On Reading Literature Literally: Concrete Imagery before Doctrine

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Prefatory Remarks[1]

This paper requires a short introduction, for, at least some of the issues I wish to explore are not commonly explored in the academic study of Buddhism. The questions I address in this paper, and the personal motivations behind this particular form of curiosity, may be expressed succinctly as follows:

1. What are the presuppositions of "Pure Land thought," understood broadly as belief in the power of a bodhisattva's vow as it is realized in the "purification" of the bodhisattva's buddha-field?
   a. What implications does the belief in many lands and many bodhisattvas have for our understanding of the nature and the function of the bodhisattva ideal?
   b. What exactly is the nature of belief in multiple buddhas, bodhisattvas and buddha-fields —a belief at the heart of the mythology of the bodhisattvas in so many Mahāyāna sūtras?
2. What would have made the existence of purified buddha-fields **believable** to an audience in ancient India?
   a. What would that belief look like if it were understood **literally** and not simply as a metaphor for some philosophical or ethical conception?
   b. How is the bodhisattva ideal related to the vague, but central conception of a space or dimension known as the *dharmadhātu*,
   c. and to the more concrete conception of purified world-realms?

These concerns were prompted, of course by more concrete or particular problems. For instance, and more specifically, I have been puzzled for some time by the manner in which Śākyamuni, as the voice of authority in the *Sukhāvatī-vyūha* sutras, appeals in the Shorter *Sukhāvatī-vyūha* to the buddhas of the ten cosmic directions for validation of his teachings on Amitābha's Pure Land. We may dismiss this important passage as hyperbole or as "legitimation," but we still need to explain what would make such an appeal cogent and effective. In other words, we need to understand what sort of presupposition would render believable this particular claim to legitimation in the *Shorter Sūtra.*

In this instance, as in many other passages in the sūtras, we do not need more than a cursory reading to realize that the first, or concrete, meaning (which we shall call "the literal" for lack of a better word) seems to say something more (or something less —depending on your perspective) than what we communicate to our students and audiences with our doctrinal, philosophic or normative

[1] My thanks to Prof. Katsura Shōryu of Ryukoku University for inviting me to participate in the symposium where an earlier version of this paper was presented. I also thank Dennis Hirota, of the same institution, for his response to the paper, and to those members of the audience who offered valuable comments and questions, especially James Dobbins of Oberlin College.

interpretations.[2] We are, in some ways, despite our proffered methodological strategies, still entrapped by the lure of Buddhist doctrinal subtleties. But, obviously, there is more to Buddhist texts than the arguments, or, for that matter, the dogmatic enumerations of the scholastic tradition.[3]

Given the claims contained in them, my theoretical (hermeneutic) approach cannot be separated from concrete issues of interpretation, from the particulars of the text. And, as I argue below, these particulars raise a number of questions regarding the way we speak about Mahāyāna, about buddhas and about bodhisattvas. More specifically, I feel these texts show that we may still have a lot to learn from the particulars of these individual texts, buddhas and bodhisattvas, despite our acquired insights into the general or doctrinal interpretations that seem to underlie the grand narratives of the sūtras. I have felt, for instance, that Western attempts to distinguish so-called celestial bodhisattvas from some other form of bodhisattva ("Human"? "Earthly"?) are misguided and do not serve any heuristic purpose. If anything, our nomenclature and exegetical discourse have prevented us from asking for the meaning and function of the way bodhisattvas are depicted in the *sūtras*.[4] In seems to me, moreover, that except for one paper by Paul Harrison, we have not confronted the implications of this Western distinction.

I am, of course, also interested in question of "authorship." and "origins," and questions about the dating and the evolution of Buddhist texts and their ideas across time.[5] However, I also raise the question of what may have made change possible and, above all, acceptable to Buddhist individuals and communities —across time, and at the various levels of potential meaning in these texts (doctrine, mythology, ritual, *ethos* and *habitus*). That is to say, for me the investigation of history implies also an investigation of the nature of religious discourse and human belief, and the way discourse and belief becomes acceptable as truth or reality in a given cultural context.

This does not mean that the nature of belief can be used as historical evidence, or that understanding belief in ancient texts can follow the same positive methodologies of textual history. But having at least

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[2] My use of "literal" does not presuppose any philosophical stance regarding the exact nature of the literal. It is simply a short-hand for "taking the concrete imagery of our texts and face value, as if it represented an actual world that we can see, hear, touch, and inhabit." This way of reading is then contrasted with our need to find philosophical, ethical or existential meanings, that is, our attempts to map the imaginal world of the text onto our own imaginal world (what we commonly call the "reality of our existence"). I am well aware that the word "literal" itself is very much contested in linguistics, translation theory and philosophy. The reader can start the exploration of these debates with the works by Cohen and Stern referenced below in notes 8 and 9.

[3] This is not the place to show that the scholastics were themselves very much immersed in the concrete and literal forms of the foundational myths of their own doctrinal abstractions. I think this is generally speaking obvious, but it still needs to be considered carefully. Furthermore, as I shall clarify presently, I am not in any way suggesting that scholastic schematism and philosophical analysis are not relevant to the study of Buddhism.

[4] P. Harrison, "Mañjuśrī and the Cult of the Celestial Bodhisattvas," *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal*, 13.2(May 2000), 157-193. I have followed a slightly different line of argument in a paper titled "Avalokiteśvara's Potala in the Avataṃsaka," to be published by the Organizing Committee of the conference "Daejanggyeong: A Millennium Commemoration of the Tripitaka Koreana" —Daegu, 2011.

[5] Again, for the sake of brevity, I have not unpacked what I mean by "authorship." Many of the texts that interest us are not exactly amenable to analyses of authorship as one would apply in a historical environment in cultures where individual authorship has been valued for centuries. I am also an advocate a conception of origins and authorship that incorporates at least some of the insightful conclusions of Western criticism following post-structuralism. The concepts of "dating" and "evolution" would also have to be fine-tuned in light of more contemporary concepts of transmission and reception.

a theoretical understanding of belief can help understand the nature of change —in other words, it can help understand how belief or ideation affect the evolution of doctrine, its reception, its acceptance, and its transformations.

In the present paper in particular I am interested in (1) the evolution of a text (or rather, of a set of ideas in that text), (2) in the way people may have understood this texts and its ideas, and (3) in the presuppositions that can make texts such as this one believable and vital enough to warrant change and growth in the interpretation of its doctrines.

Questions of Terminology: Reading and Interpreting

Our attention has been called more than once to our tendency to see mystery in the reality imagined or lived by others. For instance, we call ritual, or even worse, "just a ritual," those actions that, from our own limited perspective, seem to have no effectiveness or function. This is a recalcitrant bias. Hence our first impulse (after we have overcome the tendency to dismiss such phenomena as meaningless) is to get rid of our puzzlement with a second order explanation: symbolism, meaning, doctrinal profundity, social function, etc.

There is nothing *inherently* misguided about such attempts at understanding. But, some times we jump to that second order of analysis before we have noted, first, the salient features of the concrete object (ritual or literary, performative or imaginal), or before we have attempted to imagine how a human being can actually live in his or her "foreign world" without sharing with us the kind of meanings we seem to require to be able to understand our own world and world-views.

I do not wish to travel very far in a morass of interpretations laid over interpretations, of methodological perspectives clashing with methodological perspectives. In this short paper, I only wish to point towards one way in which we can perhaps engage in the activity of interpreting and understanding beliefs ("doctrine," "myth" and "ritual," if you will) by looking at such beliefs and their expression in the most literal sense I can imagine. This means, in part, that I will privilege the *imaginal* over the symbolic,[6] assuming provisionally that believers have the capacity to accept as real a world populated by non-natural phenomena, without necessarily positing a symbolic or demythologized meaning behind those phenomena. And assuming, moreover, that human beings can live in a world in which not all phenomena are "natural" —in our contemporary sense of what is natural.

I would like to imagine a reading that attempts to understand how the concreteness of religious imagery can provide enough meaning for believers to have no need to seek anything beyond that concreteness, allowing them to live in that imaginal world without feeling the urge to build a symbolic

[6] I use the word "imaginal" advisedly and in the technical sense now common in literary and religious studies: a world of imagination that constitutes reality for a given human being or community of human beings. I am also borrowing from I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, New York and London, Oxford University Press, 1936, and from I. A. Richards & C. K. Ogden, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, London and New York, 1923. One should note one of my earliest sources, which also influenced Ogden: Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (reprint Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2007. First ed. 1911, tenth ed. 1927) — also online in PDF format at: http://ia600609.us.archive.org/23/items/DiePhilosophieDesAlsOb/HansVaihinger_philosophieDesAlsOb.pdf

theology. It is therefore, not a matter of looking for the real meaning or the original meaning, nor the native meaning, but simply an attempt to clarify the concrete universe generated by the text and asking whether that universe is habitable —whether someone can feel content with that concreteness, however absurd or naïve it may seem to some of us. Needless to say, in doing so, I imply that such universes are perhaps not so absurd or naïve as they may seem to someone standing outside of them.

As a foreshadowing of some of my conclusions, I should point to the origin of these reflections. In reading and rereading "the Pure Land Sutras," and other texts of a similar genre (from *Akṣobhya-sūtra* to *Mañjuśrī-vyākaraṇa*, *Avataṃsaka* to *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*) I have reached a point where my literary imagination feels perfectly at home with the putatively fantastic universe(s) described in such texts.[7] In other words, I discovered in me the capacity to suspend disbelief to the point where I could feel not only drawn into the text as literature or drama, but also eased into an empathic relationship with a believer that would accept literally (that is, accept its imagery as reality), in the way that, for instance, many Christian believers believe the Book of Revelation is not in any way "symbolic" or metaphoric, but a description of the exact events we will live at the end of all time.

We could say that my basic assumption is that my imagination as reader can profit from a certain empathic connection with what I can posit as the imaginal reality of the other. If our capacity to understand one another depends on the ability to understand each other's worlds, we need to understand not only the thoughts of others, but the mental pictures and feelings that presumably accompany and bolster those thoughts, we need to make them "our own," even if we use these two words metaphorically or as a provisional device for understanding.[8]

In fact, even the simple capacity to sustain my attention while I read a text requires a similar process of identification or empathy, whereby I imagine the world represented by the text, and I imagine the people who have read or will read it, heard it, heard of it, performed it, etc. We often attempt to achieve some sort of connection with the other through historical and sociological understanding, but even socio-historical reasoning depends on imagining real human beings and a real human world in some ways accessible to my imagination. When we approach a text as a community's construction of a habitable world (in our case a world at the same time transcendent and immanent), the need to imagine alternative worlds is even more crucial. We need a minimal capacity to affectively and metaphorically transport ourselves to another world.[9]

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[7] "Fantastic" not in the sense of "being pure fantasy," but in the sense of feeling counter-intuitive or against my culture-bound sense of what can be real. I also take this not in the strongest sense (not in the strong, and most likely, correct interpretation of the dictum that we are animals "suspended in webs of significance" we have spun ourselves —Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, p. 5), but as a middle of the road constructivist— to become real, the web of our narratives must somehow affect human material and emotional survival.

[8] This way of looking at the text was in part inspired by my personal spin on Ted Cohen's notion of "the construction and comprehension of metaphors," which, he states, "require an ability that is the same as the human capacity for understanding one another." Cohen, *Thinking of others: On the talent for metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Appropriately, Cohen opens his first chapter with an epigraphic quote from Josef Stern's *Metaphor in Context* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000): "Nonetheless, I agree that there is a pictorial dimension to metaphor and that the perspective it generates cannot be expressed propositionally."

[9] These and the following thoughts are in part inspired by my reading of two of Ted Cohen's papers: "Metaphor, Feeling, and

If skillfully accomplished, narrative and the depiction of a narrative's setting (not that these two can be separated so easily), will effect a state of receptivity or suggestibility in the expected receptor-responder very similar to what I propose the reader attempts to achieve —many centuries and kilometers away from the original site of production— in the enjoyment and understanding of texts of the imagination.[10]

Hence, I contend, such a process would have operated when some of these sūtras were composed, read, or recited (that is, recited and read with at least a minimal understanding of the imagery, since ritual recitation may have had other functions and meanings).[11] I also contend that a metaphoric, symbolic or theological reading depends to a certain extent on an initial acceptance of the concrete alternative world posited by the text.

Regarding the pure lands, and the buddhas and bodhisattvas that inhabit them, I wonder if it is possible to understand the universe they occupy with a literalness that offers perhaps an insight into a particular modality of Indian Buddhist belief: the belief in multiple buddhas and buddha-fields as the true representation of an objective world —at least of our world seen as an embodiment of Buddhist Dharma or as seen through the eyes of buddhas and bodhisattvas— an idea that is sometimes expressed with the technical and mythic term *Dharmadhātu*.

This ideal and abstract universe, the Dharmadhātu, is occupied by multiple worlds that do not look like ours, and is populated by beings like and and by others who are similar to us only in an ideal sense.

Narrative," *Philosophy and Literature*, 21.2(1997), 223-244, and "Identifying with Metaphor: Metaphors of Personal Identification," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57.4(1999), 399-409. Similar ideas are developed, of course, in his book, referenced above in note 8, which incorporates much of the second of these two articles. I came to know of Cohen's work after I wrote my paper on miracles for the Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, "On Buddhist Wonders and Wonder-working," (*Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 33.1–2 [2010 (2011)], pp.513–554). There is much to be gained by a closer look at Cohen in order to develop further the materials and arguments I presented in the *JIABS* paper.

[10] This is, perhaps, as good a place as any other to introduce an important aside on the term "narrative." One need only skim through a library catalogue to realize that the word has as many meanings as there are scholars using the term. It is also evident that studies of narrative overlap with many other disciplines and analytic categories —the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, for instance, includes, in addition to the expected treatment under the heading "Récit" (a superb, and very French, survey by Louis Marin and Jean Verrier), an interesting segment on narrativity under the topic of "Performance, Art" (written by Daniel Charles). In addition to the multiple uses of the term, the matter is complicated by the nature of "narrative" in the texts that I consider in this paper: the "stories" told are mostly (when they are not just a pretext for doctrinal expostulation) of the nature of passing vistas, in which ideal characters interact with visionary panoramas. It is a kind of religious narrative unlike the story-plot and chronicled history types more common in Christian scriptures. I use the term narrative, therefore, to describe passages where a plot (usually a very loose one, and often without the kind of plot development and denouement we expect) is used as a thread weaving together the other elements: isolated events and the setting (the space created in or by those events). It is more like a string of miracles than a story proper. Another, more abstract, way of stating this point is to say that plot is ritually repetitive and serves to highlight and embody the defining topoi of the tradition, but that the development of topoi in this case can become, literally, the depiction of miraculous spaces or places (for some ideas of the use of place as literary topos, see, Jean-Claude Anscombre, ed., *Théorie des topoï*, Paris: Kimé, 1995).

[11] For the sake of brevity, I will henceforth use the word "read" as a place holder for the longer, more accurate phrases the present context requires, such as, "recite, memorize, repeat, hear, write, read or perform." Obviously, in the case of the texts we are considering here, the question of their use, transmission, and *Sitz im Leben* (to say nothing of the existence of "a reader" in our modern sense of the word) still remains, for the most part, open.

Hence, to understand such a universe we are left with two main types of strategies: either we assume that all of this is metaphoric (in some cases perhaps allegoric), and that a theological unpacking is necessary, if not inevitable, or we jump in and ask ourselves what it would be like to inhabit that universe.

Since this universe, the Dharmadhātu, is supposed to be somehow coextensive or parallel to ours, we can see it as either transcendent or immanent, or both. But, be that as it may, we will need to first understand exactly is this universe, and the worlds within it, and the human-like beings that inhabit it. We need to understand what it is, before we ask ourselves what it means.

In Buddhist Studies, we have been plagued by a tendency to read in light of "established" or normative doctrinal interpretations (and this is a practice not only found among lay readers or in some of our students, but even in some of our scholarly writing). An example of this is the facile use of the word *bodhisattva* as if it were univocally and transparently an expression of a single doctrine —philosophical and ethical. We continue to read and understand "bodhisattvas" through the lens of our summaries and textbooks, and with the short-hand of doctrinal and interpretive terms that lack accuracy, or, at least, terms the meanings of which are yet to be clarified.

In such readings we try to make the bodhisattva into our own image, still trying, even today to divest the figure of the bodhisattva of any features that may seem to us a bit too fantastic, or may seem so much in the realm of the superhuman that we fear (I believe mistakenly) that the figure of the bodhisattva will lose its value as an ideal model for human action.

If we pay close attention to the concrete and specific images (iconic or narrative images) of a text, we may begin to discern the many ways in which the text means or has meant. We may begin to understand the manner in which the text constructs an imaginal world different from our own, and, at times different from our assumed understanding of the world of the text (our "interpretive *textus receptus*," as it were). And we may understand how the text would have meant a lot more than what we find in the schemata of doctrinal interpretations.

In general, this type of reading at a "literal level" can already be counted among the best practices of good historian, because historians seek to understand the text's diachronicity or to understand the relations between different layers or archeological strata, and they do so precisely by focusing on the text's concreteness, beyond or behind, any doctrinal or normative reading. However, it is not only the positive historian (the student of strata and social contexts) who stands to benefit from a literal reading that takes the concrete image at face value. The literary interpreter, or the interpreter of religious literature, as well as the translator and lexicographer, stand to gain from this approach.

I have elsewhere attempted such analyses with two well-known Mahāyāna texts: Avalokiteśvara's Litany in the 25th Chapter of the Lotus Sūtra (variously known in East Asia as the *Guānsìyīn-jīng* 觀世音經, *Kannon-gyō* 観音経 or *Fumonbon* 普門品) and the corresponding Litany in Sudhana's encounter with Avalokiteśvara in the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*.

I have argued that these two texts are literary renderings of living rituals that were incorporated into larger, fully developed *Mahāyāna Sūtras* —respectively the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Buddhāvataṃsaka*— possibly in an attempt to give folk belief a canonical or normative status, and that this process of

canonization and absorption evidently occurred late in the development of the larger *sūtra*s. When we read them within this frame of reference, we begin to see how they represent particular beliefs that do not always fit into the expectations we bring to these texts when we read them through the lens of "normative" or accepted notions of what is or is not a a sūtra, a particular sūtra, a bodhisattva, a particular bodhisattva, or what is or is not proper mahāyāna doctrine.

Both texts, *Lotus* and *Avataṃsaka*, present peculiar notions of what is or is not a bodhisattva and of the relationship of the bodhisattva to the purified buddha-fields. One text can hardly be used as a doctrinal clue to understanding the other. Yet we intuit some sort of connection —a connection that reflects, in my view, habits of imagination, literary and religious.

The *Lotus* Litany also appears to have grown with the addition of other legitimizing elements, thus showing that the impulse to create a normative or standard reading is also found in the history of traditional constructions of meaning. This is evident particularly in the attempt to link Avalokiteśvara to what must have been a rising popular cult of Amitābha. In this last point I agree with Gregory Schopen on the matter of the "generalized" acceptance of Amitābha to which many *Mahāyāna Sūtras* bear witness.[12] In fact I would reword his conclusion more boldly by suggesting that there may have existed a non-specific cult of Amitābha (paying lip service to Amitābha's importance without necessarily engaging in the exclusive worship of Amitābha).

However, as to the meaning of Schopen's phrase "generalized belief system," I part ways with him on two counts. First in his assumption that this is a "belief *system*" (he seems to imagine belief as separate from ritual practice and avoids the question of what he means by the phrase belief system). Second, I hypothesize that a belief that becomes generalized is not necessarily watered down by this generalization, but that it could be reinforced as a vehicle for legitimation or by being legitimize by general acceptance. In other words, existence as a generalized belief does not preclude the existence of cultic communities where a particular Buddha was paramount as object of worship.

Text and Function

I will not repeat the arguments I have developed elsewhere, but, the object of the present paper is an example of a phenomenon similar to the one I believe bears witness to the success of the cult behind the recitation of Avalokiteśvara's Litany. In the present, brief, analysis I wish to examine the final section of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka,* the *Samantabhadra-caryāpraṇidhāna-gāthā* (variously known as the *Fugengyōgan* 普賢行願, *Bhadracarī*, etc.). It seems to me that this section of the *Avataṃsaka* collection (henceforth abbreviated *Av*) reflects a process of growth and legitimation similar to that of the two Avalokiteśvara Litanies.

However, in the case of Samantabhadra's vows in the *Av,* the process of canonization worked both ways —legitimizing Samantabhadra even as his association with the liturgy of Mahāyāna transferred its legitimacy to the Sūtra— so that the rising figure of Samantabhadra appears to have absorbed the

[12] See Gregory Schopen, "Sukhāvatī as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 19, (1977), pp. 177-210.

general model of the Mahāyāna liturgy, the *saptavidhā anuttarā pūjā*, presenting its elements and structure as if they were part of a revelation contained in Samantabhadra's own, personal vows.[13] The liturgy was legitimized at the same time that it legitimized Samantabhadra, a bodhisattva that may have arisen, not in the popular imagination, but as an abstract deity of monkish creation: the embodiment of the perfectly virtuous conduct (*samanta-bhadra-caryā*). His final apotheosis evidently occurs in the passage that has come to be known as the *Samantabhadra-caryāpraṇidhān-gāthā* (henceforth referenced simply as *Bhadracarī*)

Our acceptance of the ending as a fitting ending is a good example of how our eagerness to read doctrinal schemata into a text misleads us into overlooking the text and its history, particularly the significance of its concrete imagery.

We are used to assuming, in the first place, that the meeting with Samantabhadra represents the most appropriate, and the original, ending of the Sanskrit *Gaṇḍavyūha* (henceforth abbreviated as *Gv*), and that, in turn, this final encounter culminated with the Vows of Samantabhadra as we know them —that is, through their canonized versions in the *Samantabhadra-caryāpraṇidhān-gāthā* (variously known as the *Fugengyōgan* 普賢行願, *Bhadracarī*, etc.) preserved in Sanskrit in the *Gv* and in a number of Asian languages, including, of course, the canonical Tibetan version, and Prajña's Chinese translation —minor variations notwithstanding.

And we conclude from the first assumption that this conveniently consecrated text constitutes the key to understanding the rest of the *Gv*. This conclusion is then conflated with a second major assumption: that the Bhadracarī is primarily the expression of the bodhisattva ideal as a model for human ethical behavior. Accordingly, we tend to interpret the *Gv* as a gradual pilgrimage culminating in the vows of the life of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, understanding these as the highest expression of the ethical ideals of those human beings who seek to live the life of a bodhisattva.[14]

This consecrated key to the conclusion of the *Gv* and the *Av* allows us to reduce the text to a sort of "ethical" teaching (however vague its formulation may be even in our own interpretations). This reading, the favorite among contemporary readers in the West, presents the bodhisattva as a model for the ethical behavior of practicing Buddhists, despite other possible readings of the myths of the bodhisattvas and of the *Bhadracarī* itself. These alternative readings are what I now call the literal reading, and which I will

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[13] The importance of these two processes may be reflected in the Chinese title of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in Prajña's translation, 入不思議解脱境界普賢行願品 (*Taishō* X, 293), where the first, presumably main or older title, 入不思議解脱境界, corresponds to an older version expressing one of the main themes of the collection, and the second, appositional subtitle, 普賢行願, represents a new vision of the *Sūtra* as culminating in the vows. One need only remember that in Buddhabhadra and Śikṣānanda's versions the final *sūtra* in the *Av* is called the 入法界品. Given the development of the *Sūtra* as a sequential (perhaps a gradually intensifying) presentation of miraculous *vimokṣas*, the appropriate finale would have to be found in Maitreya's *kūṭāgāra* (as the realization of the 入法界), followed by Samantabhadra's reinforcement of the same idea, as I argue below.

[14] This template or interpretive key has grown roots, so much so that we have, additionally, accepted the idea that the upper tier of the reliefs at Barabuḍur are representations of the *Bhadracarī* as we know it —despite the insurmountable problems that this identification must face when the reliefs are compared to the text. Thus, F. D. K. Bosch ("De Bhadracari afgebeeld op den Hoofdmuur der vierde Gaanderij van den Baraboedoer", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Ned.-Indie*, 97, 1938, pp.241-293) struggles, in my view unsuccessfully, to confront the doubts raised, many years earlier, by N. J. Krom (*Barabudur: Archaeological Description*,The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1927).

call later in this paper the narrative reading.

Parenthetically, but importantly, I should note that part of the problem is an artifact of Western biases. After all, we are attempting to discover ethical thought of a Western modality in texts in which, arguably, norms of human action fuse with the superhuman feats of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and with an aspiration towards awakening, omniscience and liberation that is essentially expressed as a ritual, not as a reflection on the ethical significance of this aspiration. I am not denying, of course, the presence of ethical principles and aspirations, I only wish to note that the norms may be there, but one cannot separate them easily from the ideal of a bodhisattva that both knows reality and can change reality, one cannot separate easily the role of the bodhisattva as paradigmatic figure from his personality as superhuman wonder-worker. Perhaps this particular Western bias is at the root of our confusion about so called celestial bodhisattvas, as if they could be clearly distinguished from so-called human or earthly bodhisattvas that, presumably, we normal humans would imagine capable of imitating.

I still think it is valid for us to ask ourselves exactly what is a bodhisattva and, more importantly in the present context, what is the relevance of the figure of so-called mythical or celestial bodhisattvas as objects of human emulation and aspiration. We shall presently return to this second question, but first let me offer some cursory observations on the first question —whether we can find an analog to Western notions of the ethical norm in the sūtras under consideration.

"Ethical," Ethos, Ritual

An "ethical" interpretation of these texts is not totally off the mark.[15] I only argue that it is hardly the most prominent role of the bodhisattvas (including the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra), at the very least in the *Gv* and in the *Av* as a whole Since I intend to discuss other, competing, understandings of the significance of the bodhisattva figure, I should at least remind the reader that I am not denying the existence of ethical meanings. I shall, therefore, begin with a short excursus on the bodhisattva as ethical paradigm.

This idea is developed, in fact, in the so-called "Ten Vows of Samantabhadra" found in the prose section preceding the *Bhadracarī* verses in Prajña's Chinese version. These ten vows in prose are, unquestionably, a summary or interpretation of the *Bhadracarī* and seem meant to lead the reader to the mythic and the ritual dimensions of the text through an initial reflection on the ethical. They are, I would argue, a self-referential commentary or interpretation of the verses that follow.

The prose passage on the Ten Vows (*Taishō 293*, 844b20-846c29) is summarized in its first lines (*Taishō 293*, 844b20-28):

> Then, after joyfully praising the sublime virtues of the Tathāgata, Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, addressed [Sudhana] the youth and all the bodhisattvas [that had gathered there], saying:

[15] One is reminded of the implicit tension in Western narrative theology between the narrative and the moral. See, for instance, Paul Lauritzen, "Ethics and Experience: The Case of the Curious Response," *The Hastings Center Report, 26*.1 (1996), 6-15 and Paul Lauritzen, "Is 'Narrative' Really a Panacea? The Use of 'Narrative' in the Work of Metz and Hauerwas," *The Journal of Religion,* 67.3(1987), 322-339.

> —Sudhana, the virtue and merit of the Tathāgata is such that even if all the buddhas of the ten directions should speak during so many *kalpas* as there are particles of dust in the uncountable numberless buddha-fields, they would not be able to ever finish describing [all that they contain]. If you wish to succeed in attaining and practicing those virtues 成就此功德門, you should practice ten great vows. Which ten?
> (1) First, to pay homage 禮敬 to all the buddhas; (2) second, to call upon and praise 稱讚 the tathāgatas; (3) third, worship them with abundant offerings 廣修供養; (4) fourth, to confess our [evil] conduct, those actions that constitute an impediment, and to express repentance 懺悔業障; (5) fifth, to celebrate the merit and virtue 隨喜功德 [of all beings]; (6) sixth, to request of [all buddhas] that they turn the wheel of Dharma 請轉法輪; (7) seventh, to request of all buddhas that they remain in [this] world 請佛住世; (8) eight, to follow constantly the teachings of the buddhas 常隨佛學; (9) ninth, to adapt [one's behavior to the needs] of sentient beings 恒順眾生; (10) tenth, to dedicate [all of one's] merit [to others] 普皆迴向.[16]

These are all aspirations that can be understood as advising a course of action that most human beings could contemplate as goals within the reach of mere mortals. However, it is difficult to imagine that the course of action contemplated is predominantly ethical. Vows 1-3, 6-7 and 10 refer to well known ritual practices. The eighth vow can be understood perhaps as including ethical teachings, but one wonders whether in the present context it does not refer to a confession of faith, more than to any particular form of moral action. The fourth vow is, of course, part of the traditional Mahāyāna ritual —but, I would nonetheless concede that here ritual begins to overlap with moral reflection. However, it is only in the ninth vow that we find the grounds for ethical reflection.

This ethical bent is especially clear in the prose explanation of this ninth vow, which reads, as follows (845c24-846a28):

> Moreover, Sudhana, when one speaks of adapting [oneself to the needs] of sentient beings, the meaning is that [one will do so with respect to] the many different kinds of sentient beings that exist in the oceans of fields in empty space in the ten direction of the universe, to the end of the Dharmadhātu. They may be born from an egg, or from a womb, from hot and humid places, or miraculously born, and depend for their sustenance on earth, water, fire, or wind; they may live in empty space, or among the plants and the trees, including all kinds of species or races, of diverse types of bodies, distinct in color, shape and appearance, . . . They may differ in the depth of their understanding and in their points of view and opinions, in their desires and joys, their thoughts and their conduct, and in their customs, their manner of dress and in their eating habits.
>
> There are beings who inhabit diverse types of villages, towns, cities and places of residence, and there are also gods, nāgas, . . . and there are also humans and non-humans. Some, lacking extremities, crawl, whereas others walk on two feet, or on four feet, and others on many more feet. Some have a bodily form, whereas others are incorporeal; some are fully conscious, others unconscious, some have a minimal degree of consciousness, others are not totally unconscious.

[16] Lit. «general dedication» [of merit]. One should note that in "vows" 5 and 10 one would be hard pressed to distinguish ritual from ethics —but this is a topic for another occasion, important as it obviously is.

And I intend to adapt myself to them, to care for this great diversity of living things, providing them with all kinds of attentive care, service, goods and benefits. I will treat them all with the same respect I show towards my parents, my teachers, my elders, and to the arhats, and even the same respect I show to the buddhas. I will render service to them all, making no distinction among them.

I will be a physician and a nurse towards those who are sick or incapacitated. I will show the way to those who are lost. I will be a shining beacon for those who have gone astray in a dark night. And I will lead the poor and the destitute to a place where they may discover abundant treasures.

This is the way a bodhisattva benefits all sentient beings with impartiality.

And why does he act in this way? If the bodhisattva adapts him or herself to sentient beings, he is behaving in accordance and in harmony with all the buddhas; and in this way in fact the bodhisattva presents his offerings to the buddhas. If the bodhisattva pays homage to and serves sentient beings, he pays homage and serves the tathāgatas. And if the bodhisattva brings joy and happiness to sentient beings, he brings joy and happiness to the tathāgatas.

And why? Because all the tathāgatas adopt the mind and heart of great compassion, regarding it with the utmost respect 諸佛如來以大悲心而為體故. Their great compassion grows thanks to sentient beings. From great compassion is born the thought of awakening, and it is through this thought of awakening that they reach the highest, perfect, complete awakening.

It is like a king of all trees which, even when it grows in a rocky and sandy wasteland, will grow roots that reach down and absorb water, so that its branches, its leaves and fruits will prosper. It is the same with this king among the trees that grows in the wasteland of birth and death.[17] All sentient beings are its roots, the buddhas and the bodhisattvas are its flowers and fruits. If we bestow upon all sentient beings the benefit of the water of our great compassion, we will nourish the flowers and the fruits which are the wisdom 智慧 of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Why? Because when they benefit sentient beings with the water of great compassion, bodhisattvas reach the highest, perfect and complete awakening. This is why it is sentient beings who have possession of awakening: without sentient beings, bodhisattvas would not be able to reach the highest, perfect and complete awakening.

Sudhana, you should therefore understand that only when your thoughts are impartially equal with regards to all sentient beings will you practice great compassion in its fullness and perfection. By means of this thought of great compassion that adapts itself to all sentient beings and is in harmony with their needs you will be able to present the most perfect offering, the offering of Dharma, to all buddhas.

This is why a bodhisattva adapts himself to all sentient being and lives in harmony with them. (…)

This passage is surprisingly reminiscent of scholastic explanations of the bodhisattva's compassion as the ground for awakening (via the thought of awakening). An idea succinctly formulated in the *śāstras* —from *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* to Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanākramas*. Furthermore, the idea of the interdependence between sentient beings as the ground for compassion and, therefore, as the ground for awakening, is developed in the passage just quoted in ways that remind us of Śāntideva's ingenious

[17] The tree stands here for the totality of the salvific process, integrating, as it were, all the players into a single organism.

arguments positing a dignity for sentient beings equal to the dignity of buddhas —arguments he develops in connections with patience (*Bodhicaryāvatāra* VI.112-123). There too, the dignity of common sentient beings is guaranteed by the mere fact that they are the objects of the love buddhas feel equally towards all sentient beings.

Having pointed to this passage, and reminding the reader that what is to follow in this paper is not meant to render insignificant this dimensions of Buddhist religious life, I can now begin to present my arguments for a different view of the position of the bodhisattva in the Buddhist imaginary.

The ethical interpretation is not the only way one can read the passage, and it is the one meaning that tends to fade away in everything that preceded it in Prajña's version, and, of course, in the *Bhadracarī* itself, where the text focuses once more on what we may call, for lack of a better word, myth and ritual: the grand vision of the powers and cosmic actions of the bodhisattva, enacted in the text's narrative.

A Preliminary Conclusion

Furthermore, the ethical theme is barely noticeable in other versions of this last chapter of the *Gv* —those found in the earlier Chinese translations of the chapter. In fact, there is no equivalent to Prajña's prose discussion of these "Ten Vows" in any of these earlier versions, or, for that matter in the extant Sanskrit version. I should also note that the prose introduction to Sudhana's encounter with Samantabhadra, which *precedes* the Ten Vows in Prajña's version, is not substantially different from the corresponding sections in the earlier Chinese translations of Buddhabhadra and Śikṣānanda (the section that introduces their own version of Samantabhadra's verse conclusion to the sūtra). Except for Prajña's "Ten Vows" the Chinese versions are not significantly different from the prose that precedes and introduces the *Bhadracarī* in its Sanskrit version. Other than the "Ten Vows" the crucial difference is in the concluding verses, to which we now must turn our attention.

The ending verses in the earlier versions of the *Sūtra* represent a stage in the history of *Gv* and *Av* when the *Bhadracarī* as we know it had not replaced an earlier ending. In these older versions we may find elements of an ethical ideal (and of the ritual elements of the *Bhadracarī*), but above all they ask us to come to terms with another conception of the bodhisattvas and a different conception of their universe (or, at least, a different aspect of the imaginal universe they inhabit in many Mahāyāna *sūtras*).

The early history of the final section of the *Gv* can be divined from major differences among the Chinese versions. The two older translations, those of Buddhabhadra (henceforth abbreviated as *Bubhd*) and Śikṣānanda (henceforth abbreviated as *Śikṣān*), contrast significantly with the newer version found in Prajña's translation. But the two older versions also contrast with two independent versions of the *Bhadracarī* preserved in the *Taishō Daizōkyō*, the first one titled "The Vows of Mañjuśrī," 文殊師利發願經 (*Taishō* X, 296, the translation of which is attributed to no one else but Buddhabhadra himself!!), the second one attributed to Bùkōng 不空, Amoghavajra (*Taishō* (*X.297*), and bearing a title that clearly reflects the Indian title of *Samantabhadracaryā-praṇidhāna*-[*gāthā*] 普賢菩薩行願讚.[18]

[18] Regarding the implied attribution of the vows to Mañjuśrī in Taishō 296, I am not sure of the actual direction of change, influence or contamination, for there is a certain degree of confusion or conflation of roles in all of these texts as to the relative

For expediency's sake, I will focus my remarks primarily on a comparison between *Bubhd* and the redaction preserved in Prajña's translation, and to a lesser extent on the version in the extant Sanskrit text of *Gv*.[19] The other two late versions correspond in all essential points with the later stratum represented by Prajña,[20] And *Śikṣān* does not differ radically from *Bubhd*.

However, the first point of note is that even in the *gāthās* in Prajña's translation the dominant element is by no means ethical. Of the 62 stanzas in that version,[21] only 4 can be regarded as expressing explicit ethical injunctions (this is is of course an approximate calculation, since some *gāthās* have mixed messages or are not clearly leaning one way or the other), of the remaining stanzas, 11 have a clear ritual message (essentially a description of the *saptavidhā anuttarā pujā*), and 27 stanzas refer to what I consider the most important thematic component of the *Gv*, the theme that ties it clearly to the rest of the *Av*: the miraculous liberating effect (the *vimokṣa*) of the virtues and wisdom of buddhas and bodhisattvas —that is, their capacity to effect change in sentient beings and their universe by the mere presence of the bodhisattva's awesome power. These 27 stanzas include 9 that refer or allude to Amitābha and his purified buddha-field.[22]

The remaining 20 stanzas are in a category that I call, for lack of a better word, «mixed» —these are stanzas not fitting in any of the above categories or expressing messages that (giving traditional interpretations the benefit of the doubt) could be interpreted as either ritual or ethical (e.g., dedication of merit), or stanzas praising Samantabhadra or Mañjuśrī.[23]

In other words, the *gāthās* can hardly be taken as expressions of the interpretation we have just quoted from the introductory prose. This is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the 62 stanzas that constitute the *Bhadracarī* in the Sanskrit version of the *Gv*.

The point is further highlighted when we consider the *gāthā's* in *Bubhd* (I remind the reader that in this version there is no equivalent to Prajña's "Ten Vows").

The *gāthās* in *Bubhd*, differ significantly from those in Prajña's translation (which, as already noted, are essentially identical with those in *Gv*). The passage in fact serves a very different function and

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importance of these two bodhisattvas.

[19] *Śikṣān* differs from *Bubhd* in interesting ways but mostly at the level of phrasing, the general purport of this section is essentially the same in both versions.

[20] One should note, however, two important points in need of clarification. First, if *Taishō* 296 is the work of Buddhabhadra, then its existence shows that the *Bhadracarī* in a form close to the one we now know existed independently and contemporaneously with the earlier ending of the *Av*, and *Gv*. Second, Amoghavajra's version is longer (62 stanzas), yet contains rough equivalents to all the stanzas of the *Bhadracarī*. The additional stanzas elaborate the theme of the *Bhadracarī* as a means to reach the Pure Land. Additionally, it includes a supplemental ritual passage of 20 stanzas, labeled as a separate text, titled 八大菩薩讚. As the title shows, this is a *stotra* to the Eight Great Bodhisattvas (assuming that 讚 is not a less common translation of *gāthā*). This places Samantabhadra in yet another mythical and ritual context.

[21] Needless to say, Prajña's version is essentially the same as the mixed Sanskrit version of the *Gv* —a point that I will not belabor in what follows.

[22] Amitābha also figures prominently in the conclusion to the "Ten Vows."

[23] Within the verses themselves the relative role of these bodhisattvas is not transparent. This is true in all version of the *Bhadracarī* under consideration in this paper: the Sanskrit, in Prajña, in Buddhabhadra's independent translation (titled, as already noted, The Vows of Mañjuśrī), and in Amoghavajra's translation.

contains no parallels to the verses in Prajña's text. None of the 99 (!!) stanzas in *Bubhd* can be regarded as suggesting any kind of ethical injunction, and none allude to the liturgy of the vow of the bodhisattva. The theme of the bodhisattva's miraculous powers pervades the poem, with, approximately 29 stanzas focusing primarily on the power to perceive all buddhas in their buddha-fields or the power to project one's salvific activity into other worlds {theme A}. These are described mostly as effects of the vows and conduct of Samantabhadra, yet approximately another 21 stanzas directly or indirectly link these powers to the virtue and vows of Samantabhadra himself {theme B} (this estimate involves, of course, much guess work, due to the scant use of personal pronouns in the Chinese text). Roughly 40 stanzas {theme C} are devoted to the theme of the transcendent or preternatural character of the bodhisattva's accomplishments, mostly as they reflect the nature of reality itself —all things being, after all, mere magical creations. And 7 stanzas {theme D} refer explicitly to the work of buddhas who are identified by name and apparently presented as examples of the buddhas of the universe without any preference or ranking.

I was at a loss as to how to classify 2 stanzas, and many of the above classifications exaggerate thematic differences, for, in my view many stanzas refer to more than one of these themes, mixing some of the themes that I have tried to separate somewhat artificially.

I would argue that the underlying dominant theme in this poem is the miraculous liberating effect (the *vimokṣa*) of the virtues and wisdom of buddhas and bodhisattvas as embodied specifically in Samantabhadra. This theme, parenthetically, allows for a seamless connection to Sudhana's pilgrimage and to much of what occurs elsewhere in *Av*. Eventually, but not in the early stages of our text, this theme would also allow a shift from the world view of the *Av* to the world view of Pure Land thought:[24] the merit of the buddhas is powerful, inherently powerful, powerful by itself, without the need for any special effort on the part of sentient beings. But we shall return to this presently.

Let me first highlight some important elements in Buddhabhadra's conclusion to the last chapter of *Av*, that is to the *sūtra* that the Chinese tradition has called, appropriately, "Entry into the *Dharmadhātu*."

The poem is introduced as a clarification to the preceding prose passage. That prose passage, linking Sudhana's visit to Maitreya through an intervening meeting with Mañjuśrī, is in many ways close to the extant Sanskrit text; but it runs a bit more smoothly, leading logically and seamlessly from, at one end, the vision of Maitreya's "tower" (more appropriately, his "storied mansion," *lóu*, 樓 = 嚴淨藏大樓觀 = *Vairocana-vyūhālaṃkāragarbha-mahākūṭāgāra*), representing the Dharmadhātu as the locus of the bodhisattva's practice, power and wisdom, and, simultaneously, all of reality when properly perceived for what it is, to, at the other end, its concluding end, the actual practice of one bodhisattva, Samantabhadra, who embodies the aspirations that Sudhana will now take in earnest.

This setting already tells us something about the nature of the vow, as well as about what a bodhisattva is in the conception of this text. The imaginal world embodied in this conception can be outlined by quoting some of the most relevant phrases of the prose introduction to Sudhana's encounter with Samantabhadra:

[24] I do not wish to imply that the *Bhadracarī* can be shown to precede, chronologically, "Pure Land thought" in the more restricted sense of the cultus of Amitābha and the hope for rebirth in Sukhāvatī.

Guided by Mañjuśrī, who instructs him to visit Samantabhadra, Sudhana approaches the place where this bodhisattva resides. There (784a9-15),

> through the power of his own roots of virtue, assisted by the majestic power of the buddhas, and moved by the power of all of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra's roots of virtue, [Sudhana] perceived ten auspicious signs [of what was to come].[25] Which ten? These ten:
>
> 1. He saw in every *purified field* the fully adorned Tree of Awakening.
> 2. He saw that there were no evil ways of rebirth in those *buddha-field*s.
> 3. He saw that every *purified field* was like a lotus flower.
> 4. He saw that in every one of those *buddha-fields* the body and mind of sentient beings had become gentle and pliable.
> 5. He saw that all those fields were adorned with countless splendid ornaments.
> 6. He saw that all the sentient beings in those buddha-fields bore upon their bodies the thirty-two major marks.
> 7. He saw that all those buddha-fields were covered by clouds of splendid ornaments.
> 8. He saw that all the sentient beings in those buddha-fields had mastered the mind and heart of benevolence 慈心.
> 9. He saw in every purified field the fully adorned seat of awakening 道場.
> 10. He saw that all the sentient beings in those buddha-fields practiced and cultivated perfectly the *samādhi* of recollecting the buddhas 修習念佛三昧.[26]

Three details are significant. First, the purified buddha-fields represent a consistent and obligatory backdrop, but they are not associated with any buddha in particular. Second, buddha-fields do not seem to be rare places, they are constitutive of the imaginal universe of the text, standing out as an ubiquitous feature of this universe. Third, these signs of the proximity of Samantabhadra suggest one important aspect in the mythology of purified buddha-fields: their visionary and thaumaturgic dimensions —bodhisattvas reveal them or, literally, can play with and among them, and in doing so they manifest what is arguably the most important aspect of their vow. What is more, this cosmic wonder is not only a manifestation of the power of bodhisattvas, it seems to be one of the (if not *the*) most characteristic activities of bodhisattvas.

We are reminded of the context for this vision: the cosmic powers of the bodhisattva and the cosmic vision that is the backdrop for most of the *Av*. This is the theme of the passage that follows immediately after the one quoted above —visions of light announce the approaching bodhisattva (784a16-b2):

> Furthermore, Sudhana saw ten different luminous portents:
>
> 1. Emanating from every single minute particle of dust in all of the *Dharmadhātu* he could see clouds woven with the rays of light shed by all the tathāgatas.
> 2. And, emanating from every single minute particle of dust in all of the *Dharmadhātu* he could see orbs of many colored light completely illuminating the *Dharmadhātu*, down to the

[25] One should note, parenthetically, the importance of sharing karmic roots, of merit transference, a theme that is evidently an important part of the "mythical logic" of Pure Land belief. It is also, as noted above, one of those points where ritual and ethics meet.

[26] I have added italics to highlight the central importance of the theme of multiple buddha-fields.

minutest particles of dust in every world in the universe.

3. Emanating from every minute particle of dust he saw the light of many clouds of precious substances, completely illuminating every minute particle of dust in all the worlds in the *Dharmadhātu*.
4. Emanating from every minute particle of dust he saw clouds of orbs of the tathāgatas' flaming light completely illuminating the *Dharmadhātu*.
5. Emanating from each minute particle of dust he saw all the clouds of incense completely pervading the *Dharmadhātu* with the joyous praise of the bodhisattva conduct of Samantabhadra in all the oceans containing all the virtues of the Great Vow.
6. Emanating from each minute particle of dust he saw the clouds of the light of all suns and moons, shedding the light of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, completely illuminating the *Dharmadhātu*.
7. Emanating from each minute particle of dust he saw the clouds of the bodies of all kinds of sentient beings, adorned with the major and the minor marks and shedding the light of a Buddha, completely illuminating the *Dharmadhātu*.
8. Emanating from each minute particle of dust he saw the clouds of the bodies of all the bodhisattvas, carrying out perfectly all the actions of bodhisattvas, filling completely the *Dharmadhātu*.
9. Emanating from each minute particle of dust he saw the clouds of the figure and image [of the buddhas], made of all the precious substances, filling completely the *Dharmadhātu* in all ten directions.
10. Emanating from each minute particle of dust he saw the clouds of the bodies of the tathāgatas, everywhere bringing down the rain of the ambrosia of all aspects of the Good dharma in every minute particles of dust in all the worlds, filling the *Dharmadhātu*.[27]

This passage highlights another important aspect of a bodhisattvas world: they live in, act within and act upon something called the Dharmadhātu —the cosmos as it really is in the eyes of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

These are themes elaborated many times in the *Gv* and in other parts of the *Av*. The fact that they are here signs of the approaching encounter with Samantabhadra is only a variant of trope seen in many previous encounters of Sudhana with his *kalyāṇa-mitras*. The portents are used as a way to hint at the characteristic activities and accomplishments of the bodhisattva.

The passage continues:

> When Sudhana had seen these ten portents, he thought: "For sure I will see Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. [The fruits of] my roots of virtue have matured, I will be able to understand the sublime conduct of the bodhisattvas. I will see all the buddhas. Having seen Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, I will be able to understand wisely, and in one moment of thought I will be able to

[27] I have added italics to highlight the centrality of the Dharmadhātu, as I did in the previous passage with reference to the Pure Lands. Parenthetically, the parallel Sanskrit passage is, on the surface, slightly different, and much more prolix. But, if anything, it tilts the balance even more in favor of the interpretation I propose: that the vow in *Av* and *Gv* is mostly about vision and power, and only tangentially about ethical striving.

pay him homage, even as I seek to see Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.

Notice, then, what announces the apparition of Samantabhadra: the effects of his extraordinary powers. These portents are proof of his presence, hence the vision ensues immediately (784b2-10):

> Then, Sudhana at once saw Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, in the *vajragarbha bodhimaṇḍa* 金剛藏道場, seated before the Tathāgata, who himself sat on the *kusumatalagarbha siṃhāsana*,[28] surrounded by a large congregation, his mind like empty space, free from attachment to anything impure, free of impediments, purifying his buddha-field, and filling the ten directions with the Dharma, free of impediments, firmly established in wisdom, having entered into the Dharmadhātu.

Once more, notice the point of reference, or the backdrop: the apparition of miraculous phenomena in a miraculous universe, the Dharmadhātu —our universe as it would appear to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Over this universe, bodhisattvas and buddhas have a special power: the power to manifest and transform its many aspects, thereby revealing something about our world, and about their own power.

This Sudhana soon realizes, as he sees that (784b15-20)

> from every hair pore in Bodhisattva Samantabhadra's body, emanated as many rays of light as there are minute particles of dust in all the worlds in the universe, completely illuminating all the worlds in empty space and in the Dharmadhātu, dissolving all pain and suffering in all sentient beings, in every way fostering in them the roots of virtue of the bodhisattvas. From each hair pore issued as many clouds of flowers . . . as many clouds of perfumed trees as there are minute dust particles of dust in all worlds in the universe, producing all sorts of sweet smells that adorned the Dharmadhātu . . .

We need not quote further or belabor the point; but the repetition is significant and worth highlighting. for it appears to be a textual practice meant to create the canvas upon which the power and virtue of the bodhisattva is depicted, the canvas of imaginal worlds: the Dharmadhātu filled with worlds, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddha-fields.

6. How Many Vows of Samantabhadra?

At this point, I would like to examine cursorily the *gāthās* as they are found in the earlier versions of *Av*. As I already announced, they have very little in common with the *Bhadracarī*, representing a separate, distinct recension. Although both recensions share a common language, common doctrinal themes and some of their tropes, the Chinese translations of *Bubhd* and *Śikṣān* present a picture of the meaning of Samantabhadra's vows. Among other things, they do not contain much that we may consider ethical arguments or injunctions for proper behavior, nor do they outline the liturgy of the vow, nor do they privilege Mañjuśrī or Amitābha —as is the case in the *Bhadracarī*.

But what is more important the central theme in *Bubhd* and *Śikṣān* is pretty much the central theme

[28] We can safely assume that the Buddha is Vairocana.

of the *Gv*: the wonderworking powers of the bodhisattva in a world that can only be described as magical. We lack the space here to translate the complete passage, or to do a point by point comparison between *Bubhd* and *Śikṣān*, much less against the *Bhadracarī*. I will limit myself to highlighting some notable features using selected verses from Samantabhadra's *gāthās* at the end of *Bubhd*.

In explaining his vow (and the visions to which Sudhana has now gained access), Samantabhadra offers an interpretation of the groundlessness of emptiness that we find throughout *Gv*: its meaning is not ontological or metaphysical, rather it is an expression of the complete freedom of buddhas and bodhisattvas. It is what allows them to know individual beings (not generic beings), giving them the power to instruct and guide effectively. As stated in the verses,

(9) [786a22-23] The subtle *wisdom* of the buddhas is pure, like empty space;
although *their mind* understands the actions of all [sentient beings]
it dwells nowhere.[29]
(10) [786a24-25] In one instant of thought *it* understands completely all things
in the three times,
clearly knowing the capacity of every sentient being, *it* responds to them
and transforms *itself* accordingly 隨其所應化.
(11) [786a26-27] The afflictions in the minds of all sentient beings, their actions,
good and bad,
it will easily understand, in order to instruct them in the True Dharma. . . .

These powers of the buddhas are precisely the powers to which one gains access through the vow. Samantabhadra himself is able to see and understand the buddhas and their powers, in fact, as repeated so many times throughout the *Gv*, the bodhisattva is able to see the activity of all other buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout time, and in all parts of the universe:

(13) [786b1-2] [I][30] can see the first arising of the aspiration to awakening,
which leaves delusions far behind,
and the cultivation of the practice of the bodhisattvas, lasting for
countless numberless kalpas.[31]
(13ab) [786b3] And I can hear the sweet voice of the Victors, as they fully
expound the Dharma . . .

Notice that particular buddhas and buddha-fields are not privileged, they are all instances of the

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[29] Needless to say, emphasis is the translator's. The subject in these stanzas is, I assume, the mind of the Buddhas, although other interpretations are possible. The expression in the original, 其心無所著, is reminiscent of the famous line from Kumārajīva's translation of the *Vajracchedikā*: 應無所住而生其心 (*Taishō, VIII*, 235, 749c23).

[30] In the *gāthās*, the pronoun *wǒ* 我 appears only in stanza 29 of *Bubhd*; and in stanzas 21 and 61 of *Śikṣān*. My use of the pronouns is therefore interpretive, based on the fact that it is Samantabhadra speaking about his vow and its effects. In most stanzas, one could easily translate impersonally (e.g., "one can see"), which would be more neutral, but not necessarily the best English rendering. Perhaps a compromise would be the impersonal or universal "you": "you [(Sudhana/or the receptor audience of the text/ as well as Samantabhadra) can] see."

[31] I take it to mean that he and Sudhana can see the full panorama of the career and activities of buddhas and bodhisattvas, a common theme in *Av* and especially central to the *Maitreya-vimokṣa*.

same phenomenon. As the verses describe the vision of these buddhas and their fields, one can see that they are presented *on the same plane*, without a clear hierarchy among them:

(16) [786b7-8] And [I] can see Vairocana 盧舍那, as he, during countless
numberless kalpas
adorns and purifies his own world, and in the end attains the highest,
most perfect awakening.
(17) [786b9-10] And [I] can see the Buddha Bhadraśrī 賢首佛,
with Samantabhadra the Great Bodhisattva 普賢大菩薩,
bringing to perfection and filling with lotus flowers their sublime buddha-field
of splendid qualities.[32]
(18) [786b11-12] And [I] can see Amita 阿彌陀,
with *Avalokitasvara* 觀世音 the Bodhisattva,
as he receives the consecration and the prediction,
filling all the worlds in the ten directions.[33]
(19) [786b13-14] And [I] can see the Buddha Akṣobhya 阿閦佛, with
Gandhahastin the Great Bodhisattva 香象大菩薩,
as they completely pervaded their pure adorned buddha field
Abhirati 妙樂嚴淨刹.[34]
(20) [786b15] And [I] can see the Buddha Candramati 月慧佛,[35] with
Vajradhvaja the Great Bodhisattva 金幢大菩薩,
as they completely pervaded their splendid pure buddha-field,
called Radiant Clear Mirror 明淨鏡妙刹.
(21) [786b17-18] And [I] can see the Buddha Sūryagarbha 日藏佛,
with Prajñābhiṣeka the Great Bodhisattva 智灌大菩薩,
as they completely pervaded their pure buddha-field,
called Radiant 清淨光明刹. . . .

It is impossible to know the extent to which all of these buddhas were individual or particular objects of worship when this poem was composed. I assume that some of them probably were —consider, at least, the obvious, Amita, Akṣobhya, Avalokiteśvara.[36] What seems to me clear is that

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[32] Elsewhere in the *Gv* and the *Av*, Bhadraśrī's field is said to be in the East, but there is no hint of this here, or in the corresponding stanza in *Śikṣān* (stanza 9, 443a1-2). It is not clear to me if the last phrase describes or names their buddha-field.

[33] Correcting the last half verse in *Bubhd* (充滿諸法界) in light of *Śikṣān* (stanza 10, 443a3-4): 或有見佛無量壽 / 觀自在等所圍遶 // 悉已住於灌頂地 / 充滿十方諸世界 // Notice that the Buddha called Amita, 阿彌陀, in *Bubhd* is called in *Śikṣān* Amitāyus 無量壽, and the Bodhisattva's name has already changed to Avalokiteśvara 觀自在. Parenthetically, Buddhabhadra's independent translation of the Bhadracarī also reads 阿彌陀, but Amoghavajra has 無量光 —all of which probably reflects the ambiguity of older prakritic forms.

[34] The pairs of buddhas and bodhisattvas that follow are not attested elsewhere in *Gv*, although they are mentioned, with some interesting variations, in the corresponding section in *Śikṣān*.

[35] Perhaps, "Candrabodhi" or "Candrabuddhi," judging from *Śikṣān* 443a7, 月覺.

[36] A few stanzas further down Samantabhadra again mentions the buddhas he sees, mentioning two buddhas by name, Vairocana [786b28] and Śākyamuni [786c5], but it is not clear to me that this other passage is meant to be connected in any way with the one quoted above. It reads (stanzas 26-29, 786b27c5): 或淨或垢穢 / 諸行業所起 // 或見盧舍那 / 於彼轉法輪 // 顯現自在力 / 方便入涅槃 //

—whether or not this passage is appealing to the beliefs of particular communities dedicated to the cultus of one or more of these buddhas— there was a belief that the bodhisattva would be able to perceive buddhas everywhere, buddha-fields everywhere, thereby gaining access to the highest and most potent virtues of awakening (perhaps awakening is becoming that, and only that vision) from all buddhas and bodhisattvas.

As the poem has Samantabhadra state immediately after the last stanzas,

(22) [786b19-20] . . . [I] can / could see all the buddhas in the worlds in the ten
directions shedding a brilliant light
that made the wheel of Dharma turn for all sentient beings,
dispelling the darkness of their delusions.
(23) [786b21-22] And [I] see / saw in each of their hair pores, buddha fields
beyond description,
with the splendid bodies of their buddhas, surrounded by assemblies of
the Sons of the Buddhas. . . .
(25) [786b25-26] During numberless millions of kalpas, [I] have cultivated
the practice of the bodhisattvas,
and in each particle of dust [I] can see clearly countless buddha-fields.

Note how the religious imagination expressed in the *Sūtra* places the buddha-fields everywhere and within each and every particle of dust. Metaphoric readings of this notion abound, but I wonder to what extent the symbolic reading is only possible against the backdrop of *a literal acceptance* of these notions —or rather, against the backdrop of these depictions of the cosmos, or cosmic vistas.

I believe it unlikely that a symbolic understanding was the only way these passages were read in the communities that produced these *sūtras*. But, even if it were, one must begin with a grasp of the literal meaning and the concrete image. The cosmic vista of a *sūtra* is, after all, the world in which a bodhisattva inhabits, and in that sense it defines the semantic field of words such as bodhisattva and purified field. In a non-metaphoric sense these imaginal worlds set one crucial parameter for the range of meaning of many important doctrinal concepts. Within these fields, the believer most likely navigated between the general and the specific, the abstract and the concrete, between a single unifying theme or image and a plurality of images.

An example of how these vistas are extended to include the figure of the bodhisattva as extraordinary being (a concrete belief that I doubt was ever understood as merely symbolic in ancient India) perhaps will drive the point home more clearly. Samantabhadra describes his own person as actually sharing in the vastness and the preternatural order expressed in the cosmic narrative. He can experience and manifest the panorama in which buddhahood is achieved and manifested:

(46) [787a9-10] And [I] have seen a light illuminating the Dharmadhātu,
illuminating all the buddha-fields,
[buddhas] manifesting a lifespan of a hundred years, or up to a hundred

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觀察眾生類 / 一切業煩惱 // 顯現自在力 / 化之令解脫 // 如是諸法王 / 十方世界中 // 顯現自在力 / 我今說少分 // 或見釋迦文 / 初成等正覺 //

million billion years,[37]

(47) [787a11-12] for numberless trillions of inconceivable kalpas,
with insight pure and unobstructed, knowing in one instant of thought
[all] the three times.

(48) [787a13-14] Understanding this according to conditioned arising, knowing
that in reality it all lacks any self nature,
in each buddha-field [they] achieve perfect awakening, and manifest it
completely in all worlds in the universe.[38]

(49) [787a15-16] [They] can appear in one [single] world, yet, [they] generate
countless buddha-fields;
manifesting these countless buddha-fields, they turn them into
one single world.[39]

One has to wonder if it is not implied here that Samantabhadra, with all his powers, while being part of conditioned arising, participates in this awakening "in each buddha-field," as he manifests this awakening "in all worlds in the universe." Hence his capacity to manifest more than one field, and to manifest them all in a single world is simultaneously an expression of awakening, of the power of awakening, and of Samantabhadra's saving powers. In fact, at this juncture *Śikṣān* speaks of the awakening of sentient beings in the pure buddha-fields (443c11-12):

(*Śikṣān* 43) [They] reach perfect awakening in one buddha-field, and they likewise
reach [awakening] in all buddha-fields;
they enter each and everyone of them, manifesting [awakening] in them all,
according to the [capacities of each and every] sentient being.[40]

There is no clear dividing line between miraculous apparitions, visions, vistas, and awakening itself.

This does not mean that the *Sūtra*'s imagery cannot be understood as a metaphor for more abstract principles. The doctrinal, or, if you will philosophical, understanding of the imaginal world constructed in the *Sūtra* is in some ways implied (or at least, it is not excluded by the doctrinal rhetoric underlying much of the technical language and allusions in the text). But, the empty nature of these many worlds is the reverse side of the miraculous backdrop: the Dharmadhātu is the ground that is not a ground, emptiness itself, but it is the concreteness of all things as they exist in emptiness.

And this concreteness is still an imaginal world populated by extraordinary worlds and extraordinary saviors. The world of images is the expression or embodiment of a buddha's awakened vision. As stated in *Bubhd*:

(84) [787c27-28] Like skillful master wonder-workers
who create many things by dint of their magic:

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[37] I translate this stanza in part in light of *Śikṣān's* parallel (443c7-8): 或見佛壽八十年 / 或壽百千萬億歲 // 或住不可思議劫 / 如是展轉倍過此 //

[38] *Śikṣān*'s parallel seems to say something very different (443c10-11): 皆從心識因緣起 / 生滅無常無自性 // 於一剎中成正覺 / 一切剎處悉亦成 // At any rate, I assume that here the stanzas describe the activity and experience of buddhas, not of Samantabhadra.

[39] This is an ambiguous stanza that can be translated in several ways: 能現一世界 / 而作無量剎 // 示現無量剎 / 而為一世界 // *Śikṣān* is different in important ways: (443c12-13): 一切入一一亦爾 / 隨衆生心皆示現 // 如來住於無上道 / 成就十力四無畏 //

[40] 443c11-12: 於一剎中成正覺 / 一切剎處悉亦成 // 一切入一一亦爾 / 隨眾生心皆示現 //

in order to transform sentient beings,
the buddhas manifest many bodies.

This is not only magic "as illusion" but magic "as power," the power to be free and inalterable, yet transform the world. In this imaginal world, bodhisattvas are free and inalterable, yet engaged and adaptable:

(85) [787c29-788a1] Like the moon traversing the empty sky: we see it
wax and wane,
it is reflected in streams and ponds, yet even its reflection outshines
the light of the firefly.
(86) [788a02-3] The pure orb of the moon of the Tathāgata's wisdom appears
to wax and wane,
and it is seen directly on the water of the mind, but even this reflection
eclipses the light of the two vehicles.[41] . . .

The metaphor of the bodhisattva as magician has been noted before, but this is not the main thrust of these verses. As can be seen from the second and the third stanza in this passage, the point is that even the faintest glimpse of buddhahood contains all of buddhahood, and that buddhahood is somehow present in its (only apparently) illusory reflections.

Here I want to underscore the literary and religious importance of what, on the surface, seems to be poetical hyperbole, that is, the importance of this grandeur of vision. For this empty world is also a world of many marvels. And the sweeping vista of this world, the Dharmadhātu, is perhaps the most important accomplishment of the bodhisattvas in the *Gv*. It is the vista of the *Av*, which I take to be an attempt at depicting, rather than explaining, the paradox of sameness in emptiness, allowing for a recognition of the equality of all sentient beings in their unique particularity.

This point is implicit in the following simile for the imaginal world of the Dharmadhātu:

(87) [788a4-5] It is like the great and deep ocean, filled with inexhaustible,
rare treasures,
for in it appear sentient beings of many different
physical appearances.
(88) [788a6-7] In the deep ocean of cause and effect, the treasures of merit
are inexhaustible:
in the pure Dharmakāya, it is not only the formless
that is manifested.[42]
(89) [788a8-9] It is like the pure shining orb of the sun, shedding light on

[41] A comparison with *Śikṣān* may be useful (444c2-5): 譬如淨月在虛空 / 令世眾生見增減 // 一切河池現影像 / 所有星宿奪光色 // 如來智月出世間 / 亦以方便示增減 / 菩薩心水現其影 / 聲聞星宿無光色 // Unfortunately, without an original, it is not possible to know which of the two translations is interpretive and which is trying to be literal, or if they simply reflect different originals.

[42] The parallel in *Śikṣān* is phrased significantly different, and the meaning of the stanza seems to me more transparent, signaling a blurring of the distinction between the body of the Buddha (the person of the buddhas?), their merit, the Dharmadhātu, and the sentient beings who have access to the vision of the Dharmadhātu —(44c8-9) 佛身功德海亦爾 / 無垢無濁無邊際 // 乃至法界諸眾生 / 靡不於中現其影 //

the darkness of the world:
the pure sun of the Tathāgata's wisdom, dissolves darkness
everywhere in the three worlds . . .
(90) [788a10-11] Like the nāgas raise bountiful clouds, bringing rain to
all things everywhere —
their bodies and minds, without losing any of their own humidity,
extinguish heat and bring refreshing coolness—
(91) [788a12-13] the Tathāgata likewise raises the clouds of great compassion,
bringing down the rain of ambrosial dharma everywhere,
extinguishing the fire of the three poisons.[43] . . .

This vista of a world of many worlds, of many buddhas and many buddha-fields, of a world that is not the world we (in our day and age) consider the natural world, seems to have served as a spring-board for various belief systems. These systems, with the passing of time (or perhaps even at its time of origin) became competing systems. But the prestige and influence of the basic model cannot be denied.

By Way of a Conclusion

I hypothesize that at some point in the history of the *Gv*, and perhaps the *Av*, the prestige of the text was such, that some Buddhists felt something could be gained by inserting the *Bhadracarī* as a new ending to the *Sūtra*. This allowed, in the first place, to legitimize Mahāyāna ritual, and perhaps the ritual use of parts of the *Sūtra*. Subsequently, it also allowed for a cross legitimation between the prestige of the *Sūtra* and belief in a particular pure buddha-field and its presiding buddha: Sukhāvatī and Amitābha Buddha —a process the final stages of which are preserved in the extant Sanskrit and in Prajña's version.

Be that as it may, the conclusion of the *Av* in the versions of *Bubhd* and *Śikṣān* preserves a different stage in the development of the families of beliefs we now call, retrospectively, the Buddhism of the Pure Lands, or, in the singular, the Pure Land. The text in these early forms preserves a belief in generalized buddhahood, in which several bodhisattvas and buddhas compete for the attention of the believer, coexisting in manners reminiscent of similar phenomena in Indian religion.

But, repeating a point I have made before regarding the *Gv*,[44] the system contained in these texts is an example of *one important dimension* of religiosity in need of the attention of students of Buddhism —that is, Buddhism as a religion of narrative. I do not intend to say, of course, that it is exclusively or primarily "a religion of narrative." I only wish to call the attention of students of Buddhist sūtras, and of Buddhism generally, to the importance of narrative in Buddhist discourse and, by extension, in Buddhist belief and practice.

Furthermore, I do not speak about the importance of narrative in religious thought in the sense in

[43] In *Śikṣān,* the first of the two stanzas seems more clear (and richer) (444c12-13): 譬如龍王降大雨 / 不從身出及心出 / 而能霑洽悉周遍 / 滌除炎熱使清涼 // The second (444c14-15), however, seems to lose part of the sustained metaphor: 如來法雨亦復然 / 不從於佛身心出 // 而能開悟一切眾 / 普使滅除三毒火 //

[44] See my *JIABS* paper mentioned earlier in footnote 9.

which Christian theologians have advocated a "narrative theology."[45] In the first place, my statements in this paper are not meant as theological reflections (although I can see how they could be construed in that sense or used to further Buddhist "theology" or "constructive thought," if you prefer).[46] In the second place, what I call narrative, the "narrative of vistas," is different from the scriptural and biographic materials in use in Western theological reflection. Lastly, I would say that, despite obvious differences among the many exponents of narrative theology,[47] Western theologians privilege story as history or life event, whereas in the texts considered here the emphasis is in the creation of alternative world. If I understand what is most significant for Christian theologies of salvation, there is an implicit point of departure in the identification or overlap between *narrative* as story-telling and *history*, that is the actual history of revelation and salvation, or the actual lives of saints and paradigmatic figures. Stories become the enactment, if not the embodiment, of the progress of salvation.

In the Buddhist context under examination here, on the other hand, narrative and the literary imagination are the means by which believers are able to cross over from the trap of repeated birth and death to the freedom of the world as seen by buddhas and bodhisattvas —or, to use more technical Buddhist language, from the mundane into the supramundane world of the Dharmadhātu. This is the case, I argue at least in the *Gv* and the *Av*. At this point, I would be reluctant to generalize beyond this material.

Theoretically or as a heuristic device, we may say that the story of salvation and of liberation is a narrative means to liberation. It is analogous to the narrative construction of individual lives so thoroughly studied in Western fields like psychoanalysis or the study of autobiography. But it is in many respects different from the telling of individual lives. The telling itself is the miracle, and its power is in its setting beyond anything having to do with individual lives.[48]

Furthermore, we may distinguish the surface of the narrative, its meaning within the tradition (traditional ways of understanding the narrative), and our theoretical interpretation, which considers narrative vistas as a mode of thinking religiously (and here, perhaps, there is significant overlap with particular forms of North American narrative theology —but that is for christian theologians to judge).

I think our texts touch on a slightly different dimension, hinted at in Ronald L. Grimes critique of the uses of narrative for the study of religion, when he concludes:[49]

> And it occurs to me that most theological treatments of narrative fail to distinguish between reading (or hearing) and rereading (or hearing again). When we hear again, we are less likely to

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[45] Again, a term that is by no means univocal. It is also a term with a long history, starting even before the phrase "narrative theology" was invented. See, in addition to the articles referenced above in notes 9 and 15, Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 55.4 (1987), 687-717, and Julian Hartt, "Theological Investments in Story: Some Comments on Recent Developments and Some Proposals," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 52(1984), 117-130. Comstock and Grimes offer interesting typologies of North American narrative theology. I refer the reader to their descriptions for a better sense of how the present project differs from the narrative theology.

[46] I would welcome such reflections. I am just not ready, personally, to go in that direction at this point in my reflection.

[47] On different ways of doing narrative theology, see Ronald L. Grimes, "Of Words the Speaker, Of Deeds the Doer," *Journal of Religion*, 66 (1986), 1-17, and the article by Comstock referenced in note 45, above.

[48] More on this in my above-mentioned *JIABS* paper on miracles.

[49] See p. 16 in the article referenced above, note 47.

be sitting on the edge of our seats… A phenomenology of "narrative repetition" (Ricoeur's term) would take us much more decisively to the bridge between myth and ritual.

There is, in fact some of this bridging in the repetitive the narrative events in *Gv* and *Av* —and we can hypothesize, with an ethnohistoric leap, that these texts were in fact chanted and repeated, like so many other sūtras today, until "we are less likely to be sitting on the edge of our seats." Yet, that does not exclude an other probable use: the recitation and exposition in commentary and preaching of the basic myth and the telling of the narrative vistas. And I think both modalities —ritual repetition and expository retelling— can serve as a bridge between certain modes or genres of religiosity. But, narrative of this sort is something more than a bridge, it is an additional mode or genre.

Cognitive theorist have suggested two axes along which one may explain the spectrum of forms expressing the human drive towards religious belief, and our capacity to accept belief. Two particularly successful models, one formulated by Whitehouse (2000 and 2004),[50] the other by Sørensen (2005, 2007),[51] posit, *respectively*, a distinction (or, as I would prefer to call it, an axis) between 'arguments and icons," and a distinction between "magical interpretations" and "symbolic interpretations." I see in many Buddhist texts, and in the interface between these texts and Buddhist practices and interpretations, analogous sets of axes. However, these texts often they straddle a religious discourse or process that suggests to me yet another way of viewing our experience, explaining in part why we are naturally susceptible to have religious beliefs that bridge the ritual and the magical, the iconic and the discursive. This process I call, borrowing an idea from (Bruner),[52] the narrative construction of the world.

Furthermore, one should note that, applying his model to ritual, Sørensen distinguishes between two approaches or responses to ritual which he calls "magical *interpretation*" and "symbolic *interpretation*" (emphasis mine). Similarly to Lawson and McCauley,[53] Sørensen argues that, "being actions," rituals have functions: they are generally performed in order to change some aspect of the world. As such, rituals involve what Sørensen calls "magical agency." I am proposing here, first, to separate "narrative" from "symbolic" (or at least to subsume symbolic under narrative), and second, that narrative has an agency of its own, that narratives, particularly, in the form of what I call "vistas," have the effect of creating a concrete imaginal world, not a symbolic world, not an interpretation of the world, but a constructed world without which the symbolic and ritual functions would lack much of their force.

To place this in the context of our discourse about Buddhist texts, what I am saying is that texts such as the ones discussed in this paper can be understood as concrete descriptions of what believers regarded

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[50] Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, and *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004.

[51] Sørensen, "Charisma, Tradition and Ritual: A Cognitive Approach to Magical Agency," in Whitehouse and McCauley, eds., *Mind and Religion*, AltaMira Press, 2005 and *A Cognitive Theory of Magic*, AltaMira Press, 2007.

[52] E.g., Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, and *Acts of Meaning*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990. The "Afterword" to the first of these two volumes (pp. 151-160) is still one of the most concise, clear and level-headed defenses of the constructionist position. Despite the dates of these works, and all that has happened since then, his insights, and the foundation of his theorizing on solid empirical observation as a developmental psychologist, remain relevant today.

[53] E. T. Lawson & R. N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), and McCauley & Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).

as *the real world*, a world constructed through the discourse of the narrative or the depiction of a vista through a text. More specifically, symbolic and ritual, as well as ethical or normative uses of the basic concepts of buddha, bodhisattva, and buddha-field depend on a certain acceptance of the reality of the vision of the Dharmadhātu as the only or the true or the actual state of things. And, yet, at the same time, a certain awareness of the gap between this world and the world in which the believer lives is fundamental: this awareness makes narrative at the same time necessary and effective.

Our text shows yet one more example of the many meanings of the concept of the purified field and the inherently pure world. Both concepts can be expressed by a wide range of beliefs and narratives, whether it be through ritual as in Chinese Pure Land, through aspiration and personal surrender as in some Chinese and Japanese understandings of the hope of rebirth in a Pure Land, or, also doctrinally (insofar as these concepts generate theological arguments and debates), and, last, but not least, mythically, insofar as they represent preternatural realms that become real "imaginally" (as a construct that constitutes an alternative reality).

I have here argued that we must add to these evidently vital and valid forms of reading the sūtras a dimension that, for lack of a better word, I have called narrative vistas. Worlds can be constructed narratively in such a way that the believer begins to have a clear view, a vista (and, perhaps, a "vision") that, despite its apparent unnaturalness, constitutes a reality that become natural by virtue of narrative power —because it is in our own nature to live in narrative realities, and religion is not an exception to this rule.