

Nonduality in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*: A Theological Reflection

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THE PERFECTION of wisdom sutras teach that all dharmas are empty, and as such are all the same, so that in the end any efforts to establish distinctions between them are delusive and futile. Conze offers a brief summary of a characteristic long-drawn-out, repetitive development in *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*: “It is because of the nonbeingness of form, etc., its emptiness, its isolatedness, its lack of own-being, that a Bodhisattva does not approach [it] from either beginning, end, or middle. Because form, etc., cannot be apprehended in nonbeingness, emptiness, isolatedness, or in lack of own-being. Nor is nonbeingness one thing, emptiness another, isolatedness another, lack of own-being another, one thing, a Bodhisattva another, form, etc., another, beginning, end, and middle another; but all these are not two nor divided. And that should be done for all dharmas.”¹ This summary fails to convey the power of the sutra’s repetitions, which in meditative recitation track down substantializing and dualistic notions to their last hiding-place.

The emptiness and sameness of all dharmas is also a basic theme of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*,² driven home this time not by exhaustive repetition but by paradoxical utterances and gestures that enact nonduality. It is because

¹ Conze 1990, p. 190. This laconic summary corresponds to no less than 42 quarto pages in Kimura 2009, pp. 1–42.

² For the Sanskrit text of this work, discovered by Professor Hisao Takahashi of Taisho University in July 1999, see Takahashi 2006. Published online by University of the West, Rosemead, CA, in the “Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon.” Paul Harrison, Luis Gómez, and others are working on an English translation of this text.

of these that one of the sutra's titles is given as *yamaka-puṭa-vyatyastanihāram*, "production of couplets and inversions."³ Nonduality provides the basic tonality for all the events and discussions in the text, none of which can be properly understood without the breakthrough to nondual insight.

Writing on the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* for Catherine Cornille's series Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts, I seek points of contact between Buddhist nonduality and the New Testament. Stepping back from the most sweeping declarations of the Buddhist texts, I note that on a more practical and prosaic plane, nonduality works on actual painful dualisms. Nonduality is never simple identity. Indeed it is always paradoxical, for it declares an intimate conjunction between what appear to be fundamentally opposed—in Buddhism, emptiness and form, nirvana and samsara, wisdom and compassion; in Christianity, the conjunction of divine power and human weakness, and of "dying with Christ" and "walking in newness of life," or of the eternal divine Word and the suffering flesh of a human being; in Western philosophy, subject and object, spirit and matter. In various ways the New Testament, especially in the Pauline and Johannine writings, works to overcome sterile and paralyzing dualisms, and in doing so finds itself aligned with Buddhism, though it is not at all clear how far this affinity goes, and to what extent each of the traditions may be called on to formulate a radical critique of the other.

The nonduality of wisdom and compassion is perhaps the most accessible form of nondual thinking in Buddhism. It addresses the practical problem of reconciling contemplative withdrawal to the forest with active involvement in the affairs of the village. But it also tackles a deeper ontological problem: since wisdom teaches us that beings have no real existence, how can we seriously express compassion for these non-existent entities? The *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* in twenty-five-thousand verses presents this as the greatest difficulty for bodhisattvas. To lead beings to awakening is like attempting to discipline or dispute with space, for, like space, the beings exhibit the character of isolatedness, emptiness, insubstantiality, and vanity. If, having understood this, "a Bodhisattva does not lose heart, feels no despondency and does not tremble in his mind, then he courses in perfect wisdom."⁴ But when he or she "surveys all dharmas from emptiness, and

³ Takahashi 2006, chapter 12, section 23. Also at chapter 12, section 17: *yamaka-vyatyasta-nihāra-pada-puṭa*. *Puṭa* is the name of a meter (Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary. Oxford: Clarendon, 1979, p. 631b). *Yamaka* is "the repetition in the same stanza of words or syllables similar in sound but different in meaning, paronomasia" (Ibid., p. 846c).

⁴ Conze 1990, p. 463.

does not abandon any being,” the bodhisattva becomes “a refuge to those without refuge, a shelter of the defenseless, the final relief of those who are without one.”⁵ To Western readers this is a recondite issue, yet it lies at the heart of Mahayana Buddhism. The paradox, like all the paradoxes in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, is generated by the doctrine of emptiness, and its solution is also found in that doctrine.

The linguistic performance of the text, with its sometimes shocking paradoxical statements, is founded in the ideal of the rhetorical dexterity of the enlightened bodhisattva, a master of language because of his freedom of vision. The *Avataṃsaka Sutra* lists skill in *yamaka* (“couples”) and *vyatyasa* (“inversions”) among the bodhisattva’s attainments, and links it with the ability to manifest the ways of samsara and to ripen all beings while abiding in nirvana, where there are no beings: “The bodhisattva is skillful in couples and inversions for, insofar as he plays with the knowledges and has obtained the excellence of the perfection of knowledge, he is able, while relying on nirvana, to manifest the ways of samsara; though possessing a domain entirely without beings, he does not cease to bring beings to ripeness.”⁶

My commentary will focus on these paradoxes, which I shall attempt to set in relationship to the Pauline and Johannine paradoxes concerning the relation of Jesus and the Father, the death and glorification of Christ, and the justification of the sinner. These can be unified under the broad heading of the paschal relationship of humanity and divinity, the drama in which human mortality and sinfulness are transformed by divine life and grace. Both sets of paradoxes point to the core concern of their respective traditions. In both cases we are dealing with ultimate reality, so that the effort to organize an interaction between the scriptural rhetoric of the Buddhist sutra on the one hand and New Testament texts on the other takes us into uncharted depths.

Throughout the centuries, Christianity has contrasted itself with alternative topographies of the spiritual world, notably the Neoplatonic One. Conflating the absolute simplicity of the One with the vibrant movement of the self-thinking Mind, which Plotinus had rigorously differentiated from it, Christian theology maintains that God is absolutely simple despite the infinity of his thoughts and activities and the processes and differentiations that go on within the divinity to give rise to a trinity of divine Persons. The resultant picture of God is less forbidding than that of the self-sufficient

⁵ Conze 1990, p. 464.

⁶ Quoted in Lamotte 1987, p. 35.

One, so utterly simple that it cannot be said to “think” or even to “be.” But divine simplicity has in the process lost its teeth. It becomes merely a negative warning against positing some kinds of differentiation in God, such as a difference of potency and act, or of part and part. Each of the three divine Persons is the one absolutely simple God, despite their distinction and their relations of procession.

Christianity might embrace Buddhist nonduality in the same way it embraced Plotinian simplicity, stretching it to accommodate the dualities of human and divine, sin and righteousness, life and death that are presupposed even in its most paradoxical and apparently nondual utterances. A clear obstacle here is that though Buddhist samsara and biblical creatureliness have much in common, the other “poles” of the nondual relationship, namely nirvana and God, are vastly different. Nirvana is impersonal, inactive, and in Madhyamaka its “emptiness” breaks down any radical disjunction from samsara, which has the same empty texture; God is personal, active, and stands over against creatures as their transcendent ground. One might envisage a nirvanic emptying of the notion of God but one could hardly give nirvana the personal traits of the biblical Creator. A more promising locus for a Christian embrace of Buddhist nonduality may be found in the figure of the bodhisattva, often compared with Christ. If all the paradoxes of Christianity center on Christ, who is both true man and true God, those of Buddhism center on the bodhisattvas, in whom samsaric and nirvanic existence are conjoined.

If Buddhist nonduality has vital relevance for Christian theology, it must be because the latter is suffering from painful dualisms for which it seeks healing in the former. Nonduality for nonduality’s sake, without any pressing urgency, is mere intellectual bookkeeping. What draws Christians to Buddhism is a chronic dissatisfaction with inherited frameworks of thought. Indeed many have moved over to Buddhism entirely, dispensing themselves from having to worry about the imponderable question of God.

Paul Knitter declares that for Christianity “dualism is the problem!” but gives initially a rather harmless-sounding account of what this means: “dualism results when we make necessary distinctions, and then take these distinctions too seriously,” especially when we overstress the infinite distinction between God and the world.⁷ The Bible does indeed present a potentially oppressive dualism between good and evil, the way of death and the way

⁷ Knitter 2009, p. 7.

of life, reinforced in a Persian infusion with the dualisms of God and Satan, angels and devils, heaven and hell. The force of these dualisms is reduced by the unitary emphases in the Christian message, such as the stress on the inseparability or even identity of love of God and love of neighbor. The centrality of the forgiveness of sins is another factor that breaks down alienation between God and humanity or among humans themselves, and creates a situation that prompts paradoxical nondual utterance.

Knitter is more exercised by the dualism between creation and a God who is totally other, infinitely transcendent. But if we think of God, with John the Evangelist, as “Spirit,” “Light,” “Love”⁸—which are not metaphysical definitions of God but name a “divine milieu”—or if with Augustine we conceive God as Being, Truth, Life, the Good, intimately present to all souls, the *internum aeternum*⁹—then the dualism evoked by Knitter does not arise. To say that this intimately and universally present source of being, insight, goodness, and love is eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent, is not to posit a remote metaphysical entity but to name a phenomenon near at hand, while proscribing things that cannot appropriately be said about it. To be sure, Augustine’s contemplative vision may not have found its most appropriate expression in the metaphysical structures of his theology, and many have suspected a relapse into Manichean dualism in the darker passages of his writings on grace and predestination. Still, Augustine’s *Confessions* remains the most influential Christian book after the New Testament, and the contemplative spiritual freedom he attained, thanks in large part to Plotinus, remains a central reference for Christian insight.

Knitter notes that nirvana and samsara are neither two nor simply one; their relationship can be described as “InterBeing.” He proposes that just as Buddhism overcame a dualism between nirvana and samsara, Christianity might seek to conceive God and creation in a similar way, such that “God really depends on us.”¹⁰ That last phrase seems to me to rewrite nonduality in the flat terms of a democratic metaphysics, where considerations of mutual relationship of equals trump attention to the concrete visage of the biblical God. Buddhism does not formulate nonduality in such flat metaphysical terms, by claiming for instance that nirvana depends on samsara. Neither does the nonduality of “He who has seen me has seen the Father”¹¹ make the Father

⁸ Jn 4:24, 1 Jn 1:5, and 1 Jn 4:16, respectively.

⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.

¹⁰ Knitter 2009, p. 23.

¹¹ Jn 14:9.

dependent on the human form of Jesus. Johannine nonduality concerns the unity between the carnal samsaric texture of human existence and the presence and manifestation of the divine in it. Metaphysical explications have always diluted the impact of this nondual awareness, whether in classic references to its basis in the consubstantiality of Father and Son and the hypostatic union of the Son with the human Jesus, or in modern efforts to interpret it as expressing a revisionist account of divine transcendence.

If a return to Johannine and Augustinian vision allays ethical and theological dualism so that it no longer constitutes a painful problem for Christian faith, does recourse to Buddhist nonduality become superfluous? Good Christian theology is itself an enterprise of nonduality, which Buddhist nonduality can reinforce and enrich, joining forces with it against painful dualisms that arise where good theology does not hold sway, in sectarianism, dogmatism, fundamentalism, and other such forms of unskillfulness. Or does Buddhist nonduality challenge Christianity at a deeper level than this, soliciting a niggling dissatisfaction or unease at the heart of biblical faith—a sense, which Jews and Muslims may also share, that the monotheistic construction of awareness of the divine or of ultimacy suffers from some painful inbuilt flaws that Buddhist insight may help to heal?¹²

Comedy and Nonduality

The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* is remarkably good-humored for a major religious text. Like the Book of Job, it takes the form of a drama, and could even be staged as such, though the special effects might be daunting. Comedy is provided in particular by the self-bondage of Śāriputra and others who are baffled by Vimalakīrti's extraordinary freedom from limiting identity.¹³ A sense of humor may allay the shock caused by antinomian passages such as the following: "Take this food if, without seeing the Teacher, hearing the dharma, or serving the *saṃgha*, you become a monk under the six heretical teachers and follow their path."¹⁴ Orthodoxy becomes a snare if we do not realize its emptiness, and heresies become a salvific means if we handle them in full awareness that they are empty. We should be ready to smile at both. Heresies break

¹² In addition to the many post-Auschwitz and death of God theologies, Daniel Sibony's psychoanalytical study of the flawed origins of monotheism should be noted. See Sibony 1997.

¹³ Interestingly, one of the earliest Sanskrit dramas, of which fragments survive, is the *Śāriputraprakarana* (Comedy of Śāriputra); see Bansat-Boudon 2006, p. xvi.

¹⁴ Takahashi 2006, chapter 3, section 17.

the attachment to orthodox views, and if one does not lend them dogmatic weight they lead back to the wisdom of emptiness. The bodhisattva who follows them deconstructs them, just as by not insisting on orthodox views he shows their merely functional status. This might be applied to the perpetual wrangle between orthodox and unorthodox views in Christian tradition.

It is true that the antinomianism is piled on so relentlessly that our smile is likely to freeze, as in watching a Beckett or Pinter play: "If adopting the eight untoward conditions of life, you do not gain the auspicious conditions; if embracing the taints you do not attain purification; if you do not bring purification to your donors, but they fall into evil paths; if you join all the Māras; if you make the nature of all passions your own nature; cultivate hostility to all beings; slander all buddhas, as well as dharma and *samgha*; and never enter *parinirvāṇa*. . . ." ¹⁵ We must suppose that what is being underlined here is the emptiness of all dharmas, such that their conventional ordering has no ultimate subsistence. One could tame this speech by reducing it to an almost banal counsel: "Be free from and unattached to all conventions even while observing them faithfully." But the brunt of it is that the bodhisattva positively demonstrates and enacts emptiness by treating approved ideals lightly and taking up what is most disapproved in order to deconstruct it.

Williams writes "Such a statement may not strike the modern reader as exactly proper material for a stand-up comedian, but it plays upon the same themes of incongruity and improbability which have always been the comic's stock-in-trade. . . . The destruction of distinctions . . . comes perilously close to absolute anarchism and meaninglessness. . . . What prevents the sutra from becoming a counsel of despair is that ever present comic sense of incongruity."¹⁶ Perhaps we should reach to Rabelais and Joyce to attune ourselves to the extravagance of such passages. If tragedy tends to build on massive oppositions of good and evil, life and death, joy and woe, heaven and hell, comedy is a more comprehensive school of nonduality. The comic hero is never perched sublimely above the common herd but is one with all humanity; offenses are dissolved in laughter or forgiveness; the frontier between dream and waking becomes porous (*A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest*); gender distinctions become a matter of carnivalesque play and cross-dressing (*As You Like It, Twelfth Night*); the lightest things become serious and the most serious things light; wisdom can appear as folly and folly as wisdom. The duality between comedy and tragedy itself

¹⁵ Takahashi 2006, section 18.

¹⁶ Williams 1990, pp. 93–94.

breaks down; there are scenes of clowning in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, to remind us that the tragic perspective does not enjoy absolute authority. Comedy is not a superficial adornment of human life, a distraction from its true essence, thought to be found in tragedy alone. Its role in dissolving fixated and dualistic perspectives makes it an agent of revelation as much as tragedy is. One might even say that it is more closely allied with religious vision, whether Buddhist or Christian, since the tragic cannot have the last word for these faiths. In comedies the last word is often forgiveness (*The Winter's Tale*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*), so that they become parables of salvation.

Does the Buddha's smile have an equivalent in the Gospels, or must we imagine Jesus as forever sighing, frowning, and chiding? Some of the gospel parables have a streak of mischief in them, as they delight in overturning expectations. This is particularly the case with the stories unique to Luke's Gospel, where the calculating soliloquies of the characters are followed by a divine surprise.¹⁷ Hierarchies are inverted and outsiders become insiders in the inclusive community of the Kingdom. Perhaps comic nonduality trumps tragic dualism in the final vision of the New Testament.

The Flowers of the Goddess

One of the most comic scenes in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* concerns a goddess who dwells in Vimalakīrti's house and who, thrilled by his teaching, makes heavenly flowers rain on the assembly. These cling to the bodies of the *śrāvakas* but not to the bodhisattvas. Śāriputra protests: "Devī, these flowers are improper (*akalpikāni*)."¹⁸ It is because he is too conscious of his religious identity that Śāriputra cannot shake off the flowers and undo the shocking and embarrassing breach of the monastic *vinaya*, which forbade the use of garlands, ornaments, and perfumes. The goddess replies that the flowers are quite proper, *kalpikāni*, since they are neither imagined nor conceived, *na kalpayanti na vikalpayanti*; it is the elders alone who are imagining and conceiving them and it is precisely their fabrications and their discrimination that are improper for one who has renounced the world to live according to the dharma. The good religious are those who refrain from such improper imagining and conceiving. It is not the goddess who has tainted Śāriputra but the evil conceptions of his own heart.

¹⁷ See Lk 7:39; 12:18–19; 15:17–19; 16:3–4; 18:4, 11–12.

¹⁸ Takahashi 2006, chapter 6, section 8.

In the Gospels likewise, it is from within that impurity comes,¹⁹ and Paul sees the painful nub of the Law in the commandment, “Thou shalt not covet.”²⁰ The Pharisees fuss about improper externals, but what is truly improper is the inward disposition of their hearts.²¹ Does this build on a crude dualism of internal and external? No, because what comes to one from the outside can be transformed by its reception—as in the (non-biblical) adage, “to the pure all things are pure.” Externally inflicted suffering can be taken up as an object of heart-exercise, becoming redemptive for the Christian, and an occasion of unmasking its emptiness for a Buddhist. Moreover, the inwardness of the heart is immediately expressed in externals, both in words: “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks,”²² and in deeds: “doing the truth.”²³ The evil deeds denounced in Mark 7:21–22 as “proceeding from within” are identical with the bad thoughts (*hoi dialogismoi hoi kakoi*) that they embody; the heart is not hidden away inside but displayed in public. The dualistic ways of thinking that lodge in Western metaphysics—and that Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty sought to correct—have little support in scripture. The materialist reductionism that would reduce the phenomena of consciousness to physical processes in the brain is not a true overcoming of dualism, for it cannot do justice to the supreme reality of the “heart” as stressed throughout scripture. In Buddhism too, *vijñāna*, discriminating consciousness, is the most impressive of the *skandhas*, and four of the five *skandhas* belong to mind rather than matter. If the overcoming of dualism in Buddhist thought gives itself a metaphysical form, in what is probably a falling-off from integral Buddhist vision, that metaphysics will be some form of idealism. The contrast between internal and external is also a source of the humor in the Gospels, as in the contrast between the self-inflated Pharisee and the humble publican.²⁴

Śāriputra devotes great care and energy to brushing away the flowers but not to cleansing his mind of the conceptions that pollute it. Or perhaps he does devote energy to cleansing the mind, but in a way that generates dualism. The heavenly flowers are a skillful means for revealing this. They do not stick to the bodhisattvas, who have cut off all conceptions. Likewise, it is on the fearful person that evil spirits take hold, and it is on those who fear

¹⁹ Mk 7:15; Mt 5:28.

²⁰ Rom 7:7.

²¹ Mt 23:25.

²² Mt 12:34.

²³ Jn 3:21; 1 Jn 1:6.

²⁴ Lk 18:11–12.

the dangers of samsara that sense-objects take hold, whereas they can do nothing to one free from all fear of samsaric passions. Fear itself and not its alleged objects is what paralyzes.

When the Gospel eloquently urges us to lay aside anxiety,²⁵ it is touching on this fundamental bondage to fearful imaginings. If “perfect love casts out fear,”²⁶ it is not because one is so good and pure that one has nothing to fear, like the bodhisattvas to whom the flowers do not stick because they are free of every residual trace, *vāsanā*, of the passions. It is not merely that a saint, joyfully engaged in works of love, no longer projects the image of a jealous, judging God who inspires fear. Rather, fundamental trust in the God who is “greater than our hearts” and who “first loved us,”²⁷ and compassionate openness to the neighbor in need (cf. 1 Jn 3:17) are acts of casting out fear in which love consists. Perhaps the *vāsanā* are not something like bad smells to be suppressed by obsessive cleansing rituals, but an inner disposition to fall back fearfully on egoistic worry. The love that casts out fear by the same token overcomes dualism—dualism between self and neighbor and dualism between God and the world. “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”²⁸

Absence of Basis

The heavenly flowers are no ordinary sense-objects, but what one might call flowers of emptiness, fitting expressions of wisdom, that a religion clumsily preoccupied with questions of form and status cannot appreciate. For a bodhisattva, anything can become such a flower, which confirms Vimalakīrti’s teaching, earlier in the chapter, on the passions and their lack of basis. When Mañjuśrī asks, “What is the root of wholesome and unwholesome?” Vimalakīrti answers that their root is the assemblage of existences (*satkāya*); the root of this is desire and attachment; their root is incorrect conceptual thoughts, which in turn are rooted in erroneous notions. The root of erroneous notions is the lack of a substratum; and this lack has no root; that is why all dharmas rest on a root without basis.²⁹ Just as in Derrida’s deconstruction, the last substantial reference is replaced by a play of referrals, a network of signifiers that never comes to rest in a foun-

²⁵ Mt 6:25–34.

²⁶ 1 Jn 4:18.

²⁷ 1 Jn 3:20; 4:19.

²⁸ 1 Jn 4:16.

²⁹ Takahashi 2006, chapter 6, section 5–6.

dation in a last signified, so the quest for the basis of dharmas never reaches a solid foundation. One realizes that such a basis cannot be found and that one cannot make a solid foundation of that very absence of basis.

Thus it is imagination that gives the passions a deceptive solidity, just as it projects substantiality, *svabhāva*, onto all empty phenomena. Every passion is without object, without a basis in durable existence; the only matter of which a passion is made is the projections of imagination and the fixity of the concepts that give them illusory consistency. To realize this is a joyful liberation; the conquest of passions, not by blind asceticism but by enlightened analysis of their lack of basis, makes of them a school of emptiness. Hence the slogan: "Passions themselves are enlightenment." Such is the paradox on which the Buddhist vision of nonduality is founded.

Every passion is ready to break down, due to its ontological inconsistency. The dyads whereby the passions keep up a semblance of existence—friend vs. foe, love vs. hate, good vs. bad—disappear like ghosts for the one who becomes aware of the sameness of dharmas, or the taste of the real, which has nothing to do with the bitterness of painful discriminations. This sameness or equality implies the identity of samsara and nirvana, for "there is nirvana only for one who imagines a samsara, and vice versa."³⁰ Nāgārjuna exposes the absence of basis of the passions in a logical dialectic. "If a lustful subject existed before lust (*rāgā*) and exempt from lust, lust would depend on that subject; given a lustful subject, there would be lust. Conversely, in the absence of a lustful subject, how could lust come to be?"³¹

One might look to Martin Luther for something analogous to this in Christian tradition. His language may often sound starkly dualistic, but we may read it against the grain to bring out a nondual significance that lends it a new coherence. Salvation, which for Luther consists essentially in the forgiveness of sins, or justification by faith in Christ, is designed for sinners. Hence the paradoxical advice to Melanchthon: "sin boldly, but believe more boldly" (*pecca fortiter, sed crede fortius*).³² Sin does not deconstruct of its own accord, or by reason of metaphysical insight into evil as a mere absence of being. Rather the sinner is transferred to Christ's realm, where sin is no longer imputed, but becomes ruled rather than ruling, *regnatum* not *regnans*. The "joyful exchange" (*fröhlicher Wechsel*) whereby the sinner is clothed in Christ's righteousness while he takes on our sin has a nondual

³⁰ Viévard 2002, p. 210.

³¹ *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā* 6. 1-2a. See also Siderits and Katsura 2013, pp. 65–67.

³² Cf. Luther, *Epistle 501 to Melanchthon*.

aspect. The slogan *simul iustus et peccator* might seem to tear the subject painfully in two opposing directions, but it could be taken as the play of two perspectives on the same situation, comparable to the play of samsaric and nirvanic perspectives in a bodhisattva's existence. If I look to myself, I am a sinner, lost; if I look to Christ, I am a saint, saved. If there is a nondual insight here it is established by an event of grace rather than by cool analysis. Bodhisattva freedom and the freedom of those justified by faith have so much in common that one wonders if an affinity may also be found between the respective causes. The Buddhist analysis of sin as delusion leads to forgiveness of all offenders and compassion toward them as caught in a web of delusion. The Christian overcoming of sin through forgiveness generates a wise insight into the emptiness and futility of evil that may rejoin Buddhist analyses. Forgiveness, in both religions, is an enactment of nonduality—nonduality between the one who forgives and the one forgiven, to begin with, and then nonduality between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness or between the ultimate all-comprehending wisdom of buddhas and the compassionate understanding at the heart of human forgiveness.

This nonduality is enacted in the Gospels by the Son of Man who dined with and was a friend of sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors.³³ Religious grace and energy is not something to be preserved from the impurity and messiness of the world, but shows its mettle precisely by being applied in the midst of that impurity, patiently working on it. "It is not the healthy but the sick who need a physician, and I have come not to call the righteous but sinners."³⁴ The bodhisattva is drawn to sin as the physician is to illness, for it is the locus of the full deployment of his forces and also the place where he comes into vital contact with suffering humanity (or sentient beings in general).

Identity

Śāriputra asks: "Goddess, how long ago did you arrive in this house?"³⁵ The question presupposes the ordinary understanding of the identity of persons and their location in space and time. It is just this kind of question that lies exposed to the transcendental deconstructions that Buddhism likes to inflict. The goddess's answer—"I have been here since the moment that Śāriputra the Elder entered deliverance"—like the answers of Jesus to

³³ Mk 2:15–16; Mt 9:10–11; Lk 5:29–30; 7:37–9; 15:2; 19:7.

³⁴ Mk 2:17; Mt 9:12; Lk 5:31.

³⁵ Takahashi 2006, chapter 6, section 9.

his interlocutors in the Synoptics and also in the Fourth Gospel, throws the question back on the questioner, showing that his question is really about himself.

Śāriputra repeats his question: "Goddess, has it been a long time since you arrived in this house?" and again the reply throws him back on himself: "Has it been a long time since Śāriputra attained liberation?" Śāriputra is struck dumb, because he understands that liberation, *vimukti*, cannot appropriately be spoken of in mundane temporal categories.³⁶ Pressed as to the reason for his silence, he answers: "Since deliverance is inexpressible I do not know what to say about it." Has he thus attained the wisdom expressed later in the sutra by Vimalakīrti in his famous silence about the nature of nonduality? Is his statement that deliverance is inexpressible comparable to the similar statement of Mañjuśrī about nonduality? Apparently not, for the goddess goes on to correct him, pointing out that deliverance is not beyond language: "The phonemes pronounced by the Elder are all characters of *vimukti*. Why? This *vimukti* is neither inside nor outside nor other than either. Phonemes likewise are neither inside nor outside nor other than either. Thus, venerable Śāriputra, do not speak of a deliverance beyond phonemes. Why? Because the identity of all dharmas constitutes *vimukti*."³⁷ Contrary to older Buddhist teachings, it is not only the realm of *vimukti* that is unspeakable, but even such mundane matters as the duration of the goddess's residence in the house. Hence, the realm of speech and the realm of the unspeakable coincide. The scene of Vimalakīrti's silence in chapter 8 raises the question of a nonduality between that silence and Mañjuśrī's speech about it. Here Śāriputra's silence does not receive much credit from the goddess, since it is caught in dualistic discrimination between mundane dharmas and the pure realm of *vimukti*.

Śāriputra objects that *vimukti* is the destruction of the three poisons, which cannot be seen as equal to wholesome dharmas. She replies: "It is for those who have gone astray that the Buddha said: 'The destruction of attachment, aversion, and folly, that is what is called deliverance.' But for those who have not gone astray he taught that attachment, aversion, and folly are themselves deliverance."³⁸ For the reader acclimatized to the paradoxes of this text, her reply is almost predictable. A therapist of the three poisons might aim at getting the patient to see how empty they are, such that they thus lose their hold.

³⁶ Cf. Lamotte 1987, p. 273: "The oldest texts recognize that nothing can be said of the one who has 'gone' (cf. *Suttanipāta*, v. 1076)."

³⁷ Takahashi 2006, chapter 6, section 9.

³⁸ Ibid.

In their self-deconstruction they become deliverance. But the goddess appears to be making a more radical point. Deliverance has pitched its tent amid the three poisons, not at a sanitized distance from them. Bodhisattva existence is not a flight from the three poisons but their transformation from within.

It is identity-fixation rather than monkish sexism that the goddess's answer targets: "In the twelve years I have dwelt in this house, I have sought my female nature, but without ever gaining it. How then could I change it? . . . All dharmas are unreal and of a nature created by magic, and you would think of asking them to change their female nature?"³⁹ Both are empty and illusory, and Śāriputra is suffering from fixation on an alleged substantial identity. The conviction of emptiness opens a space where the miraculous can occur. "Then the goddess put forth such a supernatural action that the Elder Śāriputra appeared in the very likeness of the goddess and she appeared in the very likeness of Śāriputra. Then the goddess changed into Śāriputra asked Śāriputra changed into a goddess: 'Why then, Reverend, do you not change your feminine nature?'" She then quotes the Buddha: "Dharmas are neither male nor female"⁴⁰—an insight that can be extended to all oppositions.

In the *Śūramgamasamādhi-sūtra* the *devaputra* Gopaka is asked by what good action he changed his female body and he replies: "Those engaged in the Great Vehicle do not see a difference between male and female. . . . The notions of man and woman are fabricated by the imagination." The good action that merited his sex change is his former service of Śākyamuni. "If my body now is that of a man, this does not mean that I have destroyed or abandoned the characteristics of the female body. . . . Man and woman are misconceptions, and so are all dharmas; they are absolutely free of duality."⁴¹ No doubt such blithe transcendental non-discrimination, like the "neither male nor female" of St. Paul,⁴² can coexist in practice with entrenched discriminatory customs.

Śāriputra's identity as leading disciple of the Buddha, as monk, as male, as individual, weighs on him. He carries his religious creed as a burden, and its relationship to his lived existence is an uneasy one. This heap of investments in identity and doctrine has the same oppressive role as the Law in St. Paul; what can free Śāriputra is awakening to emptiness. To be sure, the rhetoric of nonduality could be perverted into a magnificent instrument for leaving all inequalities entrenched and unchallenged, especially once

³⁹ Takahashi 2006, chapter 6, section 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid., section 15.

⁴¹ Lamotte 1975, pp. 174–75.

⁴² Gal 3:28.

these inequalities have been dubbed conventional and are thus all the more embraced. Something similar is true of the rhetoric of justification by faith.

The goddess cites the Buddha: dharmas are “neither made nor non-made, *na kṛtā na vikṛtāḥ*.”⁴³ Female nature has no real existence, so it is neither made nor unmade, and the same is true of all dharmas. The absence of fixed identities allows tremendous flexibility in adopting different unreal identities as skillful means. Paul wrote: “I have become sick to the sick that I might gain the sick; I have become all things to all men that I might save all.”⁴⁴ Paul crosses the boundaries between Jew and Gentile, and Vimalakīrti has such total freedom from self that he can cross all boundaries, led by the generous desire to lead all to happiness. Whatever the ontological riddles of nonduality in any of its versions, it seems that there is a fundamental practice that makes the two religions one. This consists in the relinquishment of all selfish clutching at one’s own identity, so that the mind-forged barriers that keep one from embracing the other in a spirit of inclusive community fall away.

The theme of nonduality remains a very puzzling one. The above remarks are an indication of the kind of reflection that arises when one moves to and fro between the language of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* and that of the New Testament. If this kind of two-way reflection gets underway, I suggest that it will be a source of religious and philosophical insights for a long time, generating a higher wisdom in which the Buddhist and Christian voices will increasingly blend.

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⁴³ Takahashi 2006, chapter 6, section 15.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor 9:22.

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