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THE PLACE OF MULTIPLE MEANINGS: THE DRAGON DAUGHTER RIDES TODAY

That Buddha had eight billion great bodhisattva great ones, and great assembly of shravakas, as many as the sands of seventy-two Ganges. The lifetime of that Buddha was forty two thousand eons, and the lifetimes of his bodhisattvas were the same.¹

Am I immersed in this multiple, am I, or am I not a part of it?²

1. MULTIPLYING LOTUS

As I write, it is a little statue I found last summer in Seoul that gathers me. It is a figure of the female *bodhisattva* of compassion seated in lotus posture upon a great fish. Mustaches and fins curling upward in harmony with the waves, this Asian Leviathan grins with the honor of carrying his serene passenger. Her smile faint, strong, and kind, her hands dancing a mudra of blessing, this Guan Yin sits on a shelf facing me as I write. Usually what I am writing is a version of Christian theology, a feminist, pluralist version much influenced by Whiteheadian thought. She helps. She floats there neither impressed nor offended by my foreignness. Her eyes remain closed, mercifully: she does not confront me but grants me immense space. At this moment, it is her peaceful relationship to the sea that rivets my attention: as I write, the shock of the great tsunamis is ebbing into the images of fathomless loss, the incalculable aftermath of horror.

I didn't first realize her connection to this essay, which stems from yet another context: not long ago I was invited to take part in an inter-religious conversation in Japan, focused on the *Lotus Sutra* as recently translated by Gene Reeves. I am grateful for the opportunity to share these reflections within the context of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*.³ This early and most important Mahayana *sutra* was recognized by the Chinese Buddhist master Zhi Yi as the ultimate teaching of the Tiantai lineage, which then spread to exercise major

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Journal of Chinese Philosophy 32:2 (June 2005) 281–296
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influence also in Korea and Japan. It announces the true *dharma* of compassion to all sentient beings, in contrast to the inferior *dharma* of mere personal liberation in *nirvana*. In this essay I read the *Sutra* as an outsider to its traditions of practice and of scholarship, as an act of naive dialogical spontaneity.

In this raw encounter I found myself initially impatient with the *Sutra*'s repetitious invocation of multiplicities. But then this multiplicity turned out to be precisely what fascinated me: the extraordinary, indeed extreme, hyperboles by which the Sakyamuni Buddha teaches the new way of radical compassion: of compassion to the countless multitudes, in their incalculable suffering.

This multiplicity appears in the *Sutra* as aggressively irreducible to any "One"—and so as unthinkable in traditional Western categories. Whether that One be God, the subject, the truth of speculation or of science, our habits either divide multiplicities into "ones" or add them up to a totality. From antiquity a clearly bounded One serviced the Western ideology of power: the one over and against the many, be they barbarians, pagans, the poor, the dark, the southern, the female, the nonhuman—or indeed the "oriental." From the vantage point of a Western auto-deconstruction, the ideology of the One subsuming the many permeates our fundamental spirituality, lending multiplicity the taint of fragmentation, dissipation, and a readily feminized, naturalized passivity. Whitehead was one of the first to challenge the priority of the one over the many. Influenced by British empiricism, with its early modern critique of the unifying paradigm of substantialism, Whitehead began to theorize "multiplicities" as such, as "a category of existence." "On the one side, the one becomes many; and on the other side, the many become one."⁴ If indeed "the many become one and are increased by one," the universe—or perhaps, better, multiverse—neither begins nor ends as a simple unity. But Whitehead's dynamic sense of balance, so sympathetic to East Asian Buddhist and Daoist sensibilities, is too easily overwhelmed in the West. In order to strengthen a process theological sense of the many in its multi-layered contribution to religious pluralism, I depend in this essay upon the philosopher of science Michel Serres. He works from a French tradition that, with its one-sided deconstruction of bounded unities, may help process pluralists to counter-balance the traditional privilege of the One.

At play in such a peculiar reading is hope, indeed gratitude, for a bottomless resource of transformation: for liberation from patterns that obstruct or trivialize "compassion" for the growing, aching, and conflicting multiplicities of the earth. What we may call the "multiplicative matrix" of the *Lotus* presses for transformation rather than transcendence—at least that transcendence in the West, which may

be vertical or horizontal, but remains dissociative in its dynamism. The multi-dimensionality of the *Lotus* diffracts rather than dissociates: and liberation is then not from but within an ongoing history. I will in the end ask certain questions of the *Sutra* itself, pertaining to its views on gender. The long feminist challenge to Western patriarchal “Oneness” that has transformed the project of Christian theology, at least in its progressive contexts, may here offer one lens for inter-religious dialogue. That lens may at first seem to fragment rather than to connect. But if dialogue is more than the quest for a common ground for the elites of the great patriarchal spiritual traditions (which have always included a few exceptional women), then I trust that the inconvenient femininity that refuses to shape itself to a unifying masculine mold may also be met with compassion. And perhaps even curiosity! But if my means are to be at all skillful, this woman’s voice does not represent “women” or “woman,” Euroamerican or Asian. Woman is no more “one” than Man.⁵ Our gender need neither unify nor divide us: it may offer however a fresh clue to enlightenment. One clue among many. But the many itself offers the first clue.

2. GRACE OF THE MULTIPLE

The multiple as such. Here’s a set undefined by boundaries. Locally, it is not individuated; globally, it is not summed up. So it’s neither a flock, nor a school, nor a heap, nor a swarm, nor a herd, nor a pack. It is not an aggregate; it is not discrete. It’s a bit viscous perhaps. A lake under the mist, the sea, a white plain, background noise, the murmur of a crowd, time.⁶

What rises off the pages of the *Lotus Sutra*, what billows and balloons and fills the reading gaze, is its multiplicity of multiplicities. These multiples multiply mountainously, vertiginously. These lists start with the great audience of Buddha on Holy Eagle Peak, an audience of millions: of so many *categories* of worthies, starting, strategically with individual *arhats* representing the very ideal about to be superseded. Women are named from the start, two famous nuns and their thousands of followers. Then the eighty thousand *bodhisattvas*; and the tens of thousands of various kings and deities—Indra alone is accompanied by “twenty thousand children of heaven”—and such marvelous collectives as the dragon kings and the centaur kings and the wheel-rolling kings and each of their tens of thousands of followers. . . . All these collectives collect themselves along with the narrator, who announces his or her singularity at the start: “This is what I heard.” To the Western novice (such as this one) such lists might feel terribly distracting. They sound like mythic hyperbole, reminiscent of more Hindu modalities, or like missionary propaganda—at any rate

far from that clean stroke of iconic minimalism Western intellectuals often covet in Buddhism.

Why do these multiples matter? They materialize much of the bulk of the *Sutra*. The *multiplicity as such* gets and holds the readers' (the thousands, the hundreds of thousands, the millions of readers') attention. But it also makes attention difficult. The text is long-winded, stubbornly repeating every major passage: each time we hear that a particular speaker, "wanting to restate what he had said, said in verse." Yet these transpositions of prose into poetry are not repetitions of the same, but—in the Deleuzian sense—repetitions as difference. This iterative abundance of the text, this multiplying of discourses, both mesmerizes and enervates, it prolongs and repeats in order to move to each new chapter. In the process it creates an immense universe of discourse.

Amid the oscillating styles, the multiplying audience of the Buddha merges with the crowd of *potential* Buddhas: the readers and hearers of the text. *Us*. The crowds do not remain exterior to the multiple subjects of the text—of the Buddha-way. The multiple as such thus floods off the page, becomes viscous, invites us, takes us in: it demands attention. "Am I, or am I not, a part of it?" But the multiple can be said to comprise the doctrinal subject of the text. For its novel emphasis and good news is the dharma of Skillful Means—which are defined as precisely multiple, proliferating strategies with which to meet every sincere effort, however childish or distracted or culturally obstructed. (However westernized, foreign, modern, postmodern . . .) As "every Buddha has been closely associated with hundreds of thousands of billions of buddhas in the past, fully practicing the way of the immeasurable *dharma*" . . . so the Buddha has "*countless skillful means* to lead living beings . . ." (21).

For the *Lotus*, the point of the multiple multiples would not seem to be then the "multiple as such" in Serres' postmodern language—or not the multiple for its own sake, plurality as an end in itself. Yet I think the *Lotus* does require a radical and, for the West, new *attention* to the multiple as such. As Serres makes clear, the multiple is not an aggregate of discrete entities that do not exactly exist anyway: "we've never hit upon truly atomic, ultimate, indivisible terms that were not themselves, once again, composite." Mere diversity—mere aggregates of discrete individuals, or indivisibles—would not conform to what Reeves has called the *Sutra*'s "strategy of integration," to the *Lotus*' dharma as a middle way "between sheer diversity and sheer unity."⁷ The multiple as such resists both mere unity and mere diversity—though it comes close (dangerously close, perhaps, even in Serres, as in all poststructuralists) to the latter. For diversity all too readily reduces to atomic units of difference. Indeed, Whitehead's

definition of a multiplicity—as a “pure disjunction of diverse entities” [22]—might also lead in this direction. But this disjunction obtains in the mode of contemporaneity prior to and subsequent to an act of concrescence, or integration. The concept philosophically protects diversity from any omnivorous One. Thus it may be that meditation on the “multiple as such” might belong among the skillful *means* of *Lotus* interpretation. But the *Lotus* does not belong among the metaphysical or cosmological treatises of Buddhism. It is not interested in an abstract category of multiplicity, but in the particular and diverse collectives forming the drama of enlightening compassion.

The text can be read as one long argument against an atomizing, or “arrogant” arhantism, with its single-minded stress upon the path of the one individual to the one end of *nirvana*. Or rather it is an argument against the *exclusive* claims of that Theravadan approach. For the text—consistently with its compassionate outreach—*includes* the arhants’ (or *shravakas*’) accomplishment in a provisional *nirvana*. That is, if they are not among those traditionalists who march out of the assembly in preemptive arrogance, not wishing to hear the new *dharma* of skillful means. The Tiantai vision of a future paradise always includes *shravakas* as well as *bodhisattvas*. The *Lotus* is ecstatically compassionate in its pluralization. All the pomp and ceremony of the iterative enumerations of the hundreds of thousands of already realized and of becoming buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, the monks and nuns, etc., does not proclaim a top-down hierarchy of being or religious privilege. This multiplicity expresses the radical grace of the Buddha-way, the generosity of a “tender care that nothing be lost” (as Whitehead put it in his Western God-revision). But can this compassion be likened to grace?

I cross that East/West boundary, the theistic boundary, only for a moment. As has always been noticed, emphasis on skillful means bears a resemblance to the repeated re-emphasis in Christianity upon grace (vs. self-saving works). But in Christianity the background assumption of a singular and omnipotent deity makes grace clumsy. It has tried to say: without this loving support—with its many “means of grace”—we cannot even choose grace itself. The grace must first be *in* me, shaping me, for the “I” even to aspire to liberation from the incurved ego. But it turned into: God does it *for* me. Then the aggressive hierarchies of Christendom, modeled on that unilateral power, justify themselves as the very means of “His” grace. This grace of a God who does it *to* or *for* me is most unlike the grace of the *Lotus*, in which the agency of the becoming-subject is never in doubt—the skillful means are skillful precisely in the endless patience and subtlety with which the bodhisattva lures the ego to self-liberation.

Consider for instance the *Lotus* parable of the rich man who disguises himself as a worker for years in order to re-establish connection with his destitute and alienated son. The parable does bear startling comparison to the gospel parable of the prodigal son. But the Sutra is more radical than the gospel. For the father does not merely welcome but painstakingly, craftily, enters the son's reality just in order to *lure* him into relationship. The lure in Whitehead systematizes this "initial aim" as divine. In this the *Lotus* displays an extraordinarily high level of viscosity or interdependence (*chou* in Chinese). Is this relationality a key to the significance of the multiplying multiples?

The dissemination of the saving graces or Buddha-seeds serves not merely as the blessing of innumerable increase but as the means of interdependence—for a dharma of interdependence. And yet the *Lotus*, like most Mahayana teachings, has a strong rhetoric of oneness:

Though buddhas in ages to come,
May teach millions and millions
Of countless gateways to the dharma,
This will actually be for the sake of the One-vehicle.

Can we read the "oneness" sought in Tiantai as code not for a simplifying, homogenizing unity, an annihilation of difference that assures the eventual collapse of the multiple? But instead as a dynamic interdependence? This would be that of hopeful process philosophical readings. And it seems to be a hope warranted by the text, which continues:

The buddhas the most honored ones,
Know that nothing exists independently,
And that Buddha-seeds grow interdependently.
This is why they teach the One-vehicle. (36)

3. THE MULTIPLICATIVE MATRIX

In the *Lotus* I count six main categories of multiplicity (aware that in fact one cannot successfully break the text into countable categories, as all the collectives overlap and expand constantly): buddhas, eons, skillful means, suffering multitudes, styles, and "meanings." (1) There are the innumerable Buddhas and becoming or future Buddhas, the whole pantheon of realized personages. (2) There are the times, the "innumerable hundreds of millions of eons," described. These multiples refract mythologically the content of the new Dharma, (3) the multiplication of skillful means—whereby all these Buddha-natures or instances of the Buddha-nature are effected and themselves are affecting others. (4) The multiplicity of those others—the "countless multitudes for whom I teach"—are the purpose and the recipients of

the teaching: the Way is not a way of self-salvation but always (also) the salvation of the other, of any and all others. (5) So the insistence on the multiple media of these means is powerful, and reflected of course in the multiple styles of the *Sutra* itself. The intentionality of this poly-stylistic strategy bears textual attestation:

With a variety of explanations,
Parables and other kinds of expression,
Through the power of skillful means
He causes all to rejoice.
He teaches sutras, poetry,
Stories of disciples' previous lives,
Stories of buddhas' previous lives
And of unprecedented things,
As well as causal explanations,
Parables and similes,
Verses which repeat them,
And passages of dialogue. (29)

All of these genres are enacted in the *Sutra* itself: so a multiplication of styles is necessary for the multiplication of buddhas—and for the amplification of the joy of the process itself.

Finally, the Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra* declares the Dharma of *Innumerable Meanings*. This suggestive phrase (which has another, kindred *Sutra* dedicated to it) may sound suspiciously postmodern. Yet it was not produced in translational response to the Derridean eon of the free-running signifier, productive of its endless significations. Yet it is not irrelevant to deconstruction, as suggested by the avowedly multiplicative character of the sutra. Without ever swaying toward meaninglessness, it resists any homogenizing or exclusivist meaning. On this deconstruction the *Lotus* seems to insist. Others have explored the possible affinities with Buddhism of Derrida's philosophy of difference—as the disruption of any substantial or self-present subject by otherness. This affinity might focus especially in the discourse of absence, gap, fissure—in its resemblance to the emptiness of all selves or *dharmas*. Indeed, I think the process-Buddhist dialogue may work better, the more process thought outgrows its antagonism to poststructuralism. Of course, deconstruction can and often does contribute to “mere diversity,” disallowing any strategy of integration—thus its students may find themselves drawn increasingly toward a version or analogue to a process metaphysics.

The *Lotus*, at any rate, offers something that we will not derive from continental or Christian thought, something between awareness and activity: “As soon as he had taught this Sutra, he sat cross-legged in the midst of the great assembly and entered the kind of concentration called *the place of innumerable meanings*, in which his body and mind were motionless.” This is an intriguing concept: that of a

form of concentration or attention that does not merely produce meanings but that is itself understood to be a *place*—something like the current English colloquial use of “place” to mean “state” (as in “she seems to be in a good place these days”). But this place is even richer with contemporary, pluralist potentiality: “the place of innumerable meanings.” Its extraordinary character is marked by a cosmological event—again framed in a plurality of plurals:

At this moment mandarava, great mandarava, manjushaka and great manjushaka flowers rained down from the sky over the Buddha and the whole great assembly, while the whole Buddha-world trembled in six different ways. (4)

In the stillness amidst the immense flux, there is no stasis: but rather a wondrously sensuous rain of flowers, and a trembling, *tremens*, itself a rhythmic repetition (whose six variations I will not fit to the above six categories!). Can it be related to the “repetition” that in Whitehead breaks up substantialist self-sameness while comprising an alternative continuity? In this flower-drenched, fragrant *Sutra*, the trembling is felt not as a threat to foundations but with joyous calm. Perhaps we may sense that this place of innumerable meanings has new meaning in this chronotope of trembling we call the postmodern, echoing in the emergent sense of place itself as inherently plural. Of course, the postmodern place of multiple meanings has long since expanded to include the many religions, in a nexus crisscrossed by the secular pluralism without which any religious claim in the West drifts toward totality. The multiplicative matrix of the *Lotus* suggests a cohesiveness in and through the disjunctions of diversity.

4. ECO-COSMIC MULTIPLICITY

Might we now open this “place” into an even wider, indeed the widest, sense of place? Throughout the *Sutra* there are allusions to vast scales of space and time. These were characteristic of ancient Indian thought. And they were not at all indigenous to biblical or later Christian cosmologies. These have been tiny by comparison. The place of the universe has only gradually been pried open by astronomy. Yet the *Lotus* develops neither cosmology nor cosmogony. Nonetheless, the oscillation between its multiple multiples often includes gargantuan sweeps through time and space. The narrator takes such vision as a gift, the beam of awakened perception that allows the disciple to perceive through the Buddha-nature all of these “worlds beyond worlds.” Both space and time expand in a virtual infinity closer to contemporary calculations of the age and size of the universe than to

prior Western assumptions. Thus of the “hundreds of billions of myriads of buddhas, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges,” it is said that

The blessings of such people
 Are so beyond calculation
 That tens of millions of billions of eons
 Would not be enough to describe them. (163)

Of course, this is not cosmology but hyperbole. Yet it is the awesome expansiveness of space, time and inter-Buddha relationality that seems to be internalized, “concentrated,” as the “place of innumerable meaning.”

At the opening of this new millennium we are living in a golden age of astronomy, in which if we pay any attention we hear descriptions that sound almost as hyperbolic, though often lacking the sense of meaning: we hear of 14 billion years, of a hundred billion stars within each of a hundred billion galaxies, of parallel or multiple or infinite universes. All such calculations unfurl at the edge of the incalculable. But isn't it high time—at least in the West—that we begin to outgrow *spiritually* (not just scientifically) our perilously parochial little creation? This means for me thinking *theologically* about vast scales of space-time—without resorting to a version of Monty Python's satiric prayer: “O lord you are so very very big. . . .” The multiples of the *Lotus* are not simply about size but about complex variation.

Reading the *Sutra* through the diffracting lens of Serres' *Genesis*, with its attempt to think “the multiple as such,” I see it everywhere: in crowds in the city as I come home, in the clouds overhead: not a set of countable *ones*, nor a single *One* divisible into *ones*, but the multiple.

The cosmos is not a structure, it is a pure multiplicity of ordered multiplicities and pure multiplicities. It is the global basis of all structures, it is the background noise of all form and information, it is the milky noise of the whole of our messages gathered together. We must give it a new name, definitely: it is a mixture, tiger-striped, motley, mottled, zebra-streaked, variegated, and I don't know what all, it is a mix or a crisis, it is a mixed aggregate, it is an intermittence.⁸

Actually he is thinking with chaos theory. He continues: “The most global concept, by good fortune and freedom, is not a unitary one. Order is never more than an island or an archipelago. In the midst of the multiple, one finds universe-isles.”

I pause and feel: Manhattan around me as an island, bursting in its ecological fragility with its innumerable of population, history, oozing and flying across the seas in global interdependence with other

universe-isles—like devastated Sri Lanka. This chaos of interconnection, the pure multiple, is not inherently good or beautiful. Nor is it evil or ugly. But it *matters*. I have developed a theology of creation within the chaos, of *creatio ex profundis*, elsewhere in depth. For any order that pushes merely against the multiple, that orders the chaos as though from above rather than from within, as though from a pure origin, builds up the dominative One. Asian thought has not been comparably burdened with a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, of which process theology represents the major deconstruction. The spirit—ruach, breath—that “vibrates over the face of the waters” in Gen. 1. 2 suggests the alternative path that Western theology might have taken and might yet, with help from Buddhism, take. I’ve called it the *creatio ex profundis*.⁹ The intermittence of our reality has the character of trembling, of self-organizing in a rhythm of iteration and multiplication, of *natura naturans*, self-birthing and dying to self, expanding beyond calculation. Of course, we within this process can, like modern Western Man, continue to shake a fist in defiance of our own smallness in the face of an impersonal Totality. Or we might practice emptying our selves, rhythmically and intermittently, breath by breath, into the immensity—that is never an empty void but that dis/closes itself as “the place of innumerable meanings.”

From the *Lotus Sutra* a wonderfully nonhuman parable captures this multiplicity that *matters*, that takes material form, that is to be respected, nurtured in its specificity. I quote it at length, in delight at this complex topography that is of course not *about* ecology, but, read in our century, is richly *ecological*:

Kashyapa, suppose that in the three-thousand-great-thousandfold world, growing on mountains, along rivers and streams, in valleys and in different soils, there are plants, trees, thickets, forests and medicinal herbs of various and numerous kinds, with different names and colors. A dense cloud spreads over all of them, covering the whole three-thousand-great-thousandfold world, and pours rain down on all equally and at the same time. The moisture reaches all the plants, trees, thickets, forests, and medicinal herbs, with their little roots, little stems, little branches, little leaves, their medium-sized roots, medium-sized stems, medium-sized branches, medium-sized leaves [etc.]. Every tree, large or small . . . receives its share. The rain from the same cloud goes to each according to its nature and kind, causing it to grow, bloom and bear fruit. Though all grow in the same soil and are moistened by the same rain, these plants and trees are all different.

You should understand, Kashyapa, that the Tathagata is like this. He appears in this world like the rising of a great cloud, and extends his great voice universally over the world of human and heavenly beings and titans, just like the great cloud covers the three thousand-great-thousandfold world. (82)

This great moist cloud spreads over the world like the *ruach* [Hebrew, “spirit”] over the primal waters of Genesis, misty, proliferative. The Buddha’s attention to the particularity of every creature in its circumstance and capacity is at once intimate and impersonal (it waters them all, as in the gospels God shines like the sun and falls like the rain on good and evil alike). The parable—which continues this thick description of a forest environment at much greater length than I can cite—manifests the multiplicative medium of the Sutra in the form of biodiversity, Can the metaphor materialize and so point to the needed global practices (practices articulated at Kyoto and defied by the United States)?

5. NOBODY’S TRANSFORMATION

We read such a Sutra from a great distance of historical time, and in my case of geocultural space as well—if not so distant relative to the Sutra’s own sense of scale! My difference does not collapse into, cannot become one with, and so appropriate, this text. Nor does this difference leave me merely outside of the text—for its margins are moist, fecund, cloudlike, shot through with transcontextual radiance. I grow in the soil of the same earth, watered by that same cloud cover. I hope I display respect by risking this kind of spontaneous engagement. Cultural difference, like ecological, can become a matter of mere divergence, the multiplicity of external relations—or can fold, intermittently, rhythmically, the multiplicities into conscious interdependence. But then this is a transformation—not a transcendence—of difference. As Serres says, “the work of transformation is that of the multiple.”

Of course, the ego, particularly in its Western and masculine format, obstructs that transformation as surely as it obstructs eco-social justice. It neither perceives nor desires the place of innumerable meanings. Serres offers a radical answer to the Western ego, one that a *Lotus* Buddha might enjoy: “I think, therefore I am Nobody. The I is nobody in particular, it is not a singularity, it has no contours, it is the blankness of all colors and all nuances, an open and translucent welcome of a multiplicity of thoughts, it is therefore the possible. I am, indeterminately, nobody.” To such hyperbole I might want to argue—in a feminist voice—that such inflection of multiplicity as nobodiness works best for empowered egos needing emancipation from themselves; that it is a dangerous hyperbole for those with no confident sense of “I am.” For those who have never had a sense of being *somebody*, being nobody means to remain humiliated, oppressed by social structure and repressed by the interior operation

of its strictures. This question of no-self would also be an issue that I raised much earlier in a context of Christian-Buddhist dialogue.¹⁰ I had argued that the construction of the self *or* the no-self in terms of a rigid gender hierarchy and the maintenance of the symbols of “the tradition” that continually reinscribe the supremacy of the male—as God the Father or Son, as Buddha or saint—and the subjection of the female to male egos, serves as the lowest common denominator of the major world religions. Yet such a critique should not dispute the transformative value of self-emptying, of *sunyata* or kenosis—if they are teachings inscribed upon the multiplicative matrix of interdependence. Then the nihilism of an abstract void does not threaten to swallow up the richness of the innumerable diversities. Then, as Serres from the vantage point of science imagines, multiplicity does the work of transformation. Then those groups and those persons who suffer from involuntary no-bodiness—may benefit from the liberating wisdom of the many means and innumerable meanings. So I do not want to make any argument against the Asian doctrine of nothingness, however much I will resist its smooth integration into Western analogues. The question is rather one precisely of finding “skillful means” for different people, different groups, in different contexts of suffering. Otherwise the multiple collapses, and with it compassion.

The *Lotus Sutra*, however, doesn’t emphasize *no-self* anyway—but rather “wisdom,” and “enlightenment.” The Buddha in “his great mercy and compassion” seeks always “the good and whatever will enrich all beings.” Is it the teaching of compassion that softens or perhaps rather “moistens” the more stringent teaching of no-self—thus displaying at the deepest level the practice of skillful means? Indeed, this *Sutra* does not seem to articulate fresh insights into the four noble truths, the dialectics of *sunyata* or the elements of *pratitya samutpadha*. Reminiscent of Tibetan Buddhism, it embraces a densely populated, mythological imaginary Western thinkers associate more with the Hindu pantheon and its aeonic immensities. Yet all these Buddhas and becoming-Buddhas (etc. . . .) appear in the multiples only to repeat, repeat, to cosmically chorus: *all* can become Buddhas. And women, like the nuns Mahaprajapati and Yashodhara, are prominent among Buddha-candidates.

Is the *Sutra* in this sense a metatext—not just a commentary rich in intertextuality with prior texts, but an offering of a new way of practicing and thus of reading the Buddha-way itself? It seems indeed to offer a kind of premodern pluralism—not in relation to other ways than the Buddha way but more urgently in relation to multiple forms of Buddhism. It is striking that early Christianity was forming at about this time, in its own rush of multiple forms; but its solutions would by

the third century CE go in the opposite direction from the *Lotus*, toward a singularizing, centering, and top-down orthodoxy. Here and there—in Augustine’s earlier hermeneutics of “multiple true interpretations,” in Dionysius’ “multiplication of names,”—would appear hints of a pluralizing first principle. But for the most part the multiple, the innumerable, became identified with the fallen, dissipative multiplicity of the world over and against the one truth of the One God & Son.

6. SEX, POWER, AND DRAGONS

I do not wish, however, to overdraw this contrast. A unifying power-drive and its specifically patriarchal propulsion is evident in the *Lotus Sutra*’s teaching as well. Its pluralism is contained within the proclamation of one all-encompassing way. Indeed, not unlike the New Testament Book of Revelation, it stoops to curses against those who malign its teachers or teachings:

If they become camels or are born as asses,
They will always carry burdens on their backs,
Be beaten with sticks, think only of water and grass,
And know nothing else.
For slandering this Sutra.
They will have to suffer. (65)

and promises for those who support them in fine stupa style:

Wherever such a teacher lives or stays,
Walks, sits, or lies down,
Or teaches even a stanza,
There a stupa should be erected.
It should be wonderfully
And beautifully adorned.
And offerings of many kinds
Should be made to it.
When sons of a buddha live in such a place,
It means that the Buddha accepts them . . . (180)

I hope that I am not risking reincarnation as an abused ass. I certainly cannot hope to be honored as a “son of a Buddha” in an erect stupa! Nonetheless, in this mode of interreligious honesty let me also note that among the innumerable I did *not* hear any liberation for women as women, but only *in spite of* our being women, and indeed with spite. The misogynist view of women and their bodies resembles Christianity, which similarly included early a few ascetic women at high levels of esteem but in general held all women qua women to be inferior and disturbing to the celibate male subject, the true subject

of most Christian and Buddhist discourse. This is evident in the final chapter of the *Sutra*. It is intriguing that the possibility of an instantaneous leap to enlightenment is marked by the dragon princess, an 8-year-old girl—in almost unfathomable contrast to the eons of the Buddha's own contemplation. She is the mythic image of the *Lotus* way's radicality. But she must overleap a great abyss of masculine prejudice. By a familiar strategy, that prejudice is at once transcended and reinscribed within the same text:

Then Shariputra said to the dragon girl: "You think that in no time at all you attained the supreme way. This is hard to believe. Why? Because the *body of a woman is filthy and impure, not a vessel for the dharma*. How could you attain unsurpassable awakening? The Buddha way is long and extensive. Only after innumerable eons of enduring hardship, accumulating good works, and thoroughly practicing all the practices can it be reached. Moreover, a woman's body has five hindrances: first, she cannot become a king of the Brahma heaven; second, she cannot become king Indra; third, she cannot become a Mara-king; fourth, she cannot become a holy wheel-rolling king; and fifth, she cannot have the body of a buddha. How then could a woman's body so quickly become a buddha?"(152)

The question is dramatically answered: "the dragon girl instantly transformed into a male, took up bodhisattva practice, and immediately went to the world named Spotless in the southern region, where, sitting on a precious lotus blossom, she attained impartial, proper awakening." This is precisely the solution of the gnostic Gospel of Thomas (otherwise such a mystically attractive, perhaps Buddhist-influenced gospel) to the same problem: "if the female becomes as a male." These new movements attract some gifted, strong women, and perhaps also some great female donors. In response, the male leadership, rather than seek liberation from the shackles of their own delusional self-supremacism—apparently such an insidious work of *maya* that these great texts remain trapped within its presuppositions—extends women the privilege of masculinization. The gesture is meant generously, indeed compassionately; it is part of the expansive, universalizing spirit of the reform. And it is parallel to other forms of dominative inclusiveness, like Christianity's extending to all others the opportunity to be saved by conversion. For as in Paul's Christ "there is neither male nor female," so also "the dharma is neither male nor female."¹¹ I do not want to belabor the *Lotus*' failure of liberation at the threshold of gender. There are many Buddhist scholars working to make the feminist critique truly internal to Buddhism and thus far more skillful in its *upaya*.¹²

I understand the feminist challenges within each venerable old patriarchal religion to be practices of Awakening. If they are felt as threatening or insignificant (and perhaps as white and Western and

imperialist), this is either because the particular feminist critique is lacking in skillful means; or because those who react against the feminist challenge to the traditions are like the “arrogant” in the *Sutra*, who leave before hearing any new *dharmā*. Probably both. Always there are clues within these ancient ways.

So at this moment in history, when the waters of chaos have devastated so many Buddhist shorelines, my gaze returns to my Guan Yin sitting in perfect lotus-grace upon the waves. It is not then insignificant that Guan Yin is none other than the Chinese name for Avalokitesvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion. Only in China, under Daoist influence, did “he” become a “she”—an intriguing inversion of the metamorphosis of the Dragon Girl! And yet it is in the *Lotus Sutra* that Guan Yin appears as Kannon—and in Japan as in China frequently appears in feminine form. Multiplying numbers of adherents of all the major religions, many of them men, are finding liberation from the formative patriarchies. For the meanings of gender and sex are also many. They shift shape like the Dragon Daughter—a skillful Drag Queen indeed!—her-him-self. On our universe-isle, new forms of *dharmic* fluidity are needed. To make space for each other will now require the act of concentration known as the place of multiple meanings.

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ENDNOTES

1. *The Lotus Sutra*, a new translation by Gene Reeves, in press. All other references will be taken from this translation from the Japanese version.
2. Michel Serres, *Genesis*, translated by Genevieve James and James Nelson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).
3. I am especially grateful for the patient and expert support of Professor Chung-ying Cheng and Dr. Linyu Gu in this endeavour.
4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1929/1978), p. 22; 167.
5. For a discussion of the inherent multiplicity of selfhood, as well as its specifically female manifestations, cf my *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
6. Serres, 4.
7. Gene Reeves, unpublished commentary on the *Lotus*.
8. Serres, 111.
9. For a full deconstruction of the *creatio ex nihilo* and reconstruction of the creation from chaos, cf my *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).
10. Catherine Keller, “Scoop up the Water and the Moon Is in Your Hands: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic Self-Emptying,” in John Cobb, Jr., and Christopher Ives (eds.), *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll and New York: Orbis Books, 1991). See also the superb critique of the critique by

- Linyu Gu, "Process and Shin No Jiko ("True Self"): A Critique of a Feminist Interpretation of 'Self-Emptying'," in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (June 2000): 201–214.
11. Rita M. Gross analyzes this axiom from a Buddhist feminist perspective in "Strategies for a Feminist Revalorization of Buddhism," in *Feminism and World Religions*, edited by Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany: SUNY, 1999), 84ff.
 12. Cf Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), and Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction* (Albany: SUNY, 1992).

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