ISSN 0972-4893

बौद्ध अध्ययन की भारतीय अन्तर्राष्ट्रीय पत्रिका

The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies

Number - 24
2024

BHIKKHU JAGDISH KASHYAP INSTITUTE OF
BUDDHIST AND ASIAN STUDIES, ADITYA-SHYAM TRUST
76, NANDNAGAR, KARAUNDI, VARANASI-221005, INDIA

The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies

Subscription and orders for the journal should be sent to the Publishers:

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION RATES	
National (INR) 1000.00	International USD 100.00

Online version free with print subscription

All remittances must be paid in favor of **Prints Publications Pvt Ltd** payable at New Delhi.

ELECTRONIC VERSION : This journal can be accessed at **www.printspublications.com**

PERIODICITY : This journal is published Annually

Printed and published by Mr. Pranav Gupta (Managing Director) on behalf of Prints Publications Pvt Ltd

All business correspondence should be addressed to:

Prints Publications Pvt Ltd
Viraj Tower 2, 4259/3, Ansari Road,
Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110 002, India.
Phone : +91-11-45355555
E-mail : **contact@printspublications.com**
Website : **www.printspublications.com**

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अङ्क २४ २०२४ / **2024** **Number 24**

विषयसूची / Contents

An Ultimate from Immanence: Lotus Buddhism Redefined for a Secular Worldview

John R. Tate*

Abstract

The article proposes a *Lotus Sūtra*-based approach to Secular Buddhism, differing from the current versions primarily derived from the Pāli Canon. After summarizing the present state of secular Buddhist doctrine and practices, it explains why a secular adaptation of the *Lotus Sūtra* will diverge. Next, is a section on scholarly opinions that cast doubt on the validity of a literal reading of the sutra's climactic revelation of an eternal Buddha and hinder belief today in Nichiren's conclusions about it in the thirteenth century. This, I argue, justifies dismantling all vestiges of the text's supernaturalism. With the above topics addressed and hermeneutic integrity in mind, the following phrase is introduced: *the conditional emergence of benevolence as gifted by time, process, and potential*. These words are intended to transform the text's depiction of an eternal Buddha into an expression for a paramount morality grounded in immanence and thereby redefine the *Lotus Sūtra* for a secular worldview. From there on, the phrase is contextualized within traditional Buddhist and contemporary socio-philosophical principles to show how they align and how the phrase can function as a replacement for faith in a transcendent understanding of the scripture's long-venerated core.

Keywords: Secular Buddhism, Lotus Sūtra, Nichiren Buddhism, virtue ethics, Religions of the future.

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Introduction

The *Lotus Sūtra* is a Buddhist scripture of the Mahāyāna tradition, filled with parables, mythical images, apparitional scenes, and revelations that invite multiple interpretations, a propensity that contributes to the text's broad reach (Teiser and Stone 2009: 2–3). This paper utilizes the *Lotus Sūtra*'s imagery to extend the scripture's reach further, possibly as far as it can go, to accommodate those who identify with a secular worldview.

While my endeavor here arose from a realization experienced after thirty years of practice with an orthodox branch of Nichiren Buddhism,[1] I soon learned it was not an isolated occurrence. Representatives from other Buddhist orientations had either come to understand or were in the process of finalizing a way to convey the teachings of the Buddha without supernaturalism. One of them is Gil Fronsdal, who refers to his solution as "Naturalistic Buddhism" (Fronsdal 2021: 266). Another, Stephen Batchelor, entitled his journal article on the topic "A Secular Buddhism" (Batchelor 2012: 87).

Both Batchelor and Fronsdal mainly rely on the teachings of the Pāli Canon to extract a doctrine and practice free of enchantment. Both reference passages in the canon that are not supernatural or they eschew supernaturalism in their interpretations. These passages then serve in their secular practices for situational ethical advice, to confirm the conditional nature of existence, and to relieve craving, reactivity, attachments, and suffering.[2] The aim

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[1] My Buddhist practice began in 1979, when I was living in San Francisco and became a member of the Soka Gakkai. At the time, they were an agency of Nichiren Shoshu. In 2012, I transitioned into a secular practice, while continuing as a member of Nichiren Shoshu. I am currently retired and living with my wife and eldest son in Fujinomiya, Japan. We are members of Nichiren Shoshu Myorenji Temple.

[2] See Higgins, 2018: 63, 84, 92 for a practice guide based on Batchelor's *After Buddhism*. Also, the following link is to an outline of an online course taught by Stephen and Martine Batchelor: Wayback Machine, October 29, 2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20231109212323/https://learn.tricycle.org/p/secular-dharma. The link below is to the Programs Overview of the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood, CA. Fonsdal is the founder and a teacher at the Center: Wayback Machine, October 30, 2023,

is to attain inner peace, foster loving kindness, and bond with an "ineffable dharma of this world."[3]

Often overlooked, however, in discussions on the inception of the secular Buddhist movement are the works of Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891-1956),[4] the first to publish a completely secular reinterpretation of the Pāli Canon.[5] Unlike the orientations of Batchelor, Fronsdal, and other traditionally schooled reformers,[6] Ambedkar's familiarity with Buddhism did not come from years of dedicated practice, but from the Buddha's renown as a native cultural icon who introduced a message of salvation applicable to everyone, equally. Ambedkar's foremost concern was to free those oppressed by the religious cosmology fortifying the Indian caste system in which he was raised (Nanda, 2007: 59). For him, Buddhism contained an ethos that was compatible with science and well-suited to support a civic culture aligned with the fundamental values of liberty, equality, and fraternity (Nanda, 2007: 58). While he linked the Buddha's dharma directly to implementation of egalitarian social reform, after his passing in 1956, close associates inserted vipassanā (insight) and loving-kindness meditation into the equation (Hennigar 2021: 1, 126).

What follows is a proposal for an alternative path to the Secular Buddhism's of Ambedkar, Batchelor, Fronsdal, and other current variations. If it takes hold, it would be a logical

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https://web.archive.org/web/20231030054938/https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/programs-overview/.

3 As for an "ineffable dharma of this world" see Batchelor 2015: 250; Fronsdal (2021: 278-79) refers to something similar in "Naturalistic Buddhism".

4 There is no article on Ambedkar's Buddhism in a recent collection of essays on secularizing Buddhism, but one contributor does at least mention Ambedkar's rejection of past and future lives. Jackson, "Avoiding Rebirth: Modern Buddhist Views on Past and Future Lives," 2021: 249, 257.

5 Ambedkar, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*.

6 Fronsdal published an article in 1998 ("Insight Meditation in the United States: Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness") about the initial stages of his naturalistic Buddhism, listing other early figures such as Jack Kornfield and S.N. Goenka. Like Fronsdal, their practices are based on the insight meditation of the Vipassanā movement. See also *Clearing the Path*, by Ñāṇavīra Thera (1920-1965). Although preceded by Ambedkar, Ñāṇavīra was arguably the first Theravāda practitioner to completely demystify the Pāli Canon.

development for Lotus Buddhism. With the success of the largest organization of Lotus practitioners in the world today due in large part to their engagement in social activism and a reduction of traditional religiosity, there is the sense that a complete demystification of the *Lotus Sūtra*, something similar to what the above proponents of the Pāli Canon have done, is an impending next step.[7]

Structurally, as mentioned in the abstract, the article begins by highlighting what sets the *Lotus Sūtra* apart from other Buddhist scriptures. Then, opinions by scholars in the field of Buddhist exegetics are cited to show the doctrinal innovations in the text were not firm truths but rather the product of a movement within Buddhism that used skillful device, also referred to as *upāya*, to keep pace with the sensibilities of the times.

Readers are requested to assess (1) the merits of these opinions and the way they are used to disengage the *Lotus Sūtra* from its supernaturalism, upayic overreach, and claim to an exclusive truth and (2) the subsequent effort to restore the scripture's intent without these characteristics. By doing so, they will be better prepared to evaluate the closing arguments in support of the following thesis statement: this paper's reinterpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s eternal Buddha as a morality sourced in immanence creates a novel form of Secular Buddhism that can help the movement appeal to a wider range of people who find supernatural beliefs problematic.

Before proceeding, however, the following definitions are in order:

Secular Buddhism describes a movement from within the Buddhist tradition that advances an ethical insight and practice adapted for a secular worldview.

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[7] The organization referenced here is the Soka Gakkai International, who claims a world-wide membership of 11 million people. There is no indication, however, that they are about to change their credal leanings by demystify the *Lotus Sūtra*. For one, their prayerbook asserts the recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra* reaches beyond the limits of time and space and affects the life of the entire universe (Soka Gakkai, The Liturgy of the Soka Gakkai International, vii). Highlighting the SGI here is only to suggest the tradition as a whole is primed for a fully demystified alternative.

A *secular worldview* refers to a perspective held by individuals unable to accept the validity of a transcendent or spiritual dimension, but who instead rely on immanent resources to determine the nature of things and ethical conduct.[8]

Supernatural (and its derivative word forms such as supernaturalism) refers to, or to belief in, a personification, reality, or realm outside the natural order of the physical universe. It is meant to include but is not limited to a Buddha with transcendent omniscience, an all-pervasive life force, an eternal being, protective deities, reincarnation, and karmic operations spanning multiple lifetimes.

Mystical (and its derivative word forms such as mysticism) refers to, or to belief in, a union with supernatural phenomena and includes but is not limited to a spiritual fusion with an ultimate reality, a doctrine or practice leading to this union, a link between such a practice and material benefits, prayers that affect the dead, and an object of worship endowed with a life force or deceased founder's life.

By these definitions, I hope to clarify how the terms are used in this article and to avoid confusion with how they might be used in other contexts.

Challenges associated with adapting the *Lotus Sūtra* for a secular worldview

It should be no surprise to anyone familiar with the vast number of Buddhist teachings available today that different forms of Secular Buddhism might emerge. Yet, unless one is aware of how the Lotus tradition fits into the broad view, they are unlikely to anticipate how different it can be.

Simply put, the *Lotus Sūtra* represents a radical transformation of the religion (Lopez 2016: 218). It takes nirvāṇa (the complete cessation of craving that drives the relentless cycle

[8] My definition of a secular worldview is an adaptation of that of Mikael Stenmark (2021: 574). Charles Taylor's thoughts on the matter were also considered (2007: 50–51), along with George Holyoake's, quoted in the conclusion, below.

of birth, death, and rebirth) and relegates it to an expedient device.[9] Also, canonical basics such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, long associated with attaining nirvāṇa, are eclipsed by a focus better suited to the transmigratory mission of long-term bodhisattvas.[10]

The bodhisattvas in the *Lotus Sūtra* know the pitfalls of craving and reactivity and the attraction of inner peace, but these teachings are of secondary importance. Their primary concern is paying homage to the text's salvific message and skillfully implementing it after the Buddha's passing.[11] The sufferings they encounter in rebirth are portrayed in the scripture not as matters for "cessation" but opportunities for cultivating immense merit (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 250). For those who embrace the transcendent path of a votary of the *Lotus Sūtra*, numerous passages assure worldly reward and eventual omniscience (Kubo and Yuyama, 2007: 233-64).

Another distinguishing feature of the *Lotus Sūtra* is its treatment of both the conditional nature of existence and Buddhist enlightenment as a unified, affirmative principle.[12] The position contrasts with those schools of Buddhism that assert existence originates in concepts and has no objective ground (Mattis 2002: 252). As in the Tibetan Buddhism of Batchelor's background, Ultimate Truth is emptiness and everything else is only conventionally true (Batchelor, 2015: 130). Their practices seek to "dispel the fiction of 'self' or 'inherent existence' to appreciate the true nature of things" (Batchelor 2015: 6-7).

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[9] "The Buddha teaches nirvāṇa to those with dull facilities, who are satisfied with lowly aspirations and attached to birth and death, who have not practiced the profound path in the presence of innumerable buddhas and are confused by suffering." (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 33–4)

[10] "To those who sought the śrāvaka vehicle he [a buddha traced to a prior incarnation of Gautama] expounded the Dharma in accordance with the Four Noble Truths, ferried them from birth, old age, illness, and death. . . . To the bodhisattvas, he expounded the Dharma in accordance with the six perfections, with reference to the highest, complete enlightenment, and led them to the Buddha's wisdom." (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 265)

[11] "After my parinirvāṇa, they can preserve, recite, and extensively teach this sūtra" (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 209).

[12] In support of the Lotus tradition's treatment of existence as an affirmative principle, see: Mattis 2002: 256; Nakamoto 1990: 143; Reeves, 2002: 388; Venturini 2002: 334.

The Lotus tradition has long advanced a more positive approach, at times based on the following excerpt from Chapter Two of the text:

> No one but the buddhas can completely know the real aspects of all dharmas—that is to say [the suchness of] their character, nature, substance, potential, function, cause, condition, result, effect, and essential unity (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 23). [13]

In sixth-century China, Zhiyi (Wade-Giles: Chih-i [538–597 CE]) taught that if one emphasizes the 'suchness' of each of the above traits then their 'essential unity' with the phenomenal realm will be empty of independent existence.[14] If one emphasizes 'character,' 'nature' and so forth, the 'essential unity' refers to a connection between the above Ten Suchnesses and a phenomenal realm that does exist, although dependent on conventional causes and conditions.[15] If one emphasizes the meaning of the middle (at once ultimately empty and conventionally existent), then the 'essential unity' is a combination of both, merged into an integrated threefold principle.[16]

Thus, given Zhiyi's inclusion of an interdependent existence as one of three essential unities, there is realness in existence; though conditioned, conventionally labelled, and empty of a fixed identity, it is far more than a mere construct of ungrounded thought (Mattis 2002: 252). As noted by Donald Lopez and Jacqueline Stone, this interpretation had significant implications. For one, it re-established discreet entities and conceptual distinctions as commonsense experiences, freed of false essentializing or clinging. And second, justified bodhisattva

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[13] See also Hurvitz 2009: 22–23. Kubo and Yuyama do not reference "suchness," whereas Hurvitz does. Informed by Hurvitz, this explanation of the Ten Suchnesses applies Zhiyi's reasoning to the Kubo and Yuyama translation of the passage cited above.

[14] Lopez and Stone 2019: 16. This paragraph is a paraphrase of Zhiyi's explanation in Swanson 1989: 184.

[15] Swanson 1989:184; Ziporyn 2016: 88; Lopez and Stone 2019: 17.

[16] See Swanson 1989: 292 n. 93 for elaboration on Zhiyi's terminology. According to Swanson, Zhiyi's Middle Way was simultaneously empty of an eternal, unchanging, substantial Being, yet conventionally or provisionally existent.

practices that moved beyond their negation (Lopez and Stone, 2019: 17).

Although the Ten Suchnesses just cited appear in commentaries as supporting the scripture's existence-affirming nature, the primary reference is the text's response to its Sanskrit title, *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*. As noted in Sangharakshita's *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment*, '*saddharma*' is usually translated as "good law or good doctrine," but '*sad*' comes from a Sanskrit root which means to exist, so it is more like "true or real, genuine, or authentic." In the same way, '*dharma*' is often translated as "doctrine or teaching," but more accurately "truth, or even the ultimate nature of things." '*Puṇḍarīka*' means "white lotus," thereby rendering the title: *The Scripture of the White Lotus of the Real Truth* (Sangharakshita, 1993: 35–36).

It is not until Chapter Sixteen that we learn what the 'real truth' of the 'white lotus' is. In a climactic scene on a bejeweled stūpa suspended in air, with deities, other buddhas, and a vast number of bodhisattvas present, Gautama contradicts forty years of previous representations by formally announcing that he attained enlightenment many lifetimes before his historical appearance in BCE India. In the words of the Buddha,

> Since sentient beings have various natures, desires, behaviors, thoughts, and distinctions, the Tathāgata, wanting to cause them to plant roots of good merit has explained various teachings through a variety of examples, explanations, and illustrations. He has not desisted in doing buddha acts even for a single moment and, in this way, it has been an extremely long time since I attained Buddhahood. My lifespan is immeasurable and incalculable. I abide forever without entering parinirvāṇa (Kubo and Yuyama, 2007: 224-25).

With this disclosure, there is a new description of the Buddha's demise that carries remnants of the old. As with traditional parinirvāṇa, Gautama passes away—free of rebirth, suffering, and death. But rather than as a non-self without remainder,[17] he remains forever as an ineffable presence in this world. As depicted, the Tathāgata is here to distinguish "natures,

[17] Vajira and Story, 1998. "Part Six: The Passing Away," stanzas 1-20.

desires, behaviors, and thoughts" to help "sentient beings . . . plant roots of good merit."

Thus, Chapter Sixteen dispenses with the Buddha's passing as represented in the Nikāyas and Āgamas and reconstitutes it as a salvific state of being replete with omniscient wisdom and compassion. With the Buddha always present to guide distinct natures, stark conditionality is infused with a moral faculty and a venerable purpose.[18]

Although the *Lotus Sūtra* contains additional distinguishing features, this single revelation and its union with existence is the text's defining attribute and, as such, should be treated with due care when reinterpreted for a secular cohort. In the next section, I begin my project by establishing a reasonable basis for severing the scene from all vestiges of supernaturalism.

The influence of Mahāyāna scholarship on the secularization of the *Lotus Sūtra*

Much of the groundwork for secularizing the Lotus tradition has been accomplished by the academic community. Whereas many faith-based practitioners believe the *Lotus Sūtra* contains a series of discourses taught by Siddhārtha Gautama (563–483 BCE) near the end of his life, the current scholarly consensus is that the text is an extensive expansion of his original teachings drafted by well-intended followers between 50 BCE and 150 CE, about five centuries after he passed away. The content was likely previously transmitted orally and obviously created with Gautama's earlier dharma in mind but, as with other Mahāyāna sutras, the *Lotus Sūtra* is no longer accepted by knowledgeable outsiders to be the word of the historical Buddha.[19] Hence, the

[18] The representation of the Buddha with all reality may "be taken as a revelation of the Buddha-nature inherent in all things" (Mattis 2002: 247).

[19] Regarding authorship of the *Lotus Sūtra* and date composed, see Morgan 2002: 352–56; Teiser and Stone 2009: 4–8; Hurvitz 2009: xix–xx; and Lopez and Stone 2019: 11–13. As per Lopez and Stone, "almost all of the Mahāyāna sūtras purport to be the word of the historical Buddha, yet none is. They are later works that introduce important innovations in Buddhist thought, even while devising elaborate strategies to demonstrate their authenticity as the Buddha's word; they legitimate the new by representing

sutra's end-of-life timing and Gautama's participation in the discourse are regarded as apocryphal creations intended to validate the text's transformative revelations, including the reorientation of parinirvāṇa with a buddhic omnipresence.

Not surprisingly, the recognition of multiple layers of deception in a sacred scripture like the *Lotus Sūtra* prompted a considerable amount of inquiry into what was going on at the time of the text's composition. The first impartial analyst on record in this regard was a freethinker from Japan named Tominaga Nakamoto (1715–1746). Nakamoto is known for conducting the first systematic challenge to the presumption that the sutras were directly taught by Gautama.[20]

In his exposé, entitled *Emerging from Meditation*, he contended it was essential for Gautama to associate his teachings from the beginning with "the remarkable power of great supernatural transformations." By surpassing his competition in metaphysical sophistication, he could distinguish his doctrine and convince a population predisposed to belief in the transcendent that his way to ease suffering was superior (Nakamoto 1990: 73–74, 105).

After Gautama's death and his followers split into factions, this pattern of supersession through escalating levels of supernaturalism continued as an inter-sectarian phenomenon (Nakamoto, 1990: 81). When later generations received the precepts, they were unaware of what had transpired (Nakamoto, 1990: 61).

For Nakamoto, the "non-emptiness and absolute reality" of the *Lotus Sūtra* were part of the culmination of this process (Nakamoto 1990: 143). In his tersely expressed opinion, he claims that the authors embellished the text so it would appear to be "the greatest of all the truly real teachings of the world-honored one" and the source for the true character of things "after more than forty years" of teaching the "provisional." The result would be to make "the teachings of others up till then seem foolish." Convinced of this exegesis, he declares: "With this expansive power of skillful means, where is the end of misleading people past

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it as old." For a more tentative yet consistent opinion, see Mizuno 1982: 128–33.

[20] Lopez 2008: 46; Mizuno 1982: 125–28; Pye, 1990: 5.

and present? Where is there anyone who will object to it? It is impossible except for a Tathāgata emerging from his meditation" (Nakamoto 1990: 76-77).

In the last fifty years, a chorus of academics have joined Nakamoto with their own, more subdued takes on the matter. Paul Williams, for one, proposes in a book on the doctrinal foundations of Mahāyāna Buddhism that some texts may not have been circulated in the beginning as the word of the Buddha, or referred to as sutras or discourses of the Buddha, but held to be treatises of others thought of as great masters with promising paths to follow. As time passed and the spiritual merits of the writings caught on, they were subjected to a process of "sutrafication," which involved introducing elements that enabled the text to be considered prestigious and classified as *buddhavacana* itself. Often, that meant attributing the teachings directly to the Buddha or inserting his endorsement into the text.[21]

Michael Pye, on the other hand, focused on what the sutras revealed about the underlying collective consciousness of the movement. In his book on skillful means, he explains, "In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the various forms of Buddhist teaching and practice are declared to be provisional means, all skillfully set up by the Buddha for the benefit of the unenlightened" (Pye 2003: 1). It is the primary "responsibility of a Buddha or a bodhisattva who has perfected his 'skill in means'" to decide when such devices are appropriate and what techniques should be utilized (Pye, 2003: 10). "As the beneficiaries become enlightened, the expedients become redundant," which leads to release from the means that brought it about. For Mahāyānists, "the key to understand any phrase of Buddhism" or "meditational practice," including "cessation or nirvāṇa," is to see that they are all devices and have no value other than serving as a means by which to attain a solution (Pye, 2003: 3).

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of his study, Pye recognizes that "in this sense, the concept of skillful means involves the paradox that Mahāyāna Buddhism elaborates and proliferates itself without end as a religion of salvation and at the same time it tends toward its own dissolution" (Pye, 2003: 3). But later, in the conclusion, he suggests the purpose is to encourage the

[21] Williams (1989: 42) citing from Nattier (2003: 11–13, note 3).

eventual realization of an "original or final Buddhist meaning" that "leaves the empty shell of the device, whatever it was, behind" (Pye, 2003: 159).

Consider also the following synopsis by David Drewes from his summary of scholarship regarding Mahāyāna scriptural progression:

> [E]arly Indian Mahāyāna was, at root, a textual movement that developed in Buddhist preaching circles and centered on the production and use of Mahāyāna sutras. At some point, drawing on a range of ideas and theoretical perspectives that had been developing for some time, and also developing new ideas of their own, certain preachers began to compose a new type of text—sutras containing profound teachings intended for bodhisattvas—which came to be commonly depicted as belonging to a new revelation that the Buddha arranged to take place five hundred years after his death (Drewes 2010: 70).

Based on Drewes' summation and the conclusions of the other researchers cited above, we can now visualize a period of Buddhist revitalization taking place approximately 2,000 years ago, a movement in which "certain preachers began to compose a new type of text" after either realizing the methods they inherited were limited, finding them not well received by others, or both. What did not work was modified, so that the teachings of Buddhism could keep pace with changing circumstances and sensibilities.

As for areas of improvement under consideration at the time of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s formation, Jan Nattier, drawing on her research into the textual origins of Pure Land Buddhism, has an opinion. Her theory is summarized as follows.

Perhaps beginning a century or two before the start of the Common Era, Gautama was subjected to increasing levels of glorification. Initially, he was special to many of his followers, not so much for his supernatural traits or extraordinary compassion, but because he discovered on his own (without help from an awakened teacher) how to transition into nirvāṇa. Believers were merely required to follow his example to the best of their mortal abilities, and they would eventually be relieved from an existence caught in an aimless series of rebirths and suffering.

In time, however, the gap between this perspective and the significance placed on Gautama's supernatural qualities widened. This separation coincided with the allure of being part of a select few who would remain in the cycle of birth and death as bodhisattvas and become fully enlightened buddhas like the founder. The problem with this pursuit, though, was that to reach Gautama's level of awakening, one was expected to endure innumerable lifetimes of practice, overcome unimaginable hardships during each of them, and maintain an utmost level of compassion at every turn.

While many of the texts that emerged during this period highlighted the severity of the bodhisattva path, Nattier detected a parallel tendency in other scriptures that provided relief. Sutras mentioning buddhas who reigned over "pure lands" in distant world systems emerged. The first such buddha was Akṣobhya who resided in the eastern constellations and then Amitābha (Amida) in the west. Eventually, other scriptures began to reference countless buddhas throughout the ten directions.

For Nattier, the expansion of Buddhism into these new worlds and the sequential introduction of other buddhas who offered successively easier paths to enlightenment made becoming a bodhisattva more palatable. She then concludes her analysis by suggesting that as these 'pure land' notions made the prospect of becoming a buddha less daunting, they paved the way for the sweeping universalism of the *Lotus Sūtra* and other texts (Nattier, 2003: 179–81, 193–94).

As suggested by Nattier's analysis and the others mentioned above, the authors of the *Lotus Sūtra* may have been aware of these trends and felt obligated to consolidate advancements into a single source. Instead of a more efficient path to omniscience through extraterrestrial travel and association with another buddha, they designated our world as the Pure Land (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 229), let Gautama reign supreme, and made it known that complete enlightenment was possible instantaneously (Lopez and Stone 2019: 153–54). As with the text's introduction of the eternal Buddha, they could not say these were their solutions as it would have implicitly diminished the Buddha's reputation and undermined the acceptance of the sutra's innovations. As a result, to get their point across, they branded this new teaching with

Gautama's stamp and used every other nuance on the Mahāyāna literary palette for their classic impression of *buddhavacana*. If it did not have the immediate impact they envisioned, at least in the long run, it turned out to be a viable alternative.[22]

From the academic perspective, therefore, the investigation is no longer concerned with whether the Mahāyāna scriptures were taught by Gautama but has matured into an inquiry about the thoughts and culture of those who developed them. Although proponents of orthodoxy may find these viewpoints disruptive, for those who prefer to move away from the Mahāyāna reliance on enchantment, the awareness presents an opportunity. It is like what John Dewey advised in *A Common Faith*: "The change in intellectual climate due to the increase of our knowledge and our means of understanding when frankly adopted can be quite liberating" (Dewey 1934: 66–67).

With the face value of the supernatural revelations in the Mahāyāna sutras severed from their revelational source for validation, combined with an appreciation for what the Mahāyānists were trying to do and the cultural context in which they were doing it, practitioners of the *Lotus Sūtra* are now released from the restrictions of the received tradition and free to recommend change. To do this with credibility, however, the major criticisms attracted by the text from the time of its entry into the arena of modern analytic scrutiny must also be addressed.

One such criticism relates to the scripture's promise to reveal a 'real truth' and its subsequent failure to deliver on that promise (Teiser and Stone 2009: 17–18). Instead, what is revealed comes close to a transcendent embodiment of the heart and mind of the universe. The text claims to be the "one vehicle" but then describes the one vehicle as the wisdom of the Buddha to use "provisional words in order to lead sentient beings" (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 35) Without a discernable ultimate how can a secular Buddhist or any other common mortal determine from this realm what is or is not provisional?

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[22] The popularity of the *Lotus Sūtra* surged with Kumārajīva's (344–413 CE) translation into Chinese at the beginning of the fifth century CE and Zhiyi's commentary during the last half of the sixth century (Teiser and Stone 2009: 3).

The *Lotus Sūtra* is also criticized for its use of contrivance to make its point. As Nakamoto asked in 1737, "With this expansive power of skillful means, where is the end of misleading people past and present?" (Nakamoto, 1990: 77).[23] If there is a new way to understand the sutra, upgraded for the times, any revision proposed for its *saddharma* should be introduced without deception.

Another critic of the text condemns it for seeking to "unite Buddhism through an exclusivist premise that equates an incomprehensible ultimate it alone contains with absolute status over all others" (Bielefeldt 2009: 81). Because many today consider exclusivity and absolutism reprehensible, ideologies of this sort are condemned. They stifle diversity and foster narrow-mindedness. Nevertheless, as discussed next, there was an age in which these attributes gave the faith a competitive edge.

Nichiren's adaptation of the *Lotus Sūtra*

When it comes to criticisms of the Lotus tradition, one of the most persistent areas of concern has been the impact the priest Nichiren (1222-1282) had on its trajectory in thirteenth-century Japan.

In Japanese history, the times are referred to as the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and are known for an emergent samurai warrior class, the decline of Japanese aristocracy, strengthening of feudalistic norms, repeated natural catastrophes, plague, two failed invasions by the mainland Mongols, and at least a decade of fear of imminent attack by Kublai Khan's troops. Also, during this period, six new schools of Buddhism emerged and text-based exclusive truth claims were not uncommon (Stone, 2002: 262–66). So too, unchecked authority rested in a presumption of inerrancy in the black letter of Buddhist scriptural sources.[24]

As noted in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, exposure to major political and cultural upheaval, such as experienced during the Kamakura period, are when fundamentalism is the most active and

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[23] Emerging was written 1735–1737 and first published 1745 (*Emerging*, 11).

[24] Lopez and Stone 2019: 199; Nichiren 1985A: 303–08.

visible.[25] In Japan, the times sparked single-practice Buddhism, including Dōgen's Zen and Shinran's Pure Land. For years, the Tendai institution on Mount Hiei spewed rival groups and lineages, each claiming possession of the most profound dharma, all in defiance of the syncretic influence of the prevailing sensibility.[26]

Although Nichiren was not the originator of Buddhist exclusivism during the Kamakura period, he took it to another level by integrating Lotus exclusivism with a confrontational style of propagation that pitted him against all other Buddhist traditions and the government that patronized them (Stone 2012: 125). Occasionally, he engaged in formal debates, demonstrating a mastery of the scriptures and Buddhist commentary. But at other times, he was derisive, disparaging his opponents as slanderers, traitors, devils, and eaters of human flesh (Nichiren 1994: 193-210).

All this generated indignation and hatred. Nichiren was exiled on three occasions and nearly executed. His followers were also persecuted and detained, with three of them decapitated for not renouncing their faith (Stone 2014: 155).

Though arduous, these events helped form a distinct branch of Lotus Buddhism. First, they legitimized what Nichiren was doing in the context of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which predicted its devotees would experience harsh resistance for propagating its teachings in the Final Dharma Age of the fifth five-hundred-year period after Gautama's death (Stone 1994: 235). They also allowed Nichiren to differentiate his teaching from that of Tendai Buddhism and, eventually, see himself as the bearer of a new dharma, received directly from Gautama at the assembly of the *Lotus Sūtra* and intended for the Final Dharma Age (Stone 1999: 451).

This new dharma, however, was a fixed proposition. According to Pye, Nichiren believed the last fourteen chapters of the sutra, including the revelation of the eternal Buddha, were "essential teachings" that should not be construed as skillful means (Pye 2003: 150). Thus, what Nichiren left behind was a literal interpretation of the text's core supernatural element to serve as the final hermeneutic form for the salvation of all. Enlightenment

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[25] Almond, et al. 1995: 442; Ammerman 1991: 56.

[26] Davis 1991: 810 n. 34; Stone 1994: 232–33.

required a singular devotion to a proprietary absolute. Once again, the *Lotus Sūtra* was propelled to the top of the heap in the ongoing battle among Buddhist sects to supersede the competition in a fight that added fierce exclusivity to claims of supernatural superiority.

Yet, despite this outcome, Jacqueline Stone cautions against the current tendency to dismiss Nichiren's legacy because of his intolerance. The following is a summary of her concerns.

It is ironic that Nichiren's implacable opposition to the sin of Dharma slander, which in no small measure enabled his small following to take shape and develop as an independent school, should become a hindrance in contemporary times. Purely as a descriptor, the frequent characterization of Nichiren as 'intolerant' in both scholarly and popular literature is accurate enough as Nichiren had 'zero tolerance' for the practice of other teachings. However, the category of 'intolerance' is grounded in a particular set of normative modernist assumptions about religion that did not exist in medieval Japan.

Criticisms leveled against Nichiren by his contemporaries, Stone then adds, were based on very different grounds. Dismissing Nichiren as intolerant thus obscures the interpretive context within which he understood slander of the *Lotus Sūtra* to be the most frightful of sins. This aspect of his thought is difficult to grasp, not because it is doctrinally complex but because it is embedded in a view of reality so different from that which dominates intellectual discourse today (Stone 2012: 149-50).

While those who hold Stone's 'modernist assumptions about religion' should consider historical context when commenting on matters that instill so much passion, the problem is not entirely their fault. As she recognizes, confrontational Nichiren exclusivism is a charismatic idea that has lasted into modernity (Stone 1994: 256). It is not as obvious as it once was, but the trait remains ingrained in the organizations that preserve the faith today, with each claiming to represent the founder's legacy (Stone 1994: 255). The criticisms portrayed in academic journals, internet blogs, and other forums about Nichiren Buddhism relate more to the persistence of this attribute and present forms of transmission (most apparent when observing inter-sectarian relationships), than

to anything else. Therefore, it is hard for those not specialists in the field to contextualize it.

Accordingly, the second half of this article suggests a way to liberate the *Lotus Sūtra* from its long-standing association with supernaturalism and exclusivity in both its textual form and when applied during its adaptation to the fundamentalist breeding ground of 13th-century Japan. The approach, however, seeks not just to distance the faith from its past but to replace it with a long-dormant theology consistent with both the intent of the scripture and societal advances in discernment.

An ultimate insight to be understood, as well as embraced with reverence

It is mainly the teachings of the Nichiren schools that have caried the *Lotus Sūtra* into modern times.[27] For Nichiren, the ultimate insight of Buddhism was embodied in the *Lotus Sūtra*'s title, after it was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Kumārajīva in 406 CE.[28] When introduced to Japan, the text's name became *Myōhō Renge Kyō* or "Wondrous Dharma of the *Lotus Sūtra*."[29] In "On Attaining Buddhahood," Nichiren described '*Myōhō*' this way:

> It is simply the mysterious nature of our lives from moment to moment, which the mind cannot comprehend or words express. . . . It is neither existence nor non-existence, yet exhibits the qualities of both. It is the mystic entity of the Middle Way that is the reality of all things. '*Myo*' is the name given to the mystic nature of life, and '*ho*' to its manifestations. . . . Once you realize that your own life is

[27] Reeves 2008: 8; Lopez and Stone 2019: 2, 22. On page 22, they write, "Nichiren's followers dominate Lotus Sūtra practice today."

[28] The title of Kumārajīva's version of the text is pronounced *Miao-fa-lian-hua jing* in Chinese and *Myō-hō-renge-kyō* in Japanese (Reeves, 2008: 1).

[29] Inagaki 1989: 219: *Myōhō* (wondrous dharma), 244: *Renge* (lotus flower) 199: *Kyō* (sutra). Lopez and Stone (2019: 48) attribute Myō in the title to "Kumārajīva's innovation". They note also that scholars believe the Ten Suchnesses referenced earlier reflect "Kumārajīva's understanding" (2019: 66).

> the Mystic Law, you will realize that so are the lives of all others (Nichiren 1979: Vol. I. 5).

For some who accept a literal interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s depiction of an omniscient Buddha who is here for the salvation of all, the 'mystic entity of the Middle Way' is the ever-present Gautama.[30] Citing key representations made by Nichiren and the way he led his life, others believe Nichiren himself is the eternal Buddha and exists today in a mystically endowed object of worship.[31] Additionally, many from the tradition contend that the Mystic Law referenced in this excerpt is a vibrant life force.[32] With each of these perspectives, the path to enlightenment requires belief in an a reality that is beyond what the mind can 'comprehend or words express.' A Secular Buddhism based on a tradition aligned with a positive representation of existence, on the other hand, should be able to express it so that it can be assessed before one commits to it (Payne 2021: 306).[33]

Furthermore, the meaning thereafter applied to a post-transcendent *Myōhō Renge* ought to match the preeminence Nichiren gave it.[34] For him, it was the Law into which all others flowed, the primordial source of enlightenment for all Buddhas, all people, and the environment (Nichiren 1979: Vol. I. 3, 131).

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[30] Nichiren Shu, *Liturgy of Nichiren Shu*, 37, 40.

[31] Nichiren Shoshu 1983: 31–33, 109–11. The following link is to an explanation about the Nichiren tradition's object of worship: Wayback Machine, December 25, 2024. https://web.archive.org/web/20241225141247/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gohonzon.

[32] Ikeda, 2017: 34; Soka Gakkai 2018: iii–iv; Rissho Kosei-kai 2024, "Introduction."

[33] In discussing the influence of the single-truth perspective on the Secular Buddhism discourse, Payne notes "What 'ultimate' means is either never defined or is at best 'explained' as something beyond language. If something is beyond language, then no claim about it can be shown to be true–or false."

[34] As advised by Shirwin Wine in the context of Secular Judaism: A secular religious movement that lacks a strong, clear, and positive answer to the question of spirituality will not be effective (Wine 1995: 240). Firm convictions, decisively articulated, are essential to meaningful internal debate, so long as they do not degenerate into absolutism and self-righteousness (Wine 1995: 241).

Thus, recalling the revelation of the eternal Buddha in Chapter Sixteen of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the text's signature image of a white lotus rising from a pond mired in impurity, and the Ten Suchnesses in Chapter Two, including character, nature, substance, potential, etc. (not so much because it corresponds with the doctrinal roots of a particular branch of Buddhism, but mostly because it is hard to conceive of a more worthy and joyful principle), the Mystic Law is redefined here to be: *The conditional emergence of benevolence as gifted by time, process, and potential*. From here on, when the word "phrase" is used, it refers to these twelve words.

In evaluating the phrase, the following points should be considered:

Benevolent Occurrences

"Benevolence" includes three overlapping components of goodness, with the first designated as benevolent occurrences. This component is best represented by the slight imbalance between particles and antiparticles in favor of particles that allows matter to flourish.[35] Without this imbalance, there would be no sentient reproduction, flowers in bloom, bountiful harvests, air to breathe, clear blue lakes, sensory ability, or capacity for consciousness. The component also refers to fortunate incidents such as people recovering from severe illness for no apparent reason, air brakes screeching at the excruciating last minute (Vosper, 2012: 270),[36] and, of greater collective consequence, when earth received the bulk of its carbon, nitrogen, and other life-essential elements from a planetary collision that created the moon 4.4 billion years ago.[37]

Most faith-based traditions attribute the accumulation of occurrences like these to a personal or impersonal higher power.

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[35] CERN, 2023, "The Matter-Antimatter Asymmetry Problem."

[36] On the topic of benevolent occurrences, Vosper (2012: 272) writes, "Released from an image of a deity that would reward some by the devastation of others, however, we can open ourselves to a gift borne by whatever circumstances bring to us".

[37] ScienceDaily, 2019, "Planetary Collision that Formed the Moon Made Life Possible on Earth."

The relationship may be unfounded but, in perpetuating it, the devout at least tacitly recognize how extraordinary reality can be. The attribution also counterbalances the anguish experienced in life. As a result, sociologists have cautioned about a loss of deep resonance for society when traditional religious practices are widely discarded.[38] Over a century ago, for instance, Max Weber advised:

> As intellectualism suppresses belief in magic, the world's processes become disenchanted, lose their magical significance, and henceforth simply 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything. As a consequence, there is a growing demand that the world and the total pattern of life be subject to an order that is significant and meaningful. (Weber 1964: 125)

The above phrase was created to associate the wondrousness of fortunate events with an intrinsic aspect of existence, rather than a higher power.[39] In this way, the "magical significance" is no longer "suppressed," but reconciled by intellectualism. There is now a proposal for a relational ultimate to accommodate Weber's anticipated growth in demand.

Benevolent Contributions

The second component of goodness is called "benevolent contributions." In the realization tendered here, there resides a cue for conducting life in accord with everything splendid about existence. Through developing virtuous character traits, we can emulate its finest form. The assertion is: virtue builds character, and strength of character makes the good life possible.[40] In virtue,

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[38] "[A] generalized sense in our culture that with the eclipse of the transcendent, something may have been lost. . . . a deeper resonance . . . we feel should be there." (Taylor 2007: 307–10.)

[39] See Nicholas R. Longrich's October 2019 essay on the improbability of intelligent life in The Conversation. Wayback Machine, May 9, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20240509084026/https://theconversation.com/evolution-tells-us-we-might-be-the-only-intelligent-life-in-the-universe-124706.

[40] As per Peterson and Seligman (2004: 4), "[W]e believe that character strengths are the bedrock of the human condition and that strength-

reward is innate, never based on self-interest alone, and the benefit is shared (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: vii, 19, 370–71). Malevolence is recognized, but virtues encouraged, including fortitude and integrity.

For enlisting Buddhist resources related to this component, two virtues are recommended to supersede all others. The first is wisdom, which when enhanced features gains in knowledge, perspective, social acumen, fairness, practicality, creativity, and discernment. The second is teaming the pursuit of wisdom with the cultivation of respect, kindness, empathy, generosity, sharing, and humility.[41] When applied in a structured practice, this component blends wisdom and compassion, including self-compassion, refined to the best of one's ability.[42] The results may never be calibrated but, with steadfast veneration and effort, practitioners can expect to maximize their brief opportunity to match the significance of the endowment.

Benevolent Processes

The third component refers to benevolent processes, and resides in the interconnectedness of biological, geological, and sociopsychological functioning sustained by a relationship shared with potentiality. If processes lacked the ability to decay, rejuvenate, and adjust, the various segments of existence would not be able to work together. Their transience can be viewed as resilience, which is essential for our collective survival and coalescence. Sometimes, though, this capacity can cause great hardships. When it does, recall this phrase as a reminder about the opportunity for goodness in every process and to modify endeavor accordingly.

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congruent activity represents an important route to the psychological good life."

[41] The traits for wisdom and compassion listed here are not meant to exclude related variations.

[42] See Miller's critical review of character-trait classifications and recommendation for a higher-order trait to help resolve conflicts between character strengths (Miller 2018: 11).

It is also helpful for reflecting on broader implications. Think of thirst quenched by cool water sifted over fifty years through minerals packed under the snow-capped silhouette of Fujisan. Then leap far afield and see similarities with what has happened to a sacred expression filtered through the last three hundred years of shared knowledge. For humanity, what could be higher than the looming contour of pure meaning as it seeps free of obscurity into every heart and mind? With inspiration from the processes of this realm, there is no need to call on the spirit world for betterment.

A Common Principle of Good

In 1738, Tominaga Nakamoto concluded, "The whole of the *Lotus Sūtra* is just words of praise. It has no content of teaching . . . All the buddhas [in the sutra] put together give none" (Nakamoto 1990: 168-70) For Nakamoto, the text's revelation of the eternal Buddha (Nakamoto 1990: 119), its claim of being the One Vehicle (Nakamoto 1990: 101), the assertion that all dharmas have the characteristics of reality (Nakamoto 1990: 121), the instantaneous enlightenment of the Dragon King's daughter (Nakamoto 1990: 119), and the way the text made "non-emptiness and absolute reality the main point of its teachings" (Nakamoto 1990: 143) were illusory constructs that arose out of a Buddhist system of doctrinal development fueled by supernatural one-upmanship and puffery (Nakamoto 1990: 81). Nakamoto argued that the supernaturalism and puffery were so thick they obscured the central meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra* and all Buddhist texts. He believed their true core was a "common principle" of good (Nakamoto 1990: 165, 183).

This article relies in part on Nakamoto's criticisms of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s foundations to dismantle the text's supernaturalism, but asserts that, regardless of the text's flawed origins, it has served as a formidable Buddhist scripture since the time it was translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in 406 CE. Then, based on a face value reading of his translation, the article contends that the revelation of the eternal Buddha, the text's claim of being the One Vehicle, and the other innovations in it are there to support the belief that the *Lotus Sūtra* contains the highest of Buddhist teachings. And last, this paper asserts that with the introduction of

the subject phrase, supported by its three overlapping components, this 'highest' teaching now points to a goodness observed firsthand in the natural order and free of proprietary control.

As a result, there is an interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra* that adds substance to Nakamoto's recommendation for a 'common principle' of good. What was once a simple call "to do good" (Nakamoto 1990: 183) is now a phrase that enshrines 'good' in immanence and clarifies how 'good' can be more than a human centric notion. In this framework, 'good' is a humbling explanation for why we are here and how best to conduct our lives.

In the Context of Non-realism

In *The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion*, Don Cupitt (2002) emphasizes that:

> Reality has now become a mere bunch of disparate and changing interpretations, a shifting, loosely held coalition of points of view in continual debate with each other. . . . Since there cannot be any unchanging meaning, there cannot be any timeless truths. The whole world of meaning, which is the true starting point for philosophy, is by its very nature shifting all the time. . . . All truths, beliefs, theories, faiths, perspectives . . . rise and fall relative to each other as conditions change.[43]

Reality is, as Cupitt recognizes, fragile, shifty, and subject to 'changing interpretations.' The *Lotus Sūtra*, however, was composed to address this issue. As originally conceived, the remedy was supernatural, but there is now reason to believe that this solution was tied to the cultural influences and capacities of that era. Society has since advanced, and afforded us an opportunity to unravel the extramundane and recommend a successor that acknowledges conditionality, encourages benevolence, and reminds us of the gift existence can be. Maybe there are no unchanging meanings or timeless truths. Nevertheless, the above realization is submitted as one to take us into the foreseeable future.

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[43] My quotation is a compilation of three excerpts, taken from Cupitt 2002: pages 34, 35, and 36.

In the Context of Post-positive Critical Realism

Unlike non-realism there are schools of contemporary philosophy that offer ways to establish reliable meaning. One of them is post-positive critical realism.

Post-positive critical realists believe there is a reality independent of thought, which can be studied, but they are skeptical of knowing it with certainty. Most critical realists are constructivists, who also believe they can build a life for themselves, based on imperfect perceptions. Though perceptions are susceptible to error, something close to objectivity is possible if we triangulate across multiple perspectives. Thus, assessing objectivity is best handled as a social activity, rather than an individual enterprise. It is what multiple individuals are trying to achieve when they criticize each other's work. The theories that survive such intense scrutiny are like the species that survive in an evolutionary struggle. (Trochim, 2006)

'Intense scrutiny' and the opportunity to 'triangulate across multiple perspectives' to settle on fallible constructs describes the grounds upon which a secular society is built.[44] This applies as well to constructs not susceptible to the rigors of scientific proof. For example, Paul Ricoeur explains how modern hermeneutics can be used to transform what was sacred about a myth into an explicit meaning that becomes an irreversible gain of truthfulness, intellectual honesty, and objectivity (Ricoeur 1967: 352). The result is a renewed sense of innocence reached through no more than sound reasoning. Enabled by analytic frameworks like these, the resourceful can determine for themselves if a replacement for a supernatural ultimate is just another temporary device.

Buddha-nature, the enlightenment of grass and trees, and venerated images

Previously, the idea that everyone has a buddha-nature was sourced in revelation and required faith to be known. The

[44] Sokal 2013: 2. "One corollary of the critical spirit is fallibilism: namely, the understanding that all empirical knowledge is tentative, incomplete and open to revision in light of new evidence and cogent new arguments (though, of course, the most well-established aspects of scientific knowledge are unlikely to be discarded entirely)."

scriptures describe an innate purity that is a source of enlightenment, but then assert it as something beyond comprehension. The *Lotus Sūtra* only alludes to the principle when it states, "Every existing thing from the beginning always had the mark of quiescence" (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 37) but that does not preclude us from a forthright statement about it here. Buddha-nature is the capacity for benevolence. As before, though, some will have a harder time than others appreciating this and bringing it out.

An axiom related to buddha-nature in some East Asian traditions is the claim that buddhahood is attained by grass and trees. The idea of non-thinking life forms 'attaining' enlightenment implies they have a will to accomplish the task. With the rewrite of the sutra's ultimate insight suggested here, in contrast, willpower turns into a secondary prerequisite applicable only to those existents that have it. This workaround suggests that buddhahood is apparent in grass and trees whenever they hint at our affinity with an immanent divine.

Inanimate objects crafted into images worthy of reverence can also serve as a reminder of the pure nature we seek to represent. Compared to natural lifeforms, reverential images are better suited for rituals performed in domestic settings. For those interested, there are secular prayers for this purpose.[45]

Evaluation as a Religious Equifinality

The following is a passage from the *Lotus Sūtra*:

> This vehicle is wonderful,
> Supremely pure.
> In all the worlds
> There is nothing greater. (Reeves, 2008: 127.)

Although a sacred text's claim to its own superiority, as demonstrated above, remains a source of affirmation for some, others find such declarations unreliable. For those who are unconvinced, however, alternative methods exist for assessing the merits of new religious ideas. In the case of a secular replacement

[45] "Secular Prayers," 27 February 2025, Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/secular-prayers_20250227.

for a 'supremely pure' core of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it can be subjectively evaluated as a religious equifinality.

To assess the proposed phrase within this criteria, take a moment to compare it with other candidates for a universal ethic into which diverse traditional practices might converge. Consider every contender for a belief capable of survival if society's ability to discern increases, cultural ties to ancestral beliefs weaken, and an articulated awe for humility and emulation, not subservience and fear, is preferred. A proposition that, when examined closely, is accessible through a variety of means, with some more suitable than others.

Schubert Ogden, a Protestant theologian, was at least one impartial authority who identified the *Lotus Sūtra*'s potential contribution to an equifinality process. After noting that the text is centrally concerned with solving the problem of religious plurality through an ultimate unity, he suggested (to paraphrase): so long as the truth about human existence represented in the *Lotus Sūtra* is consistent with Christian values and not exclusive to Buddhism or the Buddha, but adheres to reality itself, it may serve as a similar foundation for Christianity (Ogden, 2002: 108, 112.).[46] Is there a more suitable expression for a truth about human existence founded on a shared reality and represented in most religions than what has been described here?[47]

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[46] Ogden's actual words are: "Provided only that the truth about human existence represented by my Christianity is the same truth represented by Buddhism—but in no way constituted by Buddhism or even by the Buddha, but by reality itself—a Buddhist's affirmation of the formal validity of Buddhism can be completely consistent with my affirmation of Christianity as likewise formally valid."

[47] Similar rhetorical questions could be composed around Talcott Parsons' criteria for a viable new religious doctrine. 1) Is it an innovative extension of traditional beliefs; 2) does it introduce a rationally defensible ethic that is more than a mere call for mutual love; 3) will it encourage a form of individualism that finds fulfillment in a balance between self-interest and solidarity with others; and 4) is it suitable for a secular society? (Parsons 1978: 321-22).

In Accord with a Legend about the Enlightenment of the First Buddha

Mysticism in the Lotus tradition is sourced in the primordial past. A letter attributed to Nichiren entitled "The Entity of the Mystic Law" recognizes an unidentified sage's direct spiritual union with an ineffable ultimate reality in an era called the Kalpa of Continuance; a time period long before Gautama's historical appearance.[48] The following are passages from Nichiren's letter. The first is a quote from a lecture by Zhiyi in the sixth century, the second a comment on Zhiyi's quote by Nichiren in the thirteenth century.

According to Zhiyi:

> [A]t the beginning of the kalpa of continuance, the various things in the world had no names. The sage observed the principles that govern them and, on that basis, made up names for them. . . . Now the name 'renge' is not intended as a symbol for anything. It is the teaching expounded in the Lotus Sūtra. The teaching expounded in the Lotus Sūtra is pure and undefiled and explains the subtleties of cause and effect. Therefore, it is called renge, or lotus. This name designates the true entity that the meditation based on the Lotus Sūtra reveals and is not a metaphor or figurative term (Nichiren 1994: 64–65).

According to Nichiren:

> Anyone who practices this Law will obtain both the cause and effect of Buddhahood simultaneously. The sage practiced with this Law as his teacher, and attained enlightenment, and therefore he simultaneously obtained both the mystic cause and the mystic effect of Buddhahood, becoming the Thus Come One of perfect enlightenment and fully realized virtues. (Nichiren 1994: 66)

In these excerpts, Zhiyi and Nichiren confirm an account about the origins of Buddhist enlightenment. A sage of yore goes beyond thinking of the lotus as a pristine water flower. Instead, the

[48] Whether Nichiren wrote the "Entity of the Mystic Law" is subject to dispute (Stone 1990: 17–32). The passages referenced, however, are not offered as his authenticated compositions but as "attributed" to him and a product of the lotus tradition.

attributes of the lotus are subordinate to a 'Law' that, when practiced, results in a simultaneity of both a 'mystic cause' and 'mystic effect of Buddhahood.' By merging with 'the true entity . . . the Lotus Sūtra reveals,' the sage becomes the 'Thus Come One of perfect enlightenment' and thereby forges a path for others to follow.

To demystify Zhiyi's and Nichiren's understanding of original enlightenment, there is another way to depict what may have happened back then. First, we can go beyond thinking of the lotus in terms of its distinct attributes (seed pod and flower petals appearing at the same time; seed viability lasting more than a thousand years; self-cleaning biological properties) to include those qualities it has in common with other plant life (organic growth; ability to regenerate; vibrant blossoms; a source of medicine and food).[49] Then, upon expanding the prior thought into a plausible expression that includes non-living existents and can also function as an enduring moral compass (for instance: *the conditional emergence of benevolence as gifted by time, process, and potential*) the realization thus aroused proceeds into a cognitive chain reaction that connects the phenomenal realm.

Enlightenment is no longer limited to an ineffable reality affirmed by a Thus Come One, but becomes the direct perception of a guiding principle found in nature and, when worded in a manner that helps identify its own properties, is capable of being understood. The mystical 'true entity' and its implied boundary with a mundane sphere become dispensable. [50] For anyone moved by reason's wondrous climb from the specific, to the shared, onto a pathway of ethical interrelatedness, there is an insight from immanence positioned to replace them.[51]

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[49] The Sacred Lotus, Wayback Machine, May 1, 2024. https://web.archive.org/web/20240430234242/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelumbo_nucifera.

[50] Luhmann 2013: 56–57, 59. Citing Luhmann here is meant only to credit him for inspiring these thoughts on the ostensible boundary between transcendence and immanence, as his use of the concept was applied differently.

[51] The expression 'reason's wondrous climb' finds support in Pierre Hadot's epiphany while researching the exegetics of philosophical texts from antiquity: "Thought evolves by incorporating prefabricated and pre-existing elements, which are given new meaning as they become integrated

An Alternative to Zhiyi's Three Thousand Realms

Zhiyi also articulated an ultimate insight derived from the *Lotus Sūtra*, but his ultimate was a totality encompassing both subjective and objective existence. He called it Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Thought.[52] For Zhiyi, the actual number, whether a thousand or whatever, was insignificant. What mattered was to have a template for contemplating the fluid interactions of all things and to recognize the Buddha's abiding influence in all of it.[53]

Nichiren had a different opinion about the Three Thousand Realms. He described it as the thought-moment of the eternal Buddha revealed in the *Lotus Sūtra*, embodied through chanting the title, and manifested in his image of reverence (Stone 1990: 585). The emphasis was not on a totality but faith in a practice that invites protection from harm and attainment of happiness in one's present and future lifetimes (Nichiren 1979: Vol. I. 213). For Nichiren, focusing on the Three Thousand Realms led to a "theoretical" insight, whereas his practice resulted in an "actual" attainment of a better existence (Nichiren 1985B: Vol. III. 282–83).

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into a rational system. It is difficult to say what is most extraordinary about this process of integration: contingency, chance, irrationality, the very absurdity resulting from the elements used, or, on the contrary, the strange power of reason to integrate and systemize these disparate elements and give them new meaning." (Hadot 1995: 65.)

[52] Three Thousand is the product of a calculation that multiplies ten states of existence called the Ten Worlds, by the Ten Worlds again, by the Ten Suchnesses referenced in Chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the Three Realms of Existence. The Ten Worlds include hell (utter despair), hunger, animality, combativeness, humanity, part human and divine, a disciple, a solitary buddha, bodhisattvas, and a fully enlightened buddha. The Ten Suchnesses are character, nature, substance, potential, function, cause, condition, result, effect, and essential unity. The Three Realms are 1) momentary mental and physical circumstances that unite temporarily to form life; 2) individuals who belong to one of the Ten Worlds; and 3) insentient existence (Swanson 1989: 11-12; Lopez and Stone 2019: 25, 68–69).

[53] As for the Buddha's pervasive influence, according to Zhiyi, "All of the hundred realms and thousand suchnesses are the objective realm of the Buddha." (Swanson 1989: 196.)

About fourteen hundred years after Zhiyi's 'theoretical' focus and seven hundred and fifty years after Nichiren's 'actual' attainment, we now have a meaning to fill a moment in the minds of those with a secular worldview. This one, however, unsupported by a Supreme Being, a cosmology involving rebirth, or faith in an object of worship with transformative powers. Rather, belief in an ever-abiding Buddha gives way to a twelve-word phrase expressing faith's highest virtue, just as the power projected into a sacred image subsides into an awareness that we are the ones with the power. There is faith in our ability to shape our lives for the better, but without the aid of the transcendent.

This teaching is the antithesis of Zhiyi's and Nichiren's yet, as with every opportunity for a historical dialectic, there remains commonality and overlap. Each is an existence-affirming path derived from Lotus Buddhism and each assumes responsibility for cultivating a foremost blend of wisdom and compassion in all.

Conclusion

This paper's reinterpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s eternal Buddha as a morality sourced in immanence creates a novel form of Secular Buddhism that can help the movement appeal to a wider range of people who find supernatural beliefs problematic. Four key grounds support this thesis statement.

First, Secular Buddhism refers to a movement from within the Buddhist tradition that advances an ethical insight and practice adapted for individuals unable to accept a transcendent reality. This definition is consistent with Stephen Batchelor's formulation of a Buddhist ethic divested of metaphysical truth claims (Batchelor 2015: 8). It also concurs with Gil Fronsdal's definition of Naturalistic Buddhism as without supernatural beliefs (Fronsdal 2021: 266–68). Consider too, Bhim Rao Ambedkar's reinterpretation of the early teachings to exclude reliance on the otherworldly cosmology of India's indigenous past. Each of these views honor George Holyoake's inaugural description, not of Secular Buddhism, but secularism: "Secularism means the moral duty of man in this life deduced from considerations which pertain to this life alone" (Holyoake 1870: 27). The teachings presented in this article meet their standards.

Second, the perspective outlined here represents a novel form of Secular Buddhism. The versions of Ambedkar, Batchelor, and Fronsdal are derived primarily from the Pāli Canon. Batchelor's and Fronsdal's rely on practicing insight meditation, focusing on conditionality, and letting go of attachments and reactivity; they seek to instill a practical ethic that promotes calm, kindness, and peace. After Ambedkar's passing, followers added insight and loving-kindness meditation to his call for a civil order inspired by the Buddha's teachings. That said, none of them offer guidance in terms of a paramount morality derived from an understanding of immanence.

The secular version introduced in this manuscript is the product of a demystified *Lotus Sūtra*. It proposes an expression for the dharma Fronsdal describes as something "empirical" . . . "personally accessible" . . . "verifiable by our natural senses" (Fronsdal 2021: 278-79) and what Batchelor describes as an "everyday sublime" that "outstrips our capacity for representation" (Batchelor 2015: 250). It also comports with the elements Ambedkar associates with *saddharma* in his chapter on the topic.[54] Other *saddharma*s are possible, with this new offering tendered as a reliable one for those ready to embrace it.

Third, to be considered a legitimate form of Secular Buddhism, a companion practice is by definition necessary. The prayer sets referenced earlier in the article and again in the footnote below fulfill this requirement.[55] They recognize the conditional nature of existence, but their primary focus is on the morality introduced here and on shaping one's life in its likeness. In this way, practitioners are encouraged to improve themselves and align their sphere of influence with a common good. Relief from personal suffering associated with unhealthy attachments, reactivity, hatred, and despair is an incidental outcome. As the practice takes root, so too should one's willingness to participate in worthwhile egalitarian reform.

A review of the prayers will show how they integrate secular Buddhists into the traditional rituals of various Lotus

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[54] Ambedkar, *The Buddha & His Dhamma*, Book Three, Part V.

[55] *Secular Prayers*, 27 February 2025, Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/secular-prayers_20250227.

denominations. There is also a prayer set for an independent practice. One can chant *Nam/Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō* or, for example, *Sezoku Hokekyō* (*romaji* for "Secular *Lotus Sūtra*"). Although the prayers are structured for a twice-daily routine, this is not required. Depending on one's situation, calling to mind 'the conditional emergence of benevolence as gifted by time, process, and potential' may be sufficient.

And fourth, by including an over-arching principle derived from immanence in its repertoire, Secular Buddhism will have added a teaching specifically designed to replace the loss of a transcendent Buddha. As a result, the movement can expect to help a wider range of people who struggle with supernaturalism in religion. Deifications such as a Supreme Being, God, Allah, Bhagavan, and Brahma are not just ideals but heartfelt realities cherished by many today. Clearly, those who reject this kind of theistic framing already have alternatives from the Pāli Canon to choose from. However, for the disillusioned seeking to replace an enchanted divine with an unadorned affirmative one, there is now a phrase derived from the *Lotus Sūtra* to serve as a closer fit.

As anticipated, there will be obstacles for the phrase to overcome before becoming a strong option for secular Buddhists let alone a universally recognized ethic. The very abstractness that makes the expression inclusive will be at first glance difficult for many to grasp. The body of information used to explain it may be so unrelatable (or poorly articulated) only a few can appreciate its significance. That the ultimate principle is no longer limited to a mystical union subject to claims of sectarian control is liberating yet, without institutional support, awareness of this opportunity might not last for long.

While these concerns about the phrase's chances for acceptance are important, they actually point to a more important issue. What is needed is time for people to develop familiarity and trust in the concepts that both it and its three overlapping components convey. The publication of this introduction is a mere, but essential, first step.

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