

THE LOTUS: SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF A BODHISATTVA ILLUSTRATED IN THE VIMALAKĪRTI NIRDEŚA SŪTRA

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Abstract

The lotus, the symbol of Buddhism, essentially represents purity and enlightenment. Based on the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, a significant Mahāyāna scripture, this study analyses the meaning of the lotus, the attributes of a bodhisattva, and the association between lotus and mud, connoting the intimate, interdependent, and interactive relationships between the concept of bodhisattva and sentient beings, illuminating the dynamic of secular world and pure land, while also dismantling the binary mode of thinking. It elaborates on how the bodhisattva path should be exercised, which leads to bodhisattva altruism. Buddhist altruism and non-duality hint at how individuals cultivate meaningfulness with acceptance and inclusiveness, which elevates happiness in a context of diversity.

Keywords: Bodhisattva altruism; Buddhism; compassion; loving-kindness; Mahāyāna, non-dualism, suffering

Introduction

As an icon, the lotus represents Buddhism not only in religious pictograms but also in a variety of art and literature such as architecture, painting, handicrafts, sculpture and poetry (Bukhari, 2008), visualising a rich body of artefacts. Buddhism, rooted in Indian philosophy, was developed by the Sakyamuni Buddha (usually simply called the Buddha) over 2500 years ago, for the purpose of facilitating people to achieve bliss and eradicate distress, and ultimately creating a world with peace, freedom, and happiness (Chawla & Marlatt, 2006).

One of the core Buddhist theories is the Four Noble Truths, which elaborate on the nature of suffering, its causes, cessation of distress, and methods of ceasing afflictions. It highlights the experience of transcending travail, as a process of enlightenment, within which suffering is positive reinforcement of liberation (Urbaniak, 2014). Agony is inescapable, related to existential challenges and manifested stress, dissatisfaction, and helplessness (Tun, 2015), due to ignorance concerning phenomenal impermanence and fear of uncertainties (Burton, 2017).

Buddhist wisdom asserts that beings are momentary and ever-changing: that is, the law of dependent origination, which explains the essence of phenomenal existence. All beings are temporal and last only as part of a seamless continuity (Chetry, 2015). Such a continuum results from an immediate living after an immediate demise, and vice versa, reflecting the cycle of death and rebirth in which sentient beings suffer from affliction in the secular world. The cycle repeats itself so speedily and invisibly that it engenders a manifestation of life in a series of continuous moments (Brodow, 2004), as long as main and supplementary conditions come together in a proper and timely fashion. Therefore, sentient beings realise two characteristics: interdependence and equality (Shih, 2011). Nothing can exist independently, and it is this indistinguishable nature of beings which shows equality. For instance, a seed can only grow when there is sufficient sunlight, water, air, and soil. Seed will die prematurely if any component is lacking. Likewise, for example, humidity affects the quality of the air, soil, and so forth, which impacts the growth of the seed. Interdependence presents dynamics between cause and effect (Bhattacharya, 1982), resulting in karma. Karma indicates behaviour that is

neutral per se. Nevertheless, good behaviour (a cause) leads to good consequences (an effect), and this will also be true with misconduct. Effects influence one's current life and will be carried forward to coming lives, in light of the cycle of death and rebirth, because of which Buddhists conduct themselves with caution in order to attain gratifying fruits and prevent evil aftermath in the future. Hence, people are responsible for what they decide and do, and therefore minimise their complaints in the face of calamity. Buddhism is a religion accentuating self-governed behaviour.

In fact, whereas individuals welcome expected changes, they rarely accept adverse vicissitudes with ease: howbeit variability always involves misery. Buddhists, like other ordinary folks, are happy when good things happen, such as a job promotion, but feel upset when encountering unpleasant circumstances; for example, they grieve when losing beloved ones (Cheng, 2015a, 2017b). Buddhism offers a set of precepts and practices to alleviate woes and guide behaviours, including the Noble Eightfold Path (right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration) (Bodhi, 1999), through which practitioners aim to deeply understand how phenomenal reality creates, as articulated previously, and how to overcome life difficulties and prevent harming other people. In particular, meditation is effective in cultivating right mindfulness and right concentration, which not only accomplishes spiritual liberation but also has currently been applied to therapeutic treatments (Cheng, 2016a) and psychological well-being in various situations such as the workplace (Cheng, 2016c), even for non-Buddhists and adolescents (Cheng, 2016b).

Apart from interdependence between beings, Buddhist egalitarianism points to two realms for sentient beings: the *law of dependent origination* (nature of beings), together with causality as denoted earlier, and the *inherent ability of enlightenment*. The utmost purpose of Buddhists is to become a Buddha, meaning an awakened person. Since everybody carries the inborn nature of Buddhahood regardless of sex, age, race, and social class, beings are equal and have the chance to awaken. Once they have been enlightened, they can escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, thus achieving nirvāṇa (meaning uprooting afflictions and then terminating the cycle). In this sense, Buddhist equality is dissociated from human rights but conjoined with an essence of existence that covers both human and non-human beings, illustrating Buddhist

compassion. It affirms positivity towards all beings and gives hope of liberation from suffering.

These principles are embedded in most Buddhist traditions, especially in Mahāyāna, one of the current mainstreams, which was developed about the first century and which spread widely across North and South Asia through Chinese Buddhist masters and scholars. Differing from other sects, Mahāyāna distinctly emphasises altruism, namely the bodhisattva path, wherein *bodhisattva* refers to anyone who is dedicated to helping sentient beings relieve suffering (Pope, 2007). Therefore, the spirit of Mahāyāna is equivalent to the spirit of bodhisattva (Lu, 2005), and “bodhisattva altruism” (Cheng, 2017a), formerly translated as “self-benefiting altruism” (Cheng, 2014; Cheng, 2015b, Cheng, 2015c, Cheng & Tse, 2014a), is the lifetime aspiration of Mahāyāna disciples.

The four great bodhisattvas – Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Kṣhitigarbha, and Samantabhadra – stand for great compassion, great wisdom, great vows, and great practice respectively, specifying the cardinal praxis of bodhisattva and Mahāyāna. In order to carry out these missions, bodhisattvas preserve the Four Immeasurables and implement the Six Perfections. The former signify interactions between the four elements ascertaining bodhisattva affection (Cheng & Tse, 2014a): loving-kindness causing other to rejoice; compassion to soothe the miseries of other people; empathetic joy to delight in others’ happiness; and equanimity to achieve internal peace through the wisdom of egalitarianism and indiscrimination (Cheng & Tse, 2015). These qualities govern the Six Perfections, including generosity, virtue, endurance, wisdom, diligence, and contemplation. Fulfilling these attributes, bodhisattvas benefit others and themselves as enlightened beings (Huang, 2011). Mahāyāna echoes a feedback system in which bodhisattvas and sentient beings cooperate fruitfully.

This interactive network builds a connection between bodhisattvas and sentient beings, given the fact that bodhisattvas are part of sentient beings. While the Four Immeasurables are directed towards the recipients, they also take care of the service providers themselves, spelling out self-loving-kindness, self-compassion, self-empathetic-joy, and self-equanimity. Similarly, generosity favors both service recipients and providers because the latter can strengthen capability and attain insight through helping behavior. Resulting in abundant

giving, bodhisattvas continually improve the remainder of the Four Immeasurables and Six Perfections. This loop contributes to all stakeholders.

Many Mahāyāna scriptures remarkably illuminate the notion of a bodhisattva and the bodhisattva path, among which the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra (abbreviated henceforth as the Sūtra) has become one of the popular canons in the West as early as the 19th century (Hashimoto, 1977). The Sūtra explicates the central Buddhist theories with insightful ideas, as elucidated in the coming sections, which sheds light on the development of other Buddhist sects such as Chan (Zen) (Cheng, 2014d). Unsurprisingly, it has been translated into many languages across Asia, Europe, and North America (Cheng & Tse, 2014b). English versions are available, with three renowned works by McRae (2004), Thurman (1976/1986) and Watson (1997), offering an inspired perspective towards Mahāyāna among Western scholars.

Aligning with the Sūtra (utilising Watson's translated version when citing doctrinal evidence), this study investigates the metaphor of the lotus, which demonstrates the characteristics of a bodhisattva, missionary assignments, and the relationship of the bodhisattva to other beings. Its analysis of the bodhisattva path deepens bodhisattva altruism, which thoughtfully pursues the connection between giver and recipient, and brings in the significance of depolarization, a critical Mahāyāna theory. It reveals the usefulness of these Buddhist teachings in personal development and acquiring happiness.

The Lotus as a Symbolic Representation of the Bodhisattva Concept

In addition to construing the connotations of lotus in Buddhism, the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra expounds on the dynamic between bodhisattvas and other sentient beings, the bodhisattva path, and the essentials of fulfilling the path through non-dualism, as related in the text in Chapter Eight, The Buddha Way.

“The lotus does not grow on the upland plain; the lotus grows in the mud and mire of a damp low-lying place. In the same way, the Buddha Law can never grow in a person who has perceived the uncreated nature of reality and entered into correct understanding. It is only when living beings are in the midst of the mire of earthly desires that they turn to the Buddha Law. If you plant seeds in the

sky, they will never grow. Only when you plant them in well-manured soil can they sprout and flourish. In the same way, the Buddha Law will never grow in a person who has perceived the uncreated nature of reality and entered into correct understanding. But one who entertains egoistic views as huge as Mount Sumeru can still set his mind on the attainment of anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi. From this, you should understand that all the various earthly desires are the seeds of the Thus Come One. If you do not descend into the vast ocean, you can never acquire a priceless pearl. In the same way, if you do not enter the great sea of earthly desires, you can never acquire the treasure of comprehensive wisdom.” (Watson, 1997)

The mutualism between lotus and mud signifies an interdependent heterogeneity; or equally important, a unification from heterogeneity to homogeneity, resulting from breaking through the man-made binary mode of thinking.

The relationship between Bodhisattvas and Other Sentient Beings

The term *bodhisattva* originates from Sanskrit, where “bodhi” means awakening and “sattva” refers to sentient beings (Cheng, 2014a). It unequivocally indicates that sentient beings are able to become bodhisattvas since they have enlightenment inherent in their nature. Bodhisattvas develop from ordinary people, whereas enlightenment is a distinct concept from being either a bodhisattva or an ordinary person: a bodhisattva is an awakened being, and an ordinary individual is confused and has not begun the enlightening process. Moreover, anybody who is committed to helping others is a bodhisattva, again insinuating that bodhisattvas are sentient beings and vice versa. Although bodhisattvas have prepared to transform into buddhas who have eradicated suffering and to live in the pure land (an unadulterated, calm place), they willingly defer the final transformation into buddhas and their entering into the pure land (Yao, 2006); instead, voluntarily returning to the deluded world for the benefits of sentient beings. This decision is not a sacrifice but a compassionate determination to serve other people (Goodman, 2008). Since living with ordinary people is the volition of bodhisattvas, they anticipate integrating into the mundane community so that they can maintain no distance

from sentient beings. This defines an intimate relationship between both, due to which they are interdependent.

With a lotus representing a bodhisattva as purity and enlightenment (Penney, 1995), and mud denoting bewildered individuals, the Sūtra emphasises that a lotus grows in the marsh but ascends above the water untainted (Shen-Miller, 2002), as a bodhisattva dwells in a chaotic world with people who are suffering from tribulation, but which will never be confounded. This exposes the sensible mind of a bodhisattva who enforces the bodhisattva path and realizes bodhisattva altruism, in light of the Four Immeasurables. Such an interlocking between the altruistic provider (a bodhisattva) and recipient (an ordinary folk) makes them inseparable: the sentient being is a necessary partner for the bodhisattva who achieves the bodhisattva path, and the bodhisattva is a model for sentient beings who acquire liberation and embody wisdom with compassion (Cantor, 2008).

Asserting these attributes, the Sūtra recites that anyone “who gives all he [or she] possesses as a gift to others is a bodhisattva” (Watson, 1997) “but look[s] for no recompense” (Watson, 1997), aiming to work for sentient beings wholeheartedly. Such benevolence is performed to eliminate people’s afflictions; for instance, aging, sickness, loss, and death, thereby attaining the bodhisattva path. This mission reveals an altruistic relationship between bodhisattvas and sentient beings. The Sūtra metaphorises these close links by saying that a bodhisattva loves people as though they were his/her children: therefore, “if living beings are sick, the bodhisattva will be sick, but if living beings are cured, the bodhisattva too will be cured” (Watson, 1997). This signifies compassion and empathy. Indeed, bodhisattvas and commoners are thus mutually benefitted. The latter are eager to escape from suffering through bodhisattvas’ help; concurrently, the former experience self-actualisation by giving assistance to sentient beings. This illustrates how important each is for the other, as the lotus will easily wither without mud, mud becomes worthless without the lotus. Such unification specifies an experience in which an individual will constitute a brilliant world surrounding her/himself when extending oneself into other people (Yalom, 1980).

In order to fulfil such a holy duty, a bodhisattva utilises bodhicitta (referred to fully by the term *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*), an enlightened mind, through

which bodhisattvas equip themselves to devotedly serve others. Activating bodhicitta arouses selfless compassion and is progress from being an ordinary person to becoming a bodhisattva, through which it works innately with an upright mind and profound mind, together with the Four Immeasurables, wisdom and expedient means. An upright mind is “free of flattery” (Watson, 1997) and honest, while a profound mind upholds a firm mind to the praxis of the bodhisattva path, both of which sustain bodhicitta along the path. Applying the Four Immeasurables to bodhisattva altruism, wisdom is indispensable, whereas wisdom in Mahāyāna is a thorough understanding of how the phenomenal world manifests itself, as clarified earlier. This understanding enables awakened beings to be free from defilement when they comfort miserable people. Without it, compassion fatigue will be incurred (Cheng, 2014d, 2015d), resulting in eroding bodhisattva altruism. Optimum utilisation of the three minds (bodhicitta, upright mind, and profound mind) and the Four Immeasurables through flexibility can accommodate individual needs; that is, *expedient means*. Notably, expedient means and wisdom accompany each other because of the latter guides a flawless presentation of the former. These qualities can be presented more brightly as the lotus in mud (as the secular world) than in clean water (an analogue of the pure land).

One of the sacred jobs bodhisattvas commit is to construct disparate pure lands for various kinds of beings who are disorientated through different adversities, implying expedient means. In pure lands, sentient beings are able to overcome obstacles and be at ease. The Sūtra addresses pure lands in which:

“the various kinds of living beings are in themselves the Buddha-lands (pure lands) of the bodhisattvas. ... Because the bodhisattva’s acquisition of a pure land is wholly due to his [or her] having brought benefit to living beings. ... It is because they wish to help others to achieve the success that they take their vow to acquire Buddha lands (pure lands)” (Watson, 1997).

A pure land is for sake of other beings, rather than for bodhisattvas themselves; bodhisattvas are here because sentient beings are here, and when all beings have been awakened, bodhisattvas are redundant. This interaction denotes the equality between bodhisattvas and living beings, without inferiority or superiority, signalling interplay between them.

In summary, bodhisattvas and sentient beings are not “others” or distinct. Rather, they go beyond the I-thou relationship (Buber, 1923/1937), and establish a “we” relationship in which their partnership comes along to achieve enlightenment. This symbiosis tightens their companionship and strengthens intersubjectivity (Virtbauer, 2010). Mahāyāna Buddhism increases intersubjectivity through the Four Immeasurables (Wallace, 2001), which not only shares suffering and happiness (Lomas, 2015) but also develops unconditional altruism. While altruistic behaviour positively correlates to happiness (Ali & Bozorgi, 2016; Schwarze & Winkelmann, 2011) as an internal reward (Hu, Li, Jia, & Xie, 2016), which relates to neuro-connectivity (Park et al., 2017), it also motivates personal development (Schimmel, 2009) to elevate meaningfulness (Sağnak & Kuruöz, 2017), quality of life (Proti, 2015), and life satisfaction (Martín, Perles, & Canto, 2010).

Non-dualism

Dualism, supported by the neural mechanism (Wood & Petriglieri, 2005), is a habitual thinking mode common to human beings, one which presents pairs of opposites; for example, clean/dirty, long/short, pretty/ugly, hot/cold, and clever/stupid. Dualistic categories create discriminative judgement and identify things as being either good or bad. Consequently, people force an either/or choice (Aron & Starr, 2013), which in turn induces emotional responses. They resent unfavourable environments and prefer what they like. Emotions tend to strengthen their greed, hatred, and ignorance, which lead to negative karma. However, opposites are associated with one another (Stange, 2017): they exert comparison on each other without absolute value, and exist mutually, in a supplementary manner (Cheng, 2014c). For instance, *pretty* only present when *ugly* is here: such relativity reinforces the extremes and increases resistance that will generate misunderstanding, prejudice, and bias. In contrast, Mahāyāna wisdom advocates the dissolution of dichotomies. An example annotates:

“Deluded thoughts are defilement. Where there are no deluded thoughts, that is purity. Topsy-turvy thinking is defilement. Where there is no topsy-turvy thinking, that is purity.” (Watson, 1997)

Although the lotus is pure and mud is contaminated, as delineated in the Sūtra, they are not antagonistic. A lotus does not grow from fine soil, instead, it

blossoms from grubby mud. This alludes to Buddhist wisdom which posits that purity and contamination are not necessarily contradictory. The difference between positive and negative is merely constructed, without an absolute variation. For instance, dishwater is dirty and disgusting for people but is a haven for mosquitoes. Similarly, leaving the secular world (namely, the mud) is the goal of ordinary Buddhists, while bodhisattvas (namely, lotuses) are willing to live in this tainted world in order to serve ordinary people, and “living beings are the place of practice” (Watson, 1997, p. 56) for the bodhisattva path. Only in this way, can bodhisattvas accomplish bodhisattva altruism. The unity of purity and contamination infers the symbiotic interaction between bodhisattvas and sentient beings.

Moreover, the teaching that “defilement is bodhi” illustrates the Buddhist non-duality, where the lotus is to Bodhi (enlightenment) what mud is to defilement. The Sūtra reiterates that “when all living beings gain an understanding of the nature of the mind, then no defilement exists”. Defilement is the source of suffering which is a barricade to well-being. However, it is also phenomenal, according to the law of dependent origination. Understanding the nature of defilement provides the wisdom needed to extinguish suffering. For bodhisattvas, the impediment is the source of awakening, just as mud (as the nutrient) enables the lotus to grow beautifully: “Earthly desires are the place of practice, for through them we know the nature of Suchness”. This experience also applies to ordinary people who learn from failure. In transcending from frustration, people understand that suffering is transient, since “all things in the phenomenal world are just such phantoms and conjured beings” (Watson, 1997). Such an esoteric understanding of suffering is emancipation, which guides people to become bodhisattvas. Additionally, depolarisation conquers the fear of death, when one understands the nature of life and death as elicited in the Sūtra:

“The realm of birth and death and that of nirvāṇa form a dualism. But if one sees the true nature of birth and death, one sees that there is no birth or death, no binding, no unbinding, no birth, no extinction.” (Watson, 1997,)

This also discusses the nature of existence and the co-existence of extreme pairs:

“The body and the body extinguished constitute a dualism. But the body is none other than the body extinguished. Why? Because one who sees into the true form of the body does not give rise to thoughts of seeing the body or seeing the extinction of the body. The body and the extinction of the body are not two things, not a distinction to be made.” (Watson, 1997)

Buddhists are keen to leave the secular world, which is full of defilement, and to enter into the pure land. This, however, distinguishes the two worlds. However, the Sūtra reminds that:

“The worldly and the unworldly form a dualism. But since the nature of the worldly is empty (phenomenal), the worldly is, in fact, the unworldly.” (Watson, 1997)

Since defilement is a source of enlightenment, as enunciated previously, the secular world is not necessarily disguised. Instead, pure land is in the secular world. Overcoming travail occurs in a pure land, disregarding the physical location. Spiritual transcendence in the secular world is the entrance of the pure land, resulting from non-discrimination of extremities.

Duality affects perception and sensory responses (Dewey, 1917); and perception impacts emotion (Zadra & Clore, 2011), the behavior (Lench, Darbor, & Berg, 2013). Non-dualism is an item of Mahāyāna wisdom for both bodhisattvas and sentient beings. The former hold to non-discrimination, which extends to non-judgment (Walsh, 2018) and egalitarianism, through which they are able to adopt uncontaminated loving-kindness, uncontaminated compassion, uncontaminated empathetic joy, and uncontaminated equanimity. These enable bodhisattvas to accomplish the bodhisattva path and realise bodhisattva altruism (Huang, 2011). Equivalently, in ridding themselves of this duality, sentient beings achieve non-discrimination and egalitarianism, through which they relieve sorrow and become bodhisattvas. In short, bodhisattvas and sentient beings who embody the greatest acceptance and inclusiveness are on the same track towards enlightenment, accompanied by inner peace (Lightwater, 2000) and wellness (Gowans, 2016).

Conclusion

The symbiotic relationship between a lotus and mud refers to the intimate and dynamic association between bodhisattvas and sentient beings, as the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra details. Mud is dirty but also nutritional for a growing lotus. Similarly, a bodhisattva necessarily lives with sentient beings, which is an imperative practice for the bodhisattva path. Inactivating bodhicitta, that intrinsic quality, bodhisattvas are devoted to serving others using the Four Immeasurables, wisdom, expedient means, and non-dualism, in order to attain bodhisattva altruism. Therefore, the distinction in superiority and inferiority between bodhisattvas and living beings is null, hinting at non-judgement and egalitarianism which dissolves their relativity and antithesis, and at becoming enlightened individuals who also accomplish tranquillity and well-being in an accepting and inclusive context.

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