

Buddhism as a Religion of Hope: Observations on the "Logic" of a Doctrine and its Foundational Myth

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The gift, to be true, must be the flowing of the giver unto me,
correspondent to my flowing unto him.

R. W. Emerson¹

THIS paper is written from a perspective that may strike some readers as unusual. It was originally conceived as a public talk that began as an exercise in the interpretation of a religious narrative ("the myth of Dharmākara") but soon turned into an exercise in theological speculation.² Thus, by following my own thoughts I fell upon an exercise of the imagination that illustrated for me the close tie that exists between translating words and ideas and imagining sacred worlds.

As translation, the original lecture and the present paper are an attempt to understand a family of Buddhist beliefs that seems to baffle some interpreters of Buddhism. Although this family is often designated as "Pure Land Buddhism" or "the Pure Land tradition," it encompasses much more than what is regarded as "Pure Land" in East Asia and the West. I will retain the

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," in *Essays, Second series* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1975: 163. The first edition, 1844). One must take exception to the views expressed by Emerson further down the same page regarding the gift of "the Buddhist man" (163–64).

² The talk was given in April 1983 at the Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute of Otani University in Kyoto.

expression "Pure Land Buddhism," "Pure Land" for short, only because it is more convenient than a fully descriptive label. Expressed more accurately, the referent for these phrases would have to read something along the following lines: Pure Land Buddhism is a family of beliefs and practices associated with that genre of Buddhist texts that describes the purified buddha-fields, their constitution and lay-out, and the conditions under which a human being can hope to reach such buddha-fields.

This family of beliefs has been represented in various ways throughout the history of Buddhism. Although the scholarly literature of the modern age has tended to conflate "Pure Land," "Amidism," and "Shinshū belief," they are not synonymous (and the second is problematic at best). My use of a broad term and my loose use of "Pure Land" to refer to this diverse family of beliefs is meant to signal its common ground in a mythology that links the vows of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, their saving grace and power, and the purification of buddha-fields. This is the common ground for a constellation of beliefs that includes a wide variety of Amitābha-Amitāyus beliefs and practices, similar systems focusing on other Buddhas (e.g., Maitreya and Bhaiṣajyaguru), as well as lesser known, mostly literary witnesses to similar beliefs. By referring in this essay mostly to the mythology of the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha*, I do not wish to imply that there are no important differences among various members of this larger family of Buddhist beliefs.

Ironically, our understanding of Pure Land Buddhism has been hampered by the putative proximity or similarity of its beliefs and practices to Western notions of divinity, paradise, and salvation. And, with the first person pronoun in the phrase "our understanding" I refer to both Western and East Asian interpreters. The Western observer tends to dismiss Pure Land Buddhism as not quite "Buddhism," and too much like "Christianity." Japanese Pure Land Buddhists spend much energy trying to distance their theological discourse from that of their Christian brethren.

But even a sympathetic reading of Pure Land Buddhism must face some difficulties in the conception of Pure Land faith. One can recognize and address sympathetically both its parallels and its fundamental differences with respect to systems of belief that may be called "theistic" (and these would have to include much more than just Christianity). Yet one is left with some puzzlement. It is not that Pure Land Buddhism is less (or more for that matter) consistent than other systems of religious belief, theistic, non-theistic, or of other types. Rather, my point is that certain problematic or baffling points of doctrine are seldom examined in part because so much energy is

spent in distancing Pure Land from Buddhism, as well as from Christianity.³

Regardless of its possible connections or similarities to other systems of belief, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, a series of problematic polarities coalesce in the Pure Land system of belief.⁴ These include the following: (1) the coexistence of notions of merit with concepts of grace, (2) belief in the inevitability of suffering next to an expectation of redemption (or, rather, to be more accurate, assurance of salvation), and (3) ascetic ideals of liberation coupled with an avowed confidence in the existence of a power that can and will rescue the suffering person. Additionally, at the level of imagery, ideals that presume a denial of, or an escape from, worldly aims are placed next to or

³ Simplistic identifications with forms of Christian belief have not helped. Alexandro Valignano, a Jesuit visitor to Japan in 1579, claimed that Japanese Pure Land Buddhists “hold precisely the doctrine which the devil, father of both, taught to Luther” (*Re-visioning “Kamakura” Buddhism*, ed. by Richard Payne [Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1998], 101). The idea goes back to a letter (1571) of Francisco Cabral, according to Florenz (“Die Japaner,” in *Lehrbuch der Religions-Geschicht*, ed. by P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye [Tübingen: Mohr, 1925], vol. 1, 398). Formal parallels were recognized in a more generous vein by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968). In a long footnote in vol. 1, part 2 of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (3rd ed. Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag a.g., 1945: 372–77; English version *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons. Vol. 1, 2, 1956], 340–44), he claimed that Pure Land Buddhism was the only parallel to Reform theology outside Christianity—most likely because he was not cognizant of Hindu and Muslim parallels. His opening remarks are worth quoting, because they show how complex and subtle was the mind of this theologian even at a juncture where his apologetic agenda is transparent: “We can regard it as a wholly providential disposition that as far as I can see the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity, a religious development in the Far East, is parallel not to Roman or Greek Catholicism, but to Reformed Christianity, thus confronting Christianity with the question of its truth even as the logical religion of grace (*konsequente Gnadenreligion*).” [The word “heathen” is in quotation marks in the German edition, but not in the English.] Barth appears to confuse Francisco Cabral with his more famous namesake, Francis Xavier (*loc. cit.*); Barth does not cite his sources. I could not find a similar notion in the writings of Francis Xavier. (Francisco Javier, *Cartas y escritos de San Francisco Javier*. Unica publicación castellana completa según la edición crítica de *Monumenta historica Soc. Jesu*, 1944–1945. Anotada por el padre Félix Zubillaga, S. I. 2nd ed. [Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1968]).

⁴ I use the phrase “system of belief” loosely, and as shorthand for “a constellation of families of belief and practice.” I do not mean to imply that these beliefs or practices formed part of or derived from a complete or closed theological system (I am not sure such systems can exist in the strict sense of the phrase). Needless to say, at several points in the history of Pure Land Buddhist beliefs, attempts have been made to systematically consolidate belief or to close the system.

expressed by way of images of bliss and comfort that are less than ascetic.⁵

My effort at understanding these dichotomies is, at best, preliminary and schematic. A baffling belief, an apparently contradictory set of beliefs, or an apparently irrational belief does not yield meaning readily, and usually calls for a variety of analytical strategies. In this paper I will outline what I believe is one possible strategy, one that stands critically outside the tradition, yet attempts to understand what makes the tradition meaningful from within. This I call the clarification of the “inner logic” of the belief system.⁶

This interpretation is in part motivated by a strong interest in communication across cultures—partly for professional reasons, partly for reasons of life experience. In the context of such experiences and explorations I have adopted a hypothesis about the relationship of theology to culture that seems to me the most reasonable despite the difficulties inherent to any attempt to test it. This hypothesis postulates a hierarchy of meaning (not necessarily of value) between culture and theology. I propose that the complexities of communication, translation, and interpretation and the problems that attend these processes are superordinate on problems of “theological” interpretation, understood both as exegesis and scholarly clarification.

This working hypothesis is shaped to a great extent by a conception of doctrine (including cases where doctrine is coextensive with text) as both cultural artifact and human engagement (the two notions are not mutually exclusive). This conception can be applied to Pure Land belief systems in the

⁵ Here, as in the title of the paper, I use “foundational myth” to indicate the narratives and tropes that the tradition sees as its foundational event. There is no implication that I regard these narratives, or the texts in which we find them today, as the true or ultimate origin of the tradition. Furthermore, as I shall explain in more detail below, I use the word “myth” as a loose term for those aspects of belief and doctrine that are constituted by narratives or imaginal depictions of sacred events. I call these myths whether they are seen as “foundational” (that is, as the first or pivotal events that form the groundwork for the tradition’s conviction that it carries the truth) or as “ideal” (that is, as descriptions of the way things will be or should be).

⁶ Here too I use the terms loosely: I am not talking of a formal logic or a syllogistic necessity; rather I refer to the way in which the tradition sees certain steps in the narrative itself, and subsequently in its interpretation, as somehow necessary or as somehow “making sense” as events or arguments that call for certain beliefs. This particular use of “logic” is accepted in modern English, and is illustrated in part by the following quotations from the definition of “logic” in the tenth edition of the *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1998): “interrelation or sequence of facts or events when seen as inevitable or predictable.”

following schematic way. A belief in the power of a Buddha's solemn promise entails a commitment that engages a person's behavior (and potentially the imaginal objects upon which they place their trust and hope). But such engagement is possible because the beliefs (narratives, confessional statements, ritual acts) are part of a cultural world the reality of which is beyond question. That is to say, the cultural world of belief is, like a ritual object, a concrete artifact in human imagination. The artifact is only partly represented by the text (as book, performance or recitation). It is also present in the mental landscape and the discourse of believers. For an outsider to grasp the full implication and the subjective meaningfulness of the belief and the practice, this outsider must come to understand the logic of this imaginal world.

As a philologist, I am interested in texts and in trying to understand what texts mean in a particular historical context. In spite of my belief that the Buddhist tradition has much to commend itself, the relevance of Buddhism is no reason for erasing the historical and geographical differences that exist within the tradition and between this and other traditions. Moreover, and this may be more crucial, understanding cannot take place if one ignores the cultural gaps that separate believers among themselves and believers from non-believers. These are gaps that occur in actual time and space, as well as in the imaginal spaces of culture and habit.

I therefore consider the following a useful corollary to my main working hypothesis: Buddhist values and beliefs exist in cultural contexts that may be radically different from my own, and hence my inability to understand them may be rooted in deep cultural differences. This is only a hypothesis, and I am willing to discard it if the evidence points elsewhere. But it is a reasonable hypothesis that also entails the possibility of incommensurable worlds—that is, the possibility that my world and that of the believer simply cannot meet. Incommensurability can also take a stronger form. This stronger form is as follows: even if I were to adopt wholeheartedly one of these beliefs, immersing myself in the culture that produces, maintains, and holds it, abandoning all contact with my own culture, even then I would still be unable to penetrate fully the meaning of the doctrine.

For lack of space I cannot explore here my preferred view of incommensurability, which is the following. I believe I can never fully penetrate even the meanings of my own culture, let alone those of other cultures. But this impossibility in fact reveals the fallacy of imagining culture as fully realized

or as a bounded, discreet and stable entity. Culture—and religion as a cultural phenomenon—is constantly recreated. In a manner of speaking, culture is recreation of meanings. Culture cannot be abstracted from the struggle of individuals and subgroups to make sense of a vast pool of preconceptions and symbols whose meanings not only exist in potency, but actually most likely simply do not exist until they are understood and turned into human behaviors. Thus, culture is always simultaneously emerging, diverging and converging, and no single individual or group can claim to grasp (possess or understand) the totality of the process.

I believe such cultural reflections must also shape the task of the theologian. I am assuming that the moment theologians feel the impulse to explain, clarify or rationalize doctrine, they are thereby recognizing the degree to which religion, as part of culture, is ephemeral and evasive. Similarly, the effort to understand theologically should be seen in some ways as a symptom of the barriers that stand between individuals and between cultures, as well as within an individual's multiple readings of the religious tradition upon which that individual lays a claim.

Needless to say, the theological enterprise is also hermeneutical, not only in that it attempts to understand a tradition as the intentions of an ancestral mind, or the intentions of other living individuals, authoritative or heretical. Theology also tries to make sense of a changing world, and hence part of the frustration of the theological enterprise is built into the virtually impossible task of preserving beliefs that claim relevance for all human circumstances at all times, but were produced by some human beings at a particular time.

Hence, at all levels of theological discourse one is faced with a constant need to respond—that is, not “reply,” but respond—accounting for the tradition and the world by some sort of adaptation. In this sense communication with a tradition (and between cultures) shares some elements with communication between individuals within a given culture. Effective interpersonal communication at the level of social equals often requires that one person walk halfway to the other person even as the other person walks halfway towards the first person. When this type of interaction takes place, communication is transformation.

When this model of communication is applied to religion, even the work of the historian becomes one of persuasion—to say nothing of the work of the theologian. Persuasion need not be irenic or gentle, but the suasive function of interpretation is inherent to the process of understanding. And I

would argue that this is true whether the speaker (writer) is claiming to use “critical” methods or is attempting to read his doctrinal or cultural meanings with a method claiming to be totally neutral (as the so-called phenomenological understandings were supposed to be). I would go even further and argue that in this sense any process of interpretation in religion is inevitably a process of theological persuasion.

In making sense of another, the interpreter is transformed—at the very least interpreters attempt to transform each other. If the object of interpretation is a tradition and the representatives of that tradition are trying to make themselves understood, they too will be transformed. And, I repeat and expand, transformation is not necessarily gentle or voluntary, and is seldom fully conscious.

The original audience for this paper included many persons who were not historians of Buddhism but Shinshū believers and theologians.⁷ Hence I felt a special need to include these preliminary reflections on my particular approach to the interpretation of religious doctrines. This approach assumes certain notions that are not commonly used by committed interpreters of Buddhism. These include notions that derive from the general history of religions, and also concepts of religious language and symbol. In that sense, they may be notions that are purely scholarly, and not wholly intelligible to believers. I propose that such notions may be helpful to the committed believer, as well as to the professional scholar. I now leave this preliminary note and focus on the question of the interpretation of Pure Land Buddhism.

For a significant period in the history of the contemporary scholarly study of Buddhism, doctrine was privileged as the only key to understanding Buddhist belief and practice. Even when the importance of ritual and devotion was recognized, the philosophical framework of the literate tradition

⁷ The word “theology” is here shorthand for “committed systematic reflection on religious doctrine and practice.” This means that in my view “theology” is an adequate word to connote a peculiar use of human imagination and rational thought that is committed, religious, and systematic. It is committed because it is carried out by a person who feels and expresses a sense of fealty to the tradition that is the object of this sort of thought. It is systematic, because it seeks an ordering of doctrine and practice that will be cogent, comprehensive, and rationally elegant. It is to be distinguished from philosophy only by the degree of the thinker’s explicit commitment to a particular doctrinal frame, and from confessional discourse by the degree of critical or rational reflection on the doctrinal system.

was assumed to be the only way to understand religious feeling, belief, and practice. This period in Buddhist scholarship is now finished among the specialists, but the effects of the earlier attitude linger on. Furthermore, believers have yet to begin appreciating the potential value of rethinking religion as something more than doctrine and belief.

Westerners tend to emphasize the critical and ascetic elements of Buddhism. For many Western observers, Pure Land is not consistent with this elite philosophical dimension of the tradition. Many perceive Pure Land as a "simplification" of Buddhism, or, at best, a concession to those unable to practice meditation. One purpose of this paper is to argue against that position.⁸

Now there are some good reasons for this Western understanding of Buddhism. I think it is undeniable that Buddhism produced several systems of critical philosophy. Buddhism, like other philosophies that developed at the same time, was a system or family of systems that questioned traditional beliefs. Such questioning, we believe, resonates with modern agnosticism. Whether this identification is anachronistic or not is not as crucial as the fact that we imagine classical Buddhism as a demythologized system of beliefs and practices. (There are of course other elements of Buddhism, but at this point I am concentrating on this aspect.) To conceive of Buddhism as only a philosophy, or as only a critical philosophy, is to misunderstand the theological functions of critical theology. But there is such a critical element, and I want to underline that first.

Paul Mus used to discuss the outline of the *Upaniṣads* in the following way. He understood the conception of the *ātman*, or the self, as an extended (or social) self, and the *Upaniṣads* were then seen as a critique of this notion of self. So the Brahmanic theory would be one in which the social self was

⁸ I made similar arguments many years ago, but within the context of a book review, and my apologia may have been misconstrued as a criticism ("Shinran's Faith and the Sacred Name of Amida," in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 38-1, Spring 1983: 73-84, which was followed by a rejoinder by the authors of the book reviewed, Ueda and Hirota, in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 38-4, Winter 1983: 413-17, and Gómez's surrejoinder: 418-27). My remarks were critical insofar as they questioned the way in which Mahāyāna doctrines have been frozen or fossilized on the basis of particular readings of selected Indian *śāstras*. This standardization of orthodoxy, which began in India itself, is only one set of readings of Buddhist practice and belief. It ignores the potential for growth and creativity suggested by the imagery of the sutras and by actual Buddhist belief and practice.

emphasized, and the *Upaniṣads* were a critique of that notion, still conceived, of course, in mystical-religious terms. Mus argued, furthermore, that Buddhism was a religious and social manifestation of this same critique.⁹ One could further develop these ideas by suggesting that, as a critique of the individual self, Buddhism could be understood as consisting of two movements or two parts. One movement is the deconstruction of the self. This is seen in meditations such as the meditation on the body, in which the meditator imagines breaking up the self or the body into parts. There is also the transformation of the self, or the development of the self. In this case, the meditator reviews, visualizes, or constructs all the qualities of a Buddha or of buddha-like thoughts.

But a problem arises the moment you try to transform the self, or create a new self. This is done by moral progress or moral growth, or simply by ritual representation. Either way, one assumes a certain notion of building up the self. There is of course a tension between the deconstructive and the constructive process. Also in the notion of construction by moral development we get the idea or the metaphor of moral acquisition. In this practice, we see a repetition of the notion of a social self. The social self is constructed by acquiring life and property. In the same way you construct a religious or moral self by acquiring moral property, and this notion of acquisition of a moral self is expressed in India by the notion of merit (*punya*). In the same way that in society you become rich if you work hard, in the spiritual realm if you work hard you will acquire spiritual wealth, i.e. merit. This metaphor is common among religions of salvation (or human perfectibility), but it is especially strong in India.

Traditions do not always make explicit the parallels between the accumulation of wealth and growth toward spiritual perfection as a sort of accumulation of "goods." In fact, in the classical literature of Buddhism, the connection is seldom made even metaphorically, although in practice the parallel and the cause-effect relationship is obvious. Furthermore, the connection between accumulation and expenditure, having and giving, which takes a special importance in so-called "gift economies," is central to a num-

⁹ This summary of my teacher's views follows class notes from my graduate student days, but some of these ideas may be found in his later writings, such as "The Problematic of the Self—West and East and the Maṇḍala Pattern," in Charles A. Moore, ed., *Philosophy and Culture East and West: East-West Philosophy in Practical Perspective* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1962), 594–610.

ber of Buddhist religious metaphors but is maintained only in an implicit form (wealth in merit increases the more you share the merit). However, it is not necessary to posit or prove an overlap between religious and economic meanings to understand that the metaphor of "merit" is structurally similar to common images of acquiring, losing, and giving wealth. Additionally, the giving of merit follows the rules that apply to gifts generally: it has no ultimate value, yet, in being given, it acquires infinite value.¹⁰

This complex set of metaphors plays an implicit role in Buddhism at two levels: a rhetoric of the emptiness of merit (or, no merit is the best merit), and a rhetoric of the accumulation of infinite merit. The first of these two doctrinal or rhetorical constructs is expressed in common renderings of the so-called "Perfection of Wisdom" or "Mādhyamika" dialectic. In these systems, the religious ideal is placed beyond all notions of acquisition. It is not that Mādhyamika philosophy exists in a disembodied state.¹¹ Rather, the issue is the rhetoric of Perfection of Wisdom literature and Mādhyamika, both of which tend to undermine the notions of merit and possession of merit.

But, another way of making this critique is by changing the order of time, in other words, by trying to express the time that is required for spiritual progress in paradoxical terms. So you can say, for example, that it would require an infinite time to acquire the merit you need, and that is one way of denying or rejecting the quantifiable notion of virtue. This is the second rhetoric of merit.

Thus, I propose, for the sake of simplicity, two models of Buddhist critiques of quantifiable virtue. One of them is the negative way, which we may call the model of "zero merit." This is a way of saying that the process of "acquiring virtue" or becoming perfect is never quite mathematical, that it strives toward a dimension that is not a true dimension at all. Another way of expressing a similar idea is by saying that merit is quantifiable but in measureless amounts, which we may call the rhetoric of "infinite," or "measure-

¹⁰ On the gift as a form of exchange that is homologous with or determinant of religious symbol and ritual, see Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, trans. by J. E. Turner (London: G. Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1938): sections 13-2, 50-1, 70, and 76-2, which discuss the power of the king, sacrifice, covenant, and the love of God respectively in relation to gifts.

¹¹ See Gómez, "Two Jars on Two Tables: Reflections on the Two Truths," in Jonathan Silk, ed., *Wisdom and Compassion: The Buddhist Studies Legacy of G. M. Nagao* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, forthcoming).

less merit." This is the same thing as saying that the sacred becomes, under certain conditions, immeasurable—it cannot be reduced to any other quantity and thus becomes non-quantifiable. These are, I believe, not theological claims (though they may be read as such).¹² Rather they are claims regarding the logic of a certain type of religious rhetoric. These two approaches express the two extremes or ends of all numbers, at least poetically, if not mathematically.

The zero merit position is close to Mādhyamika or similar systems. In Japan, the Zen tradition sometimes comes close to this. The infinity position is found in some sutras, and I think this is an important point in the Pure Land tradition of India. Infinite merit is measureless merit. It has a quantity, its value is not zero, but it is not quantifiable. The Bodhisattva's path is supposed to lead to infinite merit. And the way to attain infinite merit is by giving up all merit.

The logic of this doctrine is based on the assumption that the greatest merit comes from detachment. It follows then that detachment from merit is the greatest merit. At some uncertain point in the history of Buddhism, it became a widely accepted belief that merit could be dedicated (invested, if you will) to a particular purpose. For instance, one had the hypothetical option of dedicating one's merit toward the attainment of buddhahood or to rebirth in one of the celestial spheres. But one could also opt to dedicate merit (including the merit derived from the ritual of dedication itself) to the benefit of other persons (parents, children, all sentient beings).

This ideal or imaginal process, which we would associate in a secular context with the culture of gift-giving, is called technically *punya-pariṇāmanā* (*ekō* 廻向 in Japanese). The second member of this compound (*pariṇāmanā*) already suggests change, as the term means "bringing to maturity." Hence, to dedicate merit means making it fructify. When one dedicates or hands over merit to a purpose, especially for the benefit of another, merit brings its fruit. In fact the greatest of all merits derives from abandoning merit. This is of course a paradox, but I think it a beautiful and powerful paradox. One may think that it is hypocritical to say I give up merit to gain merit. But that is putting the emphasis on the wrong place, because it is not "I give merit to gain merit" but rather "I give merit."

¹² And, needless to say, the concepts lend themselves for a variety of theological polemics. For instance, Christian theologians, and Buddhist scholars from a Christian background or persuasion, would insist that immeasurable and infinite are not synonymous. But I am not persuaded that the classical Buddhists would have made such distinctions.

The doctrine of merit transference has pervaded, in one form or another, all of Buddhism. It is however more closely associated with Mahāyāna and the origins of Mahāyāna. If we agree that most of Mahāyāna directs itself against the notion of quantifiable merit, then the ideal of Mahāyāna is somehow beyond merit, whether you express it as zero or infinity. But still the believer sees himself as separate from the ideal. Consequently it becomes necessary to explain somehow the mechanism or process that leads to enlightenment. So you can either say the ideal is beyond, or if you want to erase (this difference) and have sudden enlightenment, then the ideal coincides with reality. If you are speaking from the zero point of view, you can use expressions like “enlightenment is here and now.” In the modality of the rhetoric or the dialectics of enlightenment, perfection is internal and immediate (non-mediated). This sort of rhetoric can be applied to images of the buddha-fields as well. This is done, for instance, in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*’s peculiar treatment of the myth of Abhirati, Akṣobhya’s purified field. In this modality of the rhetoric or the dialectics of enlightenment, perfection is internal and immediate (non-mediated): the Pure Land is within you, and *only* within you. In this context “perfection” appears to be emptied of all forms of virtue and merit.¹³

But if we speak from the infinite point of view, we can say we share infinite merit. This is, I would argue, the underlying assumption of the *Smaller* and the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sūtras*. The underlying metaphor in these texts contrasts sharply with the metaphor of zero merit. Both expressions are somehow equivalent, but the choice of metaphor is different and that is significant.

The metaphor of infinite merit, furthermore, lends itself naturally for a narrative conception, a process image, of the attainment of buddhahood. It also highlights the gap between the imperfect and the perfect, the time lapse between the state of being imperfect and the achievement of enlightenment.

If we speak in terms of hope, then we are speaking of a person who conceives of himself or herself as a non-ideal person. Hope is in the future because it is indirectly the expression of imperfection. But hope sometimes demands that we explain how the ideal will become reality. And one way to do this is to argue that “the perfect” facilitates or bestows perfection on “the

¹³ I use the phrase “appears to be” advisedly, because I am not completely persuaded that this is literally true. This peculiar form of the “rhetoric of immediacy” is, at least in the *Vimalakīrti*, clearly embedded in a broader argument about perfectibility and virtue.

imperfect.” This can make perfect sense as an extension of the notion of transference of merit. Transference appears to be a way to avoid the difficulties inherent to a doctrine of grace in a tradition that accepts the saving power of a “divinity” that is at the same time a human ascetic, and certainly falls short of being an all-powerful creator god. The situation is much more complicated than that, but this is not the place to explore this.

The actual or practical parameters of Buddhist belief are hard to discern. However, the literate tradition assumes that the roots of Buddhist doctrine are in the achievements of a human individual. This person, the Buddha Śākyamuni, pursued his self-interest (awakening), but, paradoxically, did so in the interest of others. When a Buddha experiences emptiness, he has experienced self-liberation. But most Indian Buddhist theologians were in agreement that emptiness was not enough. The expression *śūnyatā-karuṇā-garbha* (“that which has at its core both emptiness and compassion”) was perhaps coined as shorthand for the claim that awakening and liberation are in essence a fusion of the vision of emptiness and a compassionate heart. To experience emptiness as self-liberation is not enough. A Buddha will also have to manifest that experience in compassion (*karuṇā*). To conceive of a Buddha without compassion is to conceive of only half a Buddha. An equally standard formula defines the efforts of the Bodhisattva as a quest for self-interest and other-interest. The first is cultivation of self and liberation resulting from a clear vision of emptiness—a realization of liberating power through knowledge. The second is regard for others, concern for their suffering, and effort toward the alleviation of that suffering.

The two ideals coalesce in a number of ways, but arguably the most important point of contact in the present context is the correspondence between liberation as “freedom from,” realization as detachment, and saintly virtue as generous giving. To be free is, in one important sense, to be detached, to let go of everything, but to be fully compassionate is also to let go, to give away. As stated succinctly in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (III.10–11):¹⁴

10. All bodies, property and merit that I have acquired in the past, the

¹⁴ P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śāntideva*, Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, no.12 (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1960), 39–40. The English translation is mine. For complete translation of this text, see Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton trans., *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

ones I have now, and the ones that I may acquire in the future, I surrender them all with indifference for the benefit of all living beings.

11. Nirvana means renunciation of all things, and my mind seeks this peace. If I must renounce all, it would be better to surrender it to all sentient beings.

Additionally, in terms of the metaphor of merit, we can also say that when one acquires infinite merit as the culmination of self-cultivation, one is able to share infinite merit as the culmination of concern for others. In terms of this pair of self and others, the metaphor of merit means that acquiring infinite merit is one's own salvation, and sharing infinite merit is rescuing others. Hence, merit transference is, at least theoretically, an expression of compassion. Even if merit may be seen as ultimately empty, its transference, motivated by compassion, is fruitful, effective, and beneficial.¹⁵

This brings us to two additional paradoxes, which are implicit in the sutras: if merit is measureless, it is already shared; if it is shared, it is measureless. Merit should be empty, and to be empty means to be shared. So that only shared merit is true merit or good merit. In this way the dialectic of emptiness and compassion is embodied in the ritual of transference, in the ethical implications of transference, and, above all, in the mythology of transference.

Now I would like to discuss briefly the myth of the Pure Land sutras, and how it connects with the notion of merit. In speaking about the myth, I will use the term in a slightly personal way. I am going to use certain terms that might be confusing. When I speak of metaphor or symbol, I mean something that stands for something else because of a certain similarity. However, "stands for" in the context of the literary and theological imagination often means "is the same as." If I connect symbols in a time sequence of descriptions and events, i.e., in a narrative, then I have myth. A myth is often like a tapestry. The way that the threads of a tapestry intertwine can be analyzed in two ways: (1) as static or structural, and (2) as dynamic. In the Pure Land sutras, we can speak of metaphors of grace and we can also speak of the logic of grace. In this context the "logic" is partly based on the doctrine of transference, but is also rooted in the narrative sequence of the myth. This

¹⁵ Speaking in comparative terms, "the gift" is empty of any value other than the transactional one. Giving away the gift is what turns it into a thing of value. Interestingly, in economics this is only really true of true monies.

means that “grace” is in this tradition both a ritual and a mythic category. This duality is embodied in the crucial term *prasāda* which means both the trusting disposition of the believer and the benevolent disposition of the Buddhas that grant salvation.

In the Pure Land sutras, the logic of grace is constructed with a narrative argument. The narrative is an argument of sorts. It is the story that makes possible, if not real, the connection between *prasāda* as trusting faith and *prasāda* as grace bestowing salvation. The conceptual and affective link is reinforced by the inner logic of the story. I will not spend time explaining the story of Dharmākara and Amitābha.¹⁶ Rather, I will focus briefly on its “internal logic.”

The logic of the myth is part of a system of beliefs that is not necessarily shared by persons outside the cultural world of the believer’s presuppositions. Presuppositions refer to those ideas that would have been known and accepted by those who read or heard the sutras. These presuppositions are the following: (1) the Bodhisattva’s vow; (2) the merit required to attain buddhahood, (3) the infinite merit (power, virtue) of a Buddha, and lastly, (4) belief in the existence of purified buddha-fields.

Each of these presuppositions needs a short explanation. First, (1) the notion of the Bodhisattva’s vow was linked to notions about the power of words and the power of resolution. Second, (2) the merit upon which the attainment of buddhahood is based is incalculable. By the time the Bodhisattva pronounces the vow he is already more than just an ordinary human being, and the power of his resolution, as well as the incalculable length and difficulty of his practice, produce an even greater merit. Third, (3) it was a matter of course that Buddhas have infinite merit, that is, once they attain buddhahood, the effect of their past actions continues to be a source of sacred power. Fourth, (4) it was not enough to believe in the cosmology of the buddha-fields; for there to be a religion of Buddhism in this style, the believer had to hold the possibility that at least one buddha-field had been purified.

One can see in the sutras the following arguments that are based on these assumptions. First, there was the belief in what is called “an act of truth,” and second the belief in the inherent truthfulness of the Bodhisattva as witness to his own virtue. The “act of truth” (*satya-kriya*) consisted of a state-

¹⁶ This story can be found in Luis O. Gómez, trans., *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light, Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvativyūha Sūtras* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996).

ment in which a desired outcome or belief is caused or confirmed by a factual statement, without any implication or assumption that the two statements are related causally. For instance, one may say "As I am the son of my father, may my own son recover from this illness." This type of "moral" or "ritual" logic is found in cultures outside India as well. Related logical paradigms may be seen in prohibitive curses (e.g., "May the one who betrays me die an untimely death") and oaths (e.g., "May I die an untimely death, if I was the one who betrayed you," or "If I stole your horse, then I am not the son of my noble father").¹⁷

The order of such conditional statements varies. One could, for instance, declare "If I am the son of my father, then I am not the thief who stole your horse"—although a more idiomatic form in English would be, "As I am the son of my noble father, I have never touched your horse." Regardless of variants in the order (which may indeed express subtle nuances), they all have the following underlying logical structure: I state X. If X is true, then Y necessarily follows. Now, X is true, hence Y is true. The thematic or objective connection between X and Y is ultimately secondary or unimportant. The important connection is between the veracity of the first statement (which is usually undeniable) and the reality expressed by the proposition Y.

Additionally, the laws of this logic have been pushed one step further, especially in religious discourse: the quasi-deductive statements of the acts of truth do not distinguish clearly between the establishment of truth and the generation of reality. A concrete example of this use of the act of truth is Lokānanda's act of truth in Candragomin's version of the legend.¹⁸ In an act of selfless generosity, Lokānanda has given away his wish-fulfilling crest-jewel, but, since this jewel was an inborn integral part of his body, he has had it cut out from his own skull and is on the verge of dying. Then he makes his act of truth, which may be paraphrased as follows: "If it is a fact that I have never regretted giving away the jewel, then let a new crest-jewel grow back."¹⁹ Needless to say, a new jewel appears and the wound is miraculously healed.

¹⁷ The connection between the secular and the sacred oath (the two are not easily distinguished) is discussed by van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, section 59.2. See also Friedrich Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1961), 306 ff.

¹⁸ See Michel Hahn, trans., *Joy for the World: A Buddhist Play* (Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1974).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, stanza 40.

The evident disjunction between content and power is seen in a well-known passage from *Milindapañha* studied by Eugene W. Burlingame.²⁰ The passage serves as a commentary on another classical story of a miracle wrought by an act of truth, the legend of King Śibi (Sivi), and the *Milindapañha* discusses the nature of the act of truth (*saccakiriya* in Pāli). It presents the following example.²¹ King Aśoka once asked if anyone could make the waters of the Ganges flow against the current. The courtesan Bandhumatī said she could. She declared solemnly that she could make the waters of the Ganges turn back by an act of truth. And she did. Her act of truth was simple enough: she had never denied being a courtesan.

The vows of Bodhisattvas can take a form similar to that of the act of truth. Conceived as a subtype of the act of truth, the vow is not only the solemn and powerful declaration of a supremely virtuous person. It can also take a different structural and logical form, becoming a conditional statement in which the apodosis is factual or inevitable, and the protasis is a desired effect. In other words, the normal ontological order of the conditional has been inverted. Instead of saying “I will return if it does not rain,” (or, as an act of truth, “if it is true that I will return, then it will not rain”), one would say “If it should rain, then I am not true to my word that I shall return.” In a mythic or sacred context, this takes the formal characteristics of the following ideal or abstract statement: “if my liberation is not perfect, I will not achieve liberation.” Given the fact that the speaker is a perfect being, whose eventual (or past) achievement of perfection is a given, then the fact that his liberation is perfect is established. Furthermore, since the speaker is known to be true to his word, then the truth of the second clause guarantees the fact of the desired outcome expressed in the first clause.

The Bodhisattva’s vow is more than a simple act of truth, because the effect and the statement are identical, and because the vow is a solemn vow uttered and expressed by a truthful being—in other words, a being who always says the truth unquestionably—and the vow is spoken with the most

²⁰ V. Trenckner, ed., *The Milindapañho: Being Dialogues between King Milinda and the Buddhist Sage Nāgasena* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1880), 121–22. Eugene W. Burlingame, “The Act of Truth (*saccakiriya*): A Hindu Spell and its Employment as a Psychic Motif in Hindu Fiction,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1917), 439–41. The story is also used by Heinrich Zimmer to illustrate Indian concepts of truth. See *Philosophies of India* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1951; Repr. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969, 1971), 160–69. Zimmer connects this ancient belief to Gandhi’s notion of *satyagraha*.

²¹ Trenckner, *The Milindapañho*, 121–22.

selfless and virtuous intent. The speaker is also a living being who has already an exceptional degree of merit, who is by the vow itself renouncing or shaping all past, present, and future merit, and who will become an omniscient person. Moreover, the vow itself produces merit.

The way in which these elements connect is the following. The Bodhisattva says, "May this happen, or else this will not happen." To us, this seems like a contradiction, but at a certain level of myth and rhetoric it is a very convincing argument, because the Bodhisattva is saying, "if X then Y," but expressed in the following way: "if not-Y then not-X; but X is going to happen, therefore Y must happen." A Bodhisattva is a truthful being, he makes a vow to buddhahood, so we know he will be a Buddha; in other words, if you are a believer, these things follow one from the other.

But even more than that, the person who is listening to the sutra knows that the sutra is referring to the past, but that it is somehow a timeless or perfective past. Specifically, in the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha*, that mythological past is a time in which Dharmākara has already become a Buddha. Therefore, it is not only that we should expect him to become a Buddha, but that he is actually a Buddha. So he says, to paraphrase, "If living beings in my purified field are not in such a condition, then I will not become a Buddha." But he is a Buddha; therefore, his purified field must already be as he describes it.

This is one way to express the mystery or the metaphor of grace. Since this is closely connected to merit, in this case content and the power of the act of truth are closely related. Speaker, vow, virtue, and fruit are in fact much more closely intertwined with truth and the power of the word. But they are also closely connected to the accomplishments and virtues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

One can think of this mystery in simple psychological terms as the puzzling effect of receiving something that one does not deserve, and never having to pay back the gift. This is a rare event if one calculates the total sum of exchanges in an individual human being's life.²² However, when individual

²² The parallel to the logic of gift exchanges in the secular context is obvious, and further confirmed by the etymological and semantic connections of the word "grace" to some Western expressions of gratitude: Spanish *gracias*, Italian *grazie* (which, derived from Latin *grātus*, go back to the idea that the gift is meant to please the recipient—Compare Sanskrit *anugrāhito 'smi*). French *merci* highlights the presumed or normative affective state behind the gift (pity or compassion); whereas English "thank" suggests the normative state of mind (thoughtfulness, hence other-regard).

events, rather than a total sum, are considered, people often believe that they do receive, or that others do receive things that they neither deserve nor need to repay. This is the spectrum destiny-fortune-grace.

In Buddhist terms, this psychological phenomenon can be glossed as follows. Grace is both receiving and sharing infinite merit, and infinite merit has been shared since beginningless time.²³ In other words, the moment you define merit as being beyond quantification, it is beyond time and beyond possession. Now this has interesting implications in terms of experience and meaning. First, the connection between merit and grace can be seen, as I said before, as a critique of the notion of quantifiable merit. It also gives a new meaning to the vow, and a new importance to the Name of the Buddha. The sacred Name is as much an embodiment of buddhahood as the body of a Buddha. It is a word that expresses the essence of buddhahood and a sound that manifests its presence. More important, a Word becomes the sacred presence in the same way that the logic of the myth, by seeming to defy common logic, brings together futurity and actuality. The name of the Buddha brings together futurity, birth in the Pure Land, and actuality, the presence of grace. Needless to say, it also integrates the past, because this Name is the Vow.

Because the Name contains the essence and the presence of the Buddha, it embodies the Vow as living practice, and it also embodies the name of all Buddhas so that we can speak of an actualized vow, and we can also speak of the Vow as a moving force and guide in the path. This expresses, in the Indian tradition at least, the two aspects of hope: faith and effort. Hope can lead me to have faith, which in this context is more trust than confessional belief. But it can also lead me to make effort. Because I am confident of the outcome, I apply myself to the causes of the fruit I desire. Both elements I think are seen in Indian Buddhism very clearly, so that the notion that Indian Buddhism is a religion without faith or hope is I think very simplistic. However, Indian Buddhism does not see faith and effort as being as much in tension as Japanese Buddhism tends to do. In the same way, the tension between grace and merit, at least in Mahāyāna, is not as strong as it would seem to be in Japan. But this is not the same thing as denying a continuity of

²³ For similar notions in Japanese Buddhism outside Pure Land traditions, see Dōgen's essays "Effort" (*Gyōji* 行持) and "Worship" (*Kuyō-shobutsu* 供養諸仏). These essays are found in Terada Tōru 寺田透 and Mizuno Yaoko 水野弥穂子, eds., *Dōgen* 道元, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1970–72), vol. 1, 165–221, and vol. 2, 382–413, respectively.

tradition, derivation, and metaphor. One of the implications of what I have just said is that Pure Land Buddhism is consistent with mainstream Mahāyāna. The idea of a traditional link between Mahāyāna and the Japanese Pure Land tradition was first inspired in me in an all too brief conversation with Professor Yamaguchi Susumu in 1969, and later when I read his arguments in *Daijō toshite no Jōdo* (Pure Land as Mahāyāna).²⁴ He saw the fundamental link in the formula “emptiness is form, and form is emptiness.” Of course, the connection between this doctrinal dictum and Pure Land generally had been suggested long before, in the writings of T’an-luan. But Professor Yamaguchi made the connection to Japanese Pure Land and tried to see the link as a necessary one. That is, Pure Land doctrine was seen as a logical outcome of the nature of the synonymy or equation (*sokuze*) “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.”

I am inclined to think that, historically, faith in the purified fields and the vows of the Bodhisattva were primary. That is, such faith did not derive from an abstract formulation or vision of the meaning of emptiness—most likely it even preceded historically the formation of the great systems of Mahāyāna philosophy. But, regardless of one’s views as to the priority of this abstract notion over the so-called “simple” faith of the Buddhism of hope, the concept of the identity of form and emptiness may be construed as a pertinent theological commentary on faith.²⁵ Even if it is only an abstract reformulation, it is an appropriate one, insofar as the kind of faith we find in these traditions is a faith that converts the emptiness of the holy into the fullness of the sacred power of salvation. It is an abstract and, admittedly, intellectualized formulation, a secondary rationalization, if you will. But it is also an apposite summary for the idea that merit is ultimately empty, and hence pliable, flexible, so that it is fluid, transferable. Merit is empty because it cannot be possessed, because it is ephemeral, and hence it is best realized when

²⁴ Yamaguchi Susumu 山口 益, *Daijō toshite no jōdo* 大乘としての浄土 (Tokyo: Risōsha, 1963).

²⁵ A critique of the notion of “Pure Land faith” as simplified concession to popular belief has been questioned by historians, but awaits a theological critique. Because this notion (and, I would argue, misconception) has been used apologetically to much advantage in the past, even Pure Land Buddhists themselves are reluctant to examine it critically. Barth, in the passage quoted above (*Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 375; English version, 342) shows the flip side of this apologetic, arguing for the superiority of a doctrine of truth (meaning, naturally, his own theological position) over one of “concession.” Needless to say, I would not defend the sectarian preferences that Barth derives, willy-nilly, from his otherwise illuminating reflections.

we give it away. Who better to embody this fact than the persons who have the most merit and give it away without hesitation: namely, the Bodhisattvas.

I have therefore suggested here that the idea of faith in the Pure Land—as hope of rebirth in the Pure Land—follows from the metaphor of merit itself. In other words, the notion of merit leads, in some paradoxical way, to the notion of grace. Then finally, in a strange but not surprising way, Pure Land appears as another example of the critique of merit, an expression of the same notion of “non-duality” and the emptiness of form that Westerners see as so central to Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this sense, Pure Land hope is also an assertion equivalent to the formula “emptiness is form.” But it is not derived from this formula (either philosophically or historically), but from a parallel development that I rather characterize as mythical—that is, from the way certain symbolic and narrative processes were interpreted in practices of faith and hope.