controversy over utilitarian and deontological approaches. The former, the utilitarian, asserts that humans are pleasure-seeking and pain-avoiding beings by nature, and that therefore what constitutes the ethically acceptable or preferred behavior is acting so as to produce the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. Human beings are unethical when they follow the demands of their own personal pleasures or pain-avoidances; they are ethical when they opt in accord with the greatest totality of consequential pleasures and pains, regarding themselves as only one of all those whom the actions may affect. Thus, to facilitate thinking in the context of ethical choice making, some utilitarian

philosophers have attempted to devise calculi for arriving at the most moral of alternatives given particular options and situations.

In contrast, Kant, the principal spokesman for the deontological position, has argued against all such consequentialist approaches, maintaining that the ethical is determined by the will of the agent, rather than the consequences of the act, and that the good is the act performed from the motive of duty rather than either desire or inclination.

If one is left perplexed by these discussions and debates, the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra* is of immense value for overcoming the foregoing quandaries.

The title of the introductory *sūtra*, the *Sūtra of Innumerable Meanings*, gives a strong clue as to the direction of the resolution. The manifold diversity of the everyday world gives rise to countless ways of experiencing it and interpreting it, since experience makes accessible only a minute portion of the vast spatial and temporal diversity of the whole. Where the experiential disclosure largely overlaps in the case of two individual instances, the subjective inclinations and proclivities of the two individuals sharing similar experiences will result in interpreting them in quite different ways. The *Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law* lets us understand this plurality and diversity through the parable of the herbs. It tells of the generous rain supplying the needs of diverse plants, be they grasses, herbs, flowers, shrubs, or mighty trees. The same rain nourishes them all, yet each grows according to its own particular nature. What is here presented is how diversity is produced from some underlying singular universal—the rain.

This seems to support the foundationalist position that behind the diversity of the many specific plants there is the unity of their source in the common nutrient, the rainwater. Thus the generosity of the sky in supplying water is the foundation of the richly diverse flora.

But to avoid the charge made against the usual foundationalists, the *Lotus Sūtra* also reveals that although there is a fundamental singular truth, a foundation to the universe, this truth is accessible only to Buddha.

Although all of us are lured and coaxed along the path to achieving

Buddhahood, and, indeed, promised that it is within our essential possibilities, at the same time it is recognized that great discipline and compassion is required of us to go beyond our limited present stage of development. While the ‘foundation’ is hinted at as the Void, and is characterized by the Ten Suchnesses, these are not readily assimilable concepts, and indeed, are not concepts at all; they imply the practice of compassion and the practice of self-sacrifice. It would be folly for those listening to the Buddha to think that they have a theoretical or conceptual grasp of the ‘foundation’ of all. To the contrary, what we can grasp is one or several of innumerable meanings. However, they are all meanings of the ultimate reality, of Buddha nature.

However, any attempt to explicate this state is to present but one of its innumerable meanings. What we can grasp intellectually are meanings, not the ultimate reality. Only Buddha can grasp the ultimately real, since enlightenment is not the consequence but the pre-condition of such a power.

The Buddha advises the bodhisattvas that every Law emerges, changes, settles, and vanishes every moment, instantly (Preaching, p. 12). It is obvious that such impermanence renders the Law beyond whatever it is that we call knowing; for our kind of knowledge requires that the known be bounded and stable enough to be what it is, to endure. Our kind of knowing is to know the known by its limitations, by its determinations which specify it to be this way rather than that. But whatever is accessible to this kind of knowledge is not the ultimately real. That whose meanings the innumerable meanings qualify cannot be presented; whatever is capable of being presented, however true it may be, is just another meaning. That from which all the meanings derive is not itself another meaning; it is of an entirely different constitution which is often presented in the text only to be negated. As a propaedeutic we might be told of the Void, the Formless, the Absolute Nothingness, or the Ten Merits, but all these are but aids or step-ladders for turning the wheel—useful devices, perhaps, but not anything to be clung to, investigated, or analyzed, and especially not anything to be used as weapons against others who talk

about God, the Truth, or Suchness. All claims are to be transcended—the Void voided, the Truth abandoned as it becomes a Lie (Nietzsche)—but the practice of compassion remains paramount. To be compassionate requires no doctrine. Compassion is not something one knows; it is something one does and something one receives. The path to enlightenment is compassion; and compassion rather than hostility and partiality is what is called for by the path to enlightenment. The parable of the herbs is very clear in showing generosity or compassion for the thirst of the plants as the underlying reality of the diverse flourishing.

When in the *Lotus Sūtra* we learn that Buddha nature is recognized in all, be they disciples such as Śāriputra, great bodhisattvas, relatives of Buddha Śākyamuni, such as Rahula, or indeed, villains such as Devadatta, we can see the universality of compassion and generosity. These have to overcome hostility, revenge, and even judgement and justice. For all these require limits, contrasts, opposition, and either/or thinking. And while we are not fully enlightened we are indeed in the clutches of contrast, thinking, judgement, preference, and hierarchy. Enlightenment constitutes being beyond all this. To be beyond means always practicing compassion, being mindful of the fact that less than full enlightenment is tantamount to suffering, and finding the impermanent unsatisfactory.

Be it in the parable of the magic city or of the burning house, the suggestion is clear that skillful means are to be used for getting the willing cooperation of those whose despondency, disinterest, bad habits, or ignorance prevent them from doing what is ultimately for their own benefit. These parables fly in the face of some conventional modern claims, such as the claim that the ends do not justify the means, and that knowing the good for the other when the other does not share that knowledge is paternalism, and that using deliberate deception in order to get the other to do what we think is best for him is manipulation. Thus the parables themselves are not instances of some absolute truth, but rather, persuasive devices, themselves to be abandoned once they have enabled us to behave compassionately. They too, are merely skillful means to an end.

That this is a general practical approach is recognized in Mahāyāna traditions, in which it is claimed that the Buddha Śākyamuni taught different things at different times to different people, in each case saying what would be most beneficial for the advancement and enhancement of the audience. “I knew that the natures and desires of all living beings were not equal. Therefore I preached the Law variously. It was with tactful power that I preached the Law variously. In forty years and more, the truth has not been revealed yet.” (*Sūtra of Innumerable Meanings*, Preaching, p.14.) Thus, the teachings of the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra* are not the same as many of the other texts of the Pali Canon or the Tripitaka, but they are held to be the most advanced by its devotees, because they are presented to a wonderful assemblage of the highest and greatest beings. In contrast to Tendai and Nichiren traditions, the Zen Buddhists focus on an un verbalized direct transmission of experience and wisdom, thus sidestepping the primacy of any of the formulated teachings; but, because human beings are still human, the function of the *Sūtras* is replaced by koans in the Zen communities.

It should be clear that there is a parallel between how the innumerable meanings are aspects of the self-same reality and how the individual differentiated beings all share in the Buddha nature. This leads to the next difficulty. Is the Buddha nature of each individual merely a potential, a seed, to be realized in some future time? Certainly that seems to be the intent of the promise to the individuals to whom Buddhahood is promised in the *Sūtra*. Alternatively, perhaps each one is already and eternally an aspect of the Buddha nature, in which case realization is a change of attitude rather than a future project. Once again the answer to the problem lies buried not in who can make the best case for one or the other side of the dilemma; rather, the problem is in our way of looking at the matter, thus giving rise to a case of either/or. The solution lies in seeing that although rationally the alternatives are disjoint, and make absolute alternative claims, the reality is that both of these ways of seeing can be upheld, and neither is the whole truth. We are indeed all substantially at one with the Buddha;

we have no individual selves. Really all of the multiplicity is a part of one and the same whole. Hence when we are compassionate, we fulfill our own nature and need. And yet to rest in the truth of the oneness of all Buddha nature would leave us inactive and untrue to our own nature. There is a task, a project, a goal that directs us. And that is the practice of the Law. By being on the bodhisattva path, offering the merits of our virtues to accrue to the benefit of all sentient beings, we practice the Law of what we are, and therewith become ourselves. Note the insistence of the either/or character of our question about whether we are either already Buddha natures or whether we are to achieve that at some blessed moment when the bodhisattvas' task is done and all sentience stands ready to be enlightened. Both claims are partially and simultaneously true; both are limited claims, and hence necessarily less than the whole truth. There are moments in our temporal horizon when we take one or the other as important and appropriate — but both are but skillful means for keeping the joy of our reality vivid.

This is but another Buddhist example of tactfulness and skillful means. When words help, words are offered. But these words are not the final goal; they are merely a means to get us unstuck if we are stuck in our path toward Buddhahood. The text teaches that when it is necessary, the Buddha will “deceive us into the truth,” as Kierkegaard put it. In the parable of the magic city, the tired pilgrims are lured toward their goal and dissuaded from giving up by the mysterious illusion of the proximity of a yet-distant goal. Similarly, if we are to move beyond our habitual and limiting thoughts, perhaps potent new thoughts will effect our moving from our original stance. If a set of truth-claims helps us to move beyond our previous beliefs, the set has done its job. It does not, however, constitute a permanently satisfying and intelligible final answer. Once we are free from whatever delusion to which we were habituated, the tool of our liberation should be discarded rather than clung to. It was after all nothing more than a now-spent tool. And so it is that tactfulness requires that what is spoken be effective rather than literally true.

Wisdom is exactly the power for skillful tactical action, that which

expresses effectively the compassion respecting the will of the many finite individuals and involving the transformation of each into self-awareness as Buddha nature—self-awareness of the formless self. We run around in puzzled conceptual circles asking questions (Why does one have to realize that which is already realized? If all are already Buddha nature, does it matter whether we are diligent or not?) that are labyrinths of discursive reason. The Buddha mind is free of discursive reason and has non-mediated, direct oneness with truth. And yet discursive reason, too, is but an aspect of the Buddha nature.

Just as Hegel in the West has helped us see beyond the limiting Laws of Thought that Aristotle formulated as the conditions of rational thinking (the Law of Identity, that $A = A$; the Law of Non-Contradiction, that nothing is both A and not- A ; and the Law of Excluded Middle, that everything is either A or not- A), so the Buddhist heritage is similarly a liberating one. Hegel shows that when one thinks about a seedling, a bud, the flower and its fruit, there is a sense in which each is distinct and other than the other. But at the very same time they are all aspects of the one plant. The shoot anticipates the blossom, the flower is but the transformation of the blossom, and the fruit is the ripened flower and the promise of the seed and the sprout. In some intuitive way we can here understand that the question should not concern whether they are the same or different, but rather that the very difference is involved in the sameness; each momentary unit portends the next moment and is but the fulfillment of the previous one. The bud is and is not the flower, just as we are and are not Buddha nature. The flower is not some final goal that the bud seeks; it is but a next stage on an eternally continuous process. Similarly, Buddhahood is not some eventual final achievement but the continuous and temporal praxis of compassion. This surely is the intent when in the *Sūtra* the audience are all considered bodhisattvas, when many would have deemed themselves mere *śrāvakas* or *pratyekabuddhas*.

Process implies time, time implies change, and change implies goal or purpose; but the ultimately worthwhile goal or purpose is self-justify-

ing, autotelic.

Living compassionately is the Buddha nature, and the compassionate being has his immediate objectives and activities. These activities both serve the needs of suffering sentiency and the needs of the bodhisattva. Perhaps ordinary people all need the transformative insight that Jean-Paul Sartre plays on in his one-act play, *Huis-clos* (No Exit). The setting of the play seems like an elegant hotel lobby, but we learn from the three characters found there that they believe this to be the reception area to hell. However, each is convinced that he has been sent there by some mistake, and that he will eventually be redirected when the formalities of admission will commence.

Gradually we the audience come to see that indeed the characters are in bad faith and self-deceived if they think of themselves as paragons of virtue.

However, it takes more time for the audience to realize that these persons are not in some receiving antechamber; they are actually in hell, and each causes it to be hell for himself and the two others by a lack of sensitivity and lack of generosity. Similarly, Buddha nature is not achieved in some indefinite future state; it is practiced in each instance of compassion and generosity. The bodhisattvas have Buddha nature. The only error we make is that we think there needs to be some extinction or disappearance when all other sentient beings achieve enlightenment. But that comes from our mistaken resentment of the transient and impermanent character of being; because we long for eternity and permanence, stacticity, and, in a sense, death. This is what makes the impermanent unsatisfactory, and hence *dukkha*.

The Buddha teaches us to overcome suffering by growing beyond the four unsatisfying ways of reacting to the complex manifold: clinging to the transitory good; resenting the transitory unpleasant; desiring the potential good; and fearing the potential bad. Since 'all' consists of the actual good and bad and the potential good and bad, we suffer when we respond with clinging, resentment, desire, and fear. Were we to respond with joy and gratitude for the actual good, compassion and resoluteness

with respect to the actual bad, and simply abandon desire as well as fear, thus anticipating with hope, confidence, and serenity whatever emerges as the new, we would have attained enlightenment, and we would see the full realization of our Buddha nature. In the meanwhile, every moment so lived needs no redemption, and every moment lived with those unhealthful habits or *tanhās* is but a transient moment, vanishing into the past, losing its significance, or, possibly, becoming an occasion for insight and self-transformation, in which case its negativity has served a positive purpose. Thus all moments are redeemable. This is the sense in which a tragedy, once it is integrated and accepted, turns into a strength of character, and thus ceases to be tragic.

In conclusion, we see that the *Threefold Lotus Sūtra* is an excellent text from which to learn that our disputes and debates, which set us against each other, and which call for arguments and judgements, presuppose a kind of either/or logic which holds the truth to be similar to a meaning, opinion, or view. In terms of the first half of the *Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law* we are exposed to the Law of Appearance, from which we learn that we are not yet enlightened but have within us each the potential to achieve Buddhahood. The second half, the Law of Origin, clearly asserts our fundamental unity with Buddha. These two positions are not made to vie with one another for supremacy or correctness. They are equally promulgated by the Buddha, and each is independently intelligible. That which escapes our capacity to harmonize is left indeed as beyond our present ken, but nonetheless accessible to faith-discernment. Thus the thrust of the *sūtra* is that the truth is quite different from meanings, opinions, and views, and is capable of sustaining logically incommensurable and unharmonizable meanings, opinions, and views. Speech and assertion should supply the pragmatic means for turning the wheel, rather than assisting in the assertion of dogmatic verities. Commitment to one persuasive perspective sets us against one another and blocks us from following the true Law, compassion. Compassion, when practiced, is our Buddha nature, manifesting itself in bodhisattvic wisdom, seren-

ity, power, and fulfillment.

This is what the *Sūtra* persuades us to be loyal to. So ultimately philosophy is not the art of rational argumentation; philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, while argumentation is a character defect, not the substance of philosophy !