

The Practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in the *Lotus Sūtra* and its Reception in China and Japan

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Introduction

CHAPTER 20 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, known as the “Bodhisattva Never Disparaging,” sets forth the concept and practice of showing utmost reverence for all human beings as future Buddhas. It is known in China and Japan as the practice of bowing of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. In the first section of this paper I will explain the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as portrayed in the *Lotus Sūtra*; in section two I will examine how this practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was received in China; and in section three I will touch on the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in Japan, as evinced chiefly in Keisei’s (慶政) Kamakura-period collection of Buddhist narrative tales, the *Kankyo no tomo* (閑居友) or A Friend to One who Dwells in Solitude.

THE PRACTICE OF BODHISATTVA NEVER DISPARAGING IN THE *LOTUS SŪTRA*

The idea of “Buddha Śākyamuni’s age-old existence,”¹ which stands as one of the core concepts of the *Lotus Sūtra*, is expounded in the 16th chapter on the Life Span of the Thus Come One. The Lifespan chapter preaches that the perspective from which Śākyamuni appears to have attained Buddhahood for the first time in this world was itself merely a provisional display. In truth he achieved Buddhahood countless eons ago. It goes on to say that his future life span will extend for twice the number of years that have passed from the time of his enlightenment countless eons ago up to his preaching of the Lifespan chapter. In short, it reveals that the life span of Śākyamuni Buddha is, in fact, eternal. Although he is endowed with eternal life, Śākyamuni Buddha announces that he will feign entry into final nirvāṇa as an expedient measure to encourage sentient beings to seek out the Buddha, who is so very difficult to meet, and diligently pursue the path to Buddhahood. The chapter, moreover, expounds the possibility of obtaining sight of the Buddha, such that Śākyamuni Buddha, having put on the expedient show of entering final nirvāṇa, will appear to persons of deep faith.

At the historical point in time when the *Lotus Sūtra* was established, Śākyamuni Buddha's entry into nirvāṇa at age 80 must have been an historical fact obvious to everyone. This would have made it exceedingly difficult to accept that Śākyamuni Buddha's life span was eternal. Consequently, the Lifespan chapter is followed by various chapters that speak of vast merits and benefits that will come to beings who manage to hear and accept this difficult notion of Śākyamuni Buddha's eternity.

For example, in chapter 17, titled "Distinctions in Benefits," 12 kinds of merit are described. Chapter 18, "The Benefits of Responding with Joy," promises vast merit to persons who rejoice when they hear the *Lotus Sūtra* after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha. Chapter 19, on the "Benefits of the Teacher of the Law," preaches that persons who accept and uphold the *Lotus Sūtra*, read it, recite it, explain and preach it, and transcribe it, will obtain purification of the six faculties. Chapter 20, on the "Bodhisattva Never Disparaging," comes immediately after these three chapters. Its narrative of the past life and deeds of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is offered as the concrete example of a person who obtained purification of the six faculties through faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The name "Bodhisattva Never Disparaging" (*chang bu qing* 常不輕) has the basic meaning of "never ridiculing or making light of another person." The name itself bears a close connection to the words that this bodhisattva habitually uttered to persons whom he met: "I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare disparage you." Interestingly, the name of this bodhisattva in the Sanskrit text of the *Lotus* is *Sadāparibhūta*, which literally means "always disparaged." Zhu Fahu (竺法護, Dharmarakṣa) rendered the chapter title as "Always Disparaged" (*chang bei qing man pin* 常被輕慢品), in keeping with the Sanskrit original. This translation is consistent with the basic thrust of the narrative, wherein the bodhisattva is treated with contempt by those around him. Kumārajīva, on the other hand, translated *Sadāparibhūta* as "Never Disparaging," based on the words "I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare disparage you." In so far as both the Sanskrit text and the Chinese translation offer the words "I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare disparage you" as a direct precedent for the name of this bodhisattva, the name "Never Disparaging" seems more properly suited to the context than that of "Always Disparaged." Perhaps this reflects a situation where efforts to show respect to all others were consistently greeted with cynicism and disparagement on the part of one's contemporaries—an experience that is all too common in our secular world.

Let me now briefly introduce the story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, drawing first on the translation of Kumārajīva, and then taking into account the differences between Kumārajīva's translation and the Sanskrit text.

During the period of the Counterfeit Dharma of the very first Buddha in the series of twenty thousand million Buddhas who bore the name King of Awesome Sound, monks of overbearing arrogance exercised great authority and power. At that time there was a bodhisattva monk by the name of Never Disparaging. Why was he so named? In the Kumārajīva's translation the following answer is given:

This monk, whatever persons he happened to meet, whether monks, nuns, laymen or laywomen, would bow in obeisance to all of them and speak words of praise, saying, "I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare disparage you. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood." This monk did not devote his time to reading or reciting the scriptures, but simply went about bowing to people. (T 9. 50c. Adapted from B. Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. p. 266)

The Sanskrit text reads as follows:

It was, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, because that Bodhisattva Mahāsattva was in the habit of exclaiming to every monk or nun, male or female lay devotee, while approaching them: I do not contemn you, worthies. You deserve no contempt, for you all observe the course of duty of Bodhisattvas and are to become Tathāgatas, &c. In this way, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, that Bodhisattva Mahāsattva, when a monk, did not teach nor study; the only thing he did was, whenever he descried from afar a monk or nun, a male or female lay devotee, to approach them and exclaim: I do not contemn you, sisters. You deserve no contempt, for you all observe the course of duty of Bodhisattvas and are to become Tathāgatas. (*The Saddharma-pundarika or The Lotus of the True Law*, translated by Jan Hendric Kern. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 21. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884, p. 356)

Here we note several major points of difference between Kumārajīva's translation and the Sanskrit text. To begin with, in the Sanskrit text Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's address to others adopts the negative expression "I do not contemn you," while Kumārajīva's translation adopts the more affirmative expression, "I have profound reverence for you." This discrepancy arises from differences in the rhetorical

practice of India and China. The second point of difference entails the use of the phrase “bow in obeisance” in the Kumārajīva’s translation, for which there is no equivalent phrase in the Sanskrit text. In the latter, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging merely utters the foregoing words, with no mention of bowing to beings in obeisance. As to the third point of difference, Kumārajīva’s translation simply states that, “This monk did not devote his time to reading or reciting the scriptures” (不專讀誦經典), whereas the Sanskrit text reads, “did not expound or recite.”²

Despite these differences between Kumārajīva’s translation and the Sanskrit text, the actions of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging express an attitude that attributes the utmost dignity to humankind, bespeaking the possibility that all human beings will, without fail, become Buddhas if they practice the bodhisattva way. In other words, it is a matter of respecting all human beings equally as future Buddhas. There is no concrete statement of prophecy that provides the specific names and lands of these future Buddhas. And yet, this practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging can nonetheless rightfully be called a bestowal of prophecy, in so far as it predicts their future attainment of Buddhahood.

However, certain persons became enraged over Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s bestowals of prophecy, since he had no visible power or authority to take such an action. As a rule, bestowals of prophecy are performed by a Buddha. Hence, their anger is not without justification. They maligned and cursed Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, saying:

This ignorant monk—where does he come from, presuming to declare that he does not disparage and bestowing on us a prediction that we will attain Buddhahood? We have no use for such vain and irresponsible predictions! (T 9. 50c, Translated by B. Watson, *ibid.*, p. 267)

They were utterly outraged that such a trivial, itinerant and, otherwise, unknown monk would have the impudence to bestow prophecies that a Buddha, alone, has the right to give. Some beat him with sticks and staves, while others pelted him with tiles and stones. But even as he fled he would take up his stance at a distance and continue to call out in a loud voice, “I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!” (Translated by B. Watson, *ibid.*, p. 267) Bodhisattva Never Disparaging kept up this practice for his entire life. When he was on the point of death he heard from the sky the verses of the *Lotus Sūtra* that had been previously preached by the Buddha King of Awesome Sound. He was able to retain them in their entirety, whereupon he immediately gained the merits of purification of the six sense

faculties. His life span was extended for two hundred tens of thousands of millions of nayutas of years, during which time he preached the *Lotus Sūtra* widely for people. Moreover, the point is made clearly [in the sūtra] that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was, in fact, Śākyamuni Buddha in a prior life.

According to this narrative, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice of bowing to others has no immediate connection to the *Lotus Sūtra*. For, in point of fact, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging hears the *Lotus Sūtra* for the first time when he is on the point of death. However, the concept of the "One Buddha Vehicle," namely, that all living beings can equally attain Buddhahood, is the idea most central to the *Lotus Sūtra*. When we imagine the situation at the time when the *Lotus Sūtra* was established, might we not infer that the practice of the early followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* entailed pronouncements of future Buddhahood akin to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's bestowals of prophecy? Could the cold response to the practice of the early followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* on the part of their contemporaries have also been like the description in the chapter on Bodhisattva Never Disparaging?

The Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–1282), or his later followers, categorically equated the 24 character proclamation of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging with the five characters in the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*. That is to say, the words of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging were understood to express the basic thought of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. This development might have stemmed from precisely the insight that the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was tantamount to faith in and practice of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself.³

When we see the matter in this way, the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging becomes something that gave living expression to the concept of the One Vehicle that is so central to the *Lotus Sūtra*, namely, the idea that all sentient beings can equally attain Buddhahood, by setting it to vivid dramatic form.

THE RECEPTION OF THE PRACTICE OF BODHISATTVA NEVER DISPARAGING IN CHINA

Among the various Chinese commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*, we do not find any expositions of significance applied to the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in Daosheng's 道生 *Miafa lianhua jing shu* 妙法蓮華經疏 or Fayun's 法雲 *Fahua yiji* 法華義記.⁴ However, in the *Lotus* commentaries of Zhiyi 智顓 (538–598) and Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), we find explanations that connect the bowing practice of Never

Disparaging with the notion of intrinsic Buddha nature. The commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* composed by Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523–592) no longer survives, but as a near contemporary of Zhiyi and Jizang, his explanation resembled theirs. Apart from them, it is possible for us to know the interpretations of Huisi 慧思 (515–577) and the master of the Three Stages teaching, Xinxing 信行 (540–594). Xinxing’s interpretation is of particular interest.

Huisi and the Bowing Practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging

Huisi was the teacher of Zhiyi. Having suffered persecution on several occasions, including efforts to poison him and starve him to death, he accordingly developed a unique concept of the mahāyāna notion of patience in the face of enmity (*renru* 忍辱, *kṣānti*). It amounted to committing oneself stubbornly to all out battle when confronted by evil persons. In other words, it was an altogether proactive concept of patience. His concept of patience is set forth in the *Fahua jing anlexing yi* 法華經安樂行義. However, in the opening lines of that same work we find the following:

The *Lotus Sūtra* is the teaching (lit., Dharma-gate) of sudden enlightenment of the Great Vehicle, whereby one awakens entirely on one’s own, without resorting to a teacher, and speedily attains Buddhahood. It is a teaching that, for people in all locations, is difficult to believe. Novice bodhisattvas who, in their quest for the Great Vehicle, wish to surpass all other bodhisattvas and quickly complete Buddha’s enlightenment must keep the precepts, bear [enmity] with patience, persevere vigorously, strive diligently to develop dhyāna concentration, and concentrate one’s effort on practice of the lotus samādhi. Looking upon each and every being as though it were a Buddha, you should join your palms and venerate it as though paying reverence to the Lord [Buddha himself]. You should also regard each and every being as a great bodhisattva and good spiritual friend.... [The practice of] looking upon each and every being as though it were a Buddha is as expounded in the Chapter on Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. (T 46. 697c–698a)

According to this citation, the idea of looking upon each and every being as though it were a Buddha is explicitly based on the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. This particular interpretation of Huisi is in full agreement with his explanation of the two words “marvelous Dharma” (*miaofa* 妙法) that occurs later in the text. To wit, Huisi reads the “Dharma” (*fa*) in “Marvelous Dharma” (*miaofa*) to mean “living beings,” and glosses the term “Marvelous” (*miao*) as “purification of the

six sense faculties.” By regarding beings as intrinsically endowed with purified faculties of the six senses and as Buddhas from the outset, Huisi brings to light a practical significance to the term “Marvelous Dharma.”⁵

Universal Veneration in the Three Stages Teaching

The Chinese master Xinxing established the Three Stages teaching in an effort to develop a new form of Buddhism that was suited to the age of the decline of Dharma (*mofa* 末法). So doing, he incorporated the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging into his own personal faith and practice. Three Stages teaching advocates an integrated set of practices involving “universal veneration of others” (*pujing* 普敬) and “recognition or admission of one’s own evil” (*ren’e* 認惡). However, in contrast to the practice of “recognizing evil,” which involves sternly criticizing the evil in oneself, “universal veneration” entails showing reverence for the good in all persons other than oneself. As we will show later, Jingying Huiyuan, Zhiyi, and Jizang merely cited the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as evidence that a notion of intrinsic Buddha nature similar to that found in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was also expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*. By contrast, Xinxing’s positive incorporation of the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging into his personal religious regimen of “universal veneration” is profoundly interesting. On this point, Nishimoto Teruma observes:

What stands out in Three Stages teaching as a particularly unique form of practice is the generic worship of human beings undertaken in imitation of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s religious practice as described in the *Lotus Sūtra*. This is a concrete expression, in the form of religious practice, of the concept of universal veneration that stands as the pillar of Three Stages teaching. As a single thread that knit together the Buddhists of the North-South Dynasties Period, the *Lotus Sūtra* was accorded very high status. But propagation of the idea that people should actually practice the sort of generic veneration demonstrated by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging occurs only with Xinxing. When compared with the disciplines of other practitioners, this approach stands out as a signature feature of the practice of Three Stages teaching. Moreover, it constitutes a highly significant practice for the fact that it derives directly from the core thought of their doctrine.⁶

Jingying Huiyuan’s Interpretation

The *Mahāyāna* version of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* took shape in India around

the time of the fourth century. Its central concept involves the notion that the Dharma body is the original or fundamental essence of the Buddha, and that this Dharma body is eternal and constantly abiding. Moreover, it posits that the Buddha nature is present within all living beings. Concisely stated, it advocates the eternally abiding presence of the Dharma body and the universality of the Buddha nature.

One thing we notice immediately is that this concept from the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* bears a close resemblance to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s core notions of the One Buddha Vehicle and the age-old [enlightenment] of Śākyamuni Buddha. The idea of the One Buddha Vehicle essentially means that all living beings are equally capable of attaining Buddhahood, while that of Śākyamuni Buddha's age-old [enlightenment] propounds the eternality of Śākyamuni Buddha. The concept of the One Buddha Vehicle in the *Lotus Sūtra* provides a basis for living beings' attainment of Buddhahood by advocating the existence of a religious bond from past ages that persists between Śākyamuni Buddha and living beings. The concept of Śākyamuni Buddha's age-old enlightenment has the special feature of giving serious consideration to history, whereby the historical Buddha Śākyamuni is, himself, understood to be the eternal Śākyamuni Buddha. With the subsequent establishment of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, sentient beings' achievement of Buddhahood on the basis of an internalized principle of Buddha nature and the notion of the eternity of the person of the Buddha progressed towards complete theorization, until they became little more than abstract formulations.

In the five-period system of doctrinal classification that was popular in China during the North-South Dynasties period, it was generally recognized that the concepts of Buddha nature and the eternity of the Buddha's body expounded in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* were not preached in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The *Lotus Sūtra* was accordingly judged to be a teaching altogether inferior to that of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. Jingying Huiyuan, Zhiyi, and Jizang, otherwise known as the three great masters of the Sui Dynasty, severely criticized this scheme of doctrinal classification and sought by various strategies to prove that the Buddha nature was also expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁷ Kumārajāva's translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* comprises some 70,000 Chinese characters, but in point of fact the term "Buddha nature" is not to be found there. Thus, they were compelled to argue that the *Lotus Sūtra* expounded the Buddha nature in principle.

First let us briefly introduce Jingying Huiyuan's basic criticism. It is said that Huiyuan produced a commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* in seven fascicles. Regrettably, the work no longer survives. Nonetheless, a cri-

tique of Liu Qiu's 劉虬 (438–495) five period system of doctrinal classification appears in Huiyuan's *Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章. Therein he says the following about the question of the Buddha nature:

If you say that the *Lotus Sūtra* is [doctrinally] less profound than the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* because it does not yet expound the idea of Buddha nature, then such a theory is not correct. There is a point in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* where, in effect, it says, “Buddha nature is, in itself, the one vehicle.” Why should we necessarily say that the exposition of the one vehicle in the *Lotus Sūtra* is not to be equated with the Buddha nature? Moreover, when, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Bodhisattva Never Disparaging encounters members of the fourfold assembly, he announces in a loud voice: “It is possible that you will become a Buddha, so I will not make light of you.” It is because he knows that sentient beings possess the Buddha nature that he declares, “You will all become Buddhas.” This shows that identification [of the one vehicle] with the Buddha nature is present [in the text]. (T 44. 466a–b)

There are two aspects to the method of critique that Huiyuan adopts here. His first approach is to cite the passage from the northern version of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* that reads, “Buddha nature is an alternative name for the One Vehicle.” (Bodhisattva Lion's Roar Chapter, fascicle 27, T 12. 524c) This he uses as a proof-text for establishing identification between the Buddha nature and the One Vehicle of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The second approach is to find a rationale for Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice of reverence in the idea that sentient beings are worthy of respect because they possess Buddha nature and are destined for future attainment of Buddhahood.

The second aspect of Huiyuan's critique is particularly relevant to this article. For the evidence that he cites to prove that Buddha nature is expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra* is none other than Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice of bowing. Actually, an explanation that would link the Buddha nature to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice of bowing was already attempted in the *Fahua lun* 法華論 of the Indian master Vasubandhu (fourth century). In the second fascicle of the *Fahua lun* the text states, “When [the sūtra says that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging] prostrates and praises living beings, speaking the words ‘I do not disparage you. It is possible that you will all become Buddhas,’ it is because [the Buddha] subsequently intends to reveal that sentient beings are all endowed with the Buddha nature.” (T 26. 9a)

Zhiyi's Explanation

In the *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義, when Zhiyi expounds “the marvelousness of the three Dharmas,” he offers various arguments for proving that the notion of Buddha nature is also expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁸ One of those strategies involves citing specific passages from the *Lotus Sūtra* and showing that the Buddha nature of the threefold cause (*sanyin foxing* 三因佛性) is expounded therein.

Thus, for example, he interprets the passage from the Belief and Understanding Chapter that reads, “This is in truth my son, and I in truth am his father” (T 9. 17b. Translated by B. Watson, *ibid*, p.85), as expounding the Buddha nature of primary cause. In the passage from the Five Hundred Disciples Chapter that reads, “The Buddha is like this friend. When he was still a bodhisattva, he taught and converted us, inspiring in us the determination to seek comprehensive wisdom.... However, we have not yet lost the desire for comprehensive wisdom” (T 9. 29a. Translated by B. Watson, *ibid*, p. 151), Zhiyi interprets the term “wisdom” as corresponding to the Buddha nature of comprehending cause and the term “desire” as corresponding to the Buddha nature of contributing cause.⁹ Finally, he interprets the words of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, introduced earlier in this article, as a discourse on the Buddha nature of proper cause.¹⁰ On this point he is in agreement with Huiyuan’s interpretation. In addition, Zhiyi also cites the passage from the *Fahua lun* that we introduced earlier.¹¹

In his commentary on Bodhisattva Never Disparaging chapter contained in the first part of the 10th fascicle of the *Fahua wenju* 法華文句, Zhiyi offers the following statement on the relationship between the threefold Buddha nature and the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. Its contents are more detailed than the *Fahua xuanyi*:

The passage from the sūtra that reads, “He did not devote his time to reading or reciting the scriptures, but merely went about venerating people,” refers to the stage of someone who has realized the first grade of sympathetic joy. He rejoices in the fact that each and every object has the original nature of ease and bliss (*nirvāṇa*) and participates in a single ultimate reality. He [also] rejoices in the fact that each and every person is endowed with the threefold Buddha nature. “Reading or reciting the scriptures” is itself the Buddha nature of comprehending cause. “All are practicing the Bodhisattva way” is itself the Buddha nature of contributing cause, and “I do not dare disparage you, but have profound reverence for you” is none other than the Buddha nature of proper cause. (T 34. 141a)

Jizang's Interpretation

In fascicle seven of his first commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Fahua xuanlun* 法華玄論, Jizang gives a detailed explanation of the practice of bestowing prophesy. Therein, he says the following about prophesy based on [the Buddha nature of] proper cause and prophesy based on contributing cause:

Bestowing prophesy on the basis of proper cause is equivalent to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's declaration that the fourfold assembly will all attain Buddhahood. Although the members of this fourfold assembly do not yet have faith in the One Vehicle, the Buddha nature nonetheless resides within them and they will surely attain Buddhahood [in the future]. As for bestowing prophesy on the basis of contributing cause, it is akin to the Teacher of the Law Chapter, where faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself constitutes the contributing cause. (T 34. 420b)

At a later point in his career, Jizang in his *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏 gives seven basic reasons why the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging Chapter was preached. Of the fifth reason, he says:

[The Buddha] preached this chapter because he wished to demonstrate that living beings all possess the Buddha nature and, thereby, bring the basic meaning of the One Vehicle to completion. Sentient beings possess only the Buddha nature, and not any natures other than that. Hence, there is only the One Vehicle, and no other vehicles. (T 34. 616b)

Thus, he interprets the chapter on Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as expounding the idea that all beings have the Buddha nature. Furthermore, in explaining the meaning of the words, "Never Disparaging," he states:

The term "forever" (*chang*) in the name "forever not disparaging" (*chang bu qing*) means that every being is forever endowed with the Buddha nature. Hence it is said that, "all things are from the outset forever characterized by [the quality of] quiescent extinction." The Great Being [Never Disparaging] refrains from disparaging other people precisely because he has acquired this power of contemplation. The chapter takes its name from the person. (ibid.)

Then again, regarding the overall meaning of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's bowing practice, he says:

This bodhisattva overcomes illness and propagates the sūtra by means of the three activities [of body, speech, and mind]. First of all, he prostrates reverently with the body; secondly, he praises with the mouth. The reason why he venerates beings with the body is because all beings are endowed with Buddha nature. [Sentient beings] are future Buddhas. Wishing here and now to show reverence for their future Buddhahood, he bows to them. Praising them with the mouth functions the same way. Because all beings possess the Buddha nature and will surely be able to attain Buddhahood in the future, he praises [them for] their future [attainment of] Buddhahood. Since the body is bowing and the mouth is engaged in praising, there must also be processes of mental intention at work. Hence, the three activities are brought to completion and propagation of the *Lotus Sūtra* takes place. (T 34. 616b)¹²

Here it is worth noting that Jizang in his reading surmises that it is the propagation of the *Lotus Sūtra* that is taking place through the three activities of body, speech, and mind engaged in Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice of bowing and praising. So doing, Jizang gives the following explanation of the pronouncement that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging spoke as he bowed to others:

[The words] "I have profound reverence for you," etc., reveal that beings possess the Buddha nature of proper cause. As such, the words "profound reverence" indicates that, in addition to possessing the Buddha nature, beings are none other than future Buddhas. The word "profound" is used because it involves the utmost reverence and respect. Then again, he also uses the words "profound reverence" because the fact that sentient beings possess the Buddha nature carries extremely deep significance. The words, "practicing the bodhisattva way" illumine the Buddha nature of contributing cause. Even though one may possess the Buddha nature, one must engage in practice before one can see it. "Will become Buddhas" means that, when [beings are] originally endowed with Buddha nature and, moreover, are currently engaged in cultivating [its] causal [factors], they thereby fulfill the idea of the two [Buddha natures of] proper and contributing cause, through which they are able to achieve Buddhahood. (ibid. 617a)

In this respect, we clearly see that all three of the great masters of the Sui invoked the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in order to show that the Buddha nature was expounded in principle in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

THE RECEPTION OF BODHISATTVA NEVER DISPARAGING'S PRACTICE IN
 JAPAN, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE NINTH TALE IN THE FIRST
 FASCICLE OF *A FRIEND TO ONE WHO DWELLS IN SOLITUDE*

The author of *A Friend to One who Dwells in Solitude* (Kankyo no tomo), Keisei (1189–1268), was the elder brother of Kujō Michi'ie (1193–1252).¹³ He was born to high social station, but when he was an infant he was accidentally dropped by his wet nurse, causing injury to his spine. Due to this deformity, he abandoned all thought of life as a noble and became a monk in the Jimon line of the Tendai sect. As for the main events of his life, we know that in 1208 he retired to a hermitage in the Nishiyama section of Kyoto. In 1217 he traveled to Song China, returning to Japan the following year. In 1226 he built Hokkezanji in the Nishiyama section. The text of his *A Friend to One who Dwells in Solitude* was presented to a young girl of noble station. It is a collection of Buddhist tales that comprises 21 tales in its first fascicle and 11 tales in the second fascicle.¹⁴

The ninth tale in the first fascicle of *A Friend to One who Dwells in Solitude* bears the title, “The Story of an Old Monk from the East who emulated the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.” Thus we know a fact that the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was performed in Japan.

According to this ninth tale, whomever this filthy old monk from the eastern country happened to meet he would greet them with the words of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. His manner was extremely earnest. No matter the place, he would prostrate without the slightest hint of revulsion. Thus he would end up soiled with dirt from his feet to his knees, his face and hands muddied as well. Keisei reports that, in Japan, on the 14th day of the seventh lunar month people would endeavor to act as though there was no difference between noble and commoner.¹⁵ Keisei himself maintains that Śākyamuni Buddha himself undertook this practice when he was formerly Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. Thus one should not be choosy about the specific time when it is done. To this end, he also introduces Shōnyo (781–867) as the example of a pioneer of this practice in Japan.¹⁶

Moreover, Keisei says of the meaning of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice, “Generally speaking, the heart that embraces this behavior of refusing to belittle others perhaps bows to the fact that the Buddha nature exists deep within the chest of every living being. Deluded beings such as ourselves may not be directly aware of this principle, but even before we become enlightened we are fully endowed

with Buddha nature and there is no creature, including the [lowly] ant or mole cricket, that deserves to be looked down upon. Even among the hells and hungry ghosts there is not a single being that does not possess the Buddha nature. Hence, if you are truly cognizant of this principle, you will not fail to respect even the lowly birds and beasts.” So saying, Keisei infers that the previous example of Genjō shōnin’s bowing from the waist to birds and beasts¹⁷ might have its foundation in the notion that even animals have the Buddha nature.

Moreover, having put his finger on the fact that spite and ridicule towards others will naturally disappear if we know that all beings have Buddha nature, he cites the words of Fu Xi 傅翁 (also known as the great being Shanhui 善慧, 497–569), “Night after night, I sleep in the embrace of the Buddha, morning after morning, I arise with the Buddha.” This is based on a couplet in fascicle three of the *Recorded Sayings of the Great Being Shanhui*.¹⁸ Keisei found great inspiration in these words. Fu Xi was himself a lay Buddhist, yet he was someone who realized the loftiest attainments and who has been shown even to have intellectually influenced the likes of the great master Tiantai Zhiyi. Moreover, he was even touted to be an incarnation of Bodhisattva Maitreya.

Finally, at the end, Keisei states that, in an age when the true dharma seems to be disappearing, a person who would constantly bear in mind the universal Buddha nature must not neglect passages from sūtras where it says that it is possible to refer to woman as fully equivalent to a man, or an evil person as a good person.

Conclusion

As translated by Kumārajīva, the *Lotus Sūtra* comprises some 70,000 characters in Chinese. If we were to be asked how we might express, in a word, the central premise of the *Lotus Sūtra*, how might we answer?

Should this question be put to me, I would inevitably recall the *Lotus Sūtra*’s Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. Venerating other people as future Buddhas may be decidedly simplistic, but as a thought and practice that provides a basic perspective for directing our efforts to solve the problems of our present age and provides a foundation for ideal behavior as a human being, it is the nucleus of the *Lotus Sūtra*. When we elaborate this idea in relation to the three central premises of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the fact that each and every person is a future Buddha is tantamount to the idea that all beings can equally attain Buddhahood, and this is quite consistent with the notion of the One Buddha Vehicle taught in the Expedient Means Chapter. Such a teaching was never

expounded in the Buddhism of the Hīnayāna or Lesser Vehicle. In the Mahāyāna scriptures, only the Hīnayāna arhat was excluded from the possibility of attaining Buddhahood. But the *Lotus Sūtra* taught that all beings will attain Buddhahood, including the arhat. Why is it that all sentient beings are able to attain Buddhahood? It is because Śākyamuni Buddha, endowed with eternal life, continues to teach and deliver us sentient beings. The notion that the Śākyamuni Buddha who passed away at age 80 is a provisional manifestation and that his original essence is eternally existent is clarified in the chapter on the Life Span of the Thus Come One. Through practice of the bodhisattva path, sustained by the vast power of Śākyamuni Buddha, it becomes possible for people to attain Buddhahood.

This being the case, the bodhisattva path becomes a matter of developing a firm personal faith in the universal attainment of Buddhahood and striving to live in such a way as to spread this religious message to other beings, all the while supported by Śākyamuni Buddha's eternal presence and vast power. In other words, along with believing firmly in the ability of other people to attain Buddhahood, one adopts a lifestyle that is grounded in a thoroughgoing reverence for human beings. One person who adopted just this sort of lifestyle was Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. But in the age after Śākyamuni Buddha has passed away, it is the bodhisattvas who well up from the earth who represent the practitioners of this kind of life style.

The bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging may, after all, present a rather simple-minded approach to life, but in many cases religious truths are simple and clear. Nevertheless, as the saying goes, "it is easier said than done." For to actualize in our day to day lives a practice and philosophy that would accord the most solemn respect to human beings—much less extend this respect to every corner of the world—is an extremely difficult task. And yet, might not this example of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, with its reverence for all human beings, be something that we should establish as a foundation for solving the manifold problems of our current age?

Notes

¹ Enumeration of the two concepts of the One Buddha Vehicle in the Expedient Means Chapter and the age-old existence of Śākyamuni Buddha in the Life Span Chapter as core tenets of the *Lotus Sūtra* is consistent with traditional schemes of interpretation stemming from China. In terms of the technical language of Chinese exegesis, from the time of Fayun's *Fahua yiji*, the former has been referred to as 'elaborating the three to reveal the one,' and the latter, 'elaborating the near to reveal the distant.' I would

propose adding the concept of the bodhisattvas who well up from the earth to these two notions. My reasons for this are twofold: In the lore of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the appointment of the bodhisattvas who well up from the earth as bearers of the *Lotus Sūtra* during the age after Śākyamuni Buddha's demise is an extremely important point. Moreover, from an historical perspective, the bodhisattvas who well up from the earth are significant as a self-representation of those persons who were propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* at the point in time when the *Lotus Sūtra* took shape. See Hiroshi Kanno, *Hokekyō no shutsugen* (The Emergence of the *Lotus Sūtra*), Daizō shuppan, 1997, pp. 63–67; also, Hiroshi Kanno, “Fahuajing de zhongxin sixiang 法華經的中心思想—yi fosheng sixiang wei zhongxin 以一佛乘思想爲中心,” *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu*, 65. 3 (September, 1996): pp. 68–73.

² Kariya Sadahiko translates this passage from the Sanskrit as follows: “As for this bodhisattva, although he was a bhikṣu he did not perform ‘public expositions’ (which were expected of bhikṣus or ‘persons who have left the household life’ in the monasteries of the saṃgha), nor did he perform ‘private recitations’ (that were similarly expected of a bhikṣu).” See Kariya Sadahiko, “*Myōhokke ni okeru dokuju ni tsuite*,” *Keirin gakusō* 15 (March 1994). According to the research of Kariya Sadahiko “public exposition” (*uddeśa*) was “one of the formalities of a bhikṣu’s study of the Dharma, whereby bhikṣus would collectively discuss and debate on whatever topic might arise.” “Private recitation” (*svādhyāya*), on the other hand, referred to the practice of “monks individually rehearsing the teachings of the Buddha by reciting them out loud in either their individual cells or in a quiet spot outside the monastery.” Thus Kariya Sadahiko criticizes the translation of Kumārajīva, saying: “In order for Kumārajīva to decide to render ‘private recitation’ as ‘read and recite the scriptures’ he must have taken Bodhisattva Never Disparaging to be a person who completely abandoned the Dharma-master’s standard practice of ‘receiving, retaining or upholding, reading, reciting, explicating, and copying.’ In addition, Kumārajīva, without the slightest concern for the license he was taking, introduced the lines ‘merely went about prostrating’ and ‘bowed and praised.’ As a result the image has been fixed of Never Disparaging as some kind of eccentric who simply joined his palms and ‘went around bowing to others,’ refusing altogether to perform the Dharma-master’s rigorous practices of ‘reading and reciting the scriptures’ (in other words, ‘reciting sūtras so that other people may hear them’).”

However, concerning Kumārajīva’s addition of the word “bowing” to his translation, Tanji Akiyoshi points out certain basic differences between customs of greeting in India and China, saying, “Even today, when people in India meet they jointly say ‘namaste’ to one another. ‘Namaste’ is, in effect, *namo*, which means ‘I entrust myself to you’ or ‘I venerate you.’ ‘I entrust myself to you, or I venerate you’ is an everyday form of greeting. Might this, then, not be the reason why in the Sanskrit it was not explicitly stated that Never Disparaging bowed to the fourfold saṃgha? Even if Bodhisattva Never Disparaging truly did bow to and venerate others by saying ‘namaste,’ it would have been understood as nothing more than a common daily greeting. Perhaps this is the reason why the author of the sūtra deliberately has the bodhisattva say, ‘I do not disparage [you]’? For if he were not to speak these words, the basic disposition of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging would not be conveyed to the reader. On the other hand, could it be that Kumārajīva truly did not feel it necessary to have Bodhisattva Never Disparaging actually say in words ‘I do not disparage you.’ At that time, it was likely not an everyday custom in China to greet people by joining the palms and saying, ‘I entrust myself to you.’ Even though [Kumārajīva’s text] merely mentions the act of

joining the palms and bowing, without [the bodhisattva] saying ‘I do not disparage you,’ might not the [basic intention] still have been intact? The image of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging that Kumārajīva had in mind was that of a bodhisattva who joined his palms and bowed with his body rather than speaking with his mouth.” *Shūkyō shijin: Miyazaki Kenji*, Chūō kōronsha, 1996, p. 198.

³ The *Sushun tennō goshō* says, “The heart of [Śākyamuni Buddha’s] entire career was the *Lotus Sūtra*. The heart of *Lotus Sūtra* practice lies in the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging Chapter. What is the meaning of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s practice of revering other people? The original intention behind Śākyamuni Buddha’s coming into this world is his behavior as a human being.” See *Shōwa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun*, vol. 2, p. 1397; also, Nichiren *Daishōnin goshō zenshū*, p. 1174. The *Kyōgyōshō goshō* states, “[Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s] era was that of the counterfeit Dharma; my era is that of the turbulent and evil age of the decline of Dharma (*mappō* 末法). He was a practitioner at the first [stage of] rejoicing; I am an ordinary person at the stage of hearing the name of the truth. He sowed the seeds of becoming a Buddha with the 24 words [that he used to greet others]; I speak only the five words [of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*]. The times for attaining the way may be different, but the attaining of Buddhahood in all respects must be the same.” See *Showa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun*, vol. 2, p. 1480; also, *Nichiren Daishōnin goshō zenshū*, p. 1277. Miyazaki Kenji (1896–1933), who was influenced by Nichiren’s thought, composed the famous poem *Ame ni mo makezu*, which is well known to have drawn on the idea of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s practice. The literary value of this poem was much debated in literary circles after his death. But most likely, for Kenji, this kind of debate would have been considered pointless. The reason lies in the simple fact that this poem was not just a piece of literature, but a vow text composed by Kenji. It is the words of his vow expressing the personal desire to live a life like Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.

⁴ It does not have a direct bearing on *Lotus* thought in China, but in a memorial submitted to the Liu Song emperor Xiaowudi 孝武帝 in 462, criticism is directed to Buddhist monks who refused to bow to the emperor, in which reference is made to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s practice of bowing to any person he met. See *Yi-man zhuan* 夷蛮傳, in *Song shu*, fascicle 97. This passage is also inserted in the biography of the monk Sengyuan 僧遠 fascicle eight of the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, T 50. 377c–378a. Also see Kamata Shigeo, *Chūgoku bukkōshi*, vol. 3, Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 1984, p. 115.

⁵ Also compare the following passages in the *Fahuaqing anlexingyi*: “It is ‘marvelous’ because living beings are marvelous; ‘Dharma’ is precisely the Dharma [that is existence of] sentient beings” (T 46. 698b); “The reason that living beings are marvelous is because the [auspicious] attributes of the six sense faculties found on the body of each and every person are themselves marvelous, and because the six sovereign lords of the senses are by nature perfectly pure” (T 46. 698c); “Sentient beings and the Thus Come One together, share one and the same Dharma-body. Pure, wondrous, and without compare, it is called the *Sūtra* of the *Lotus Blossom of the Marvelous Dharma*” (T 46. 700a).

⁶ Nishimoto Teruma, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū*, Shunjūsha, 1998, pp. 47–48. As primary material on this point, see *Duigen qixing fa*, 對根起行法, where it states, “Concerning the Dharma of the single person and single practice: The single person refers to the idea that oneself is nothing but an evil person. The single practice refers to the idea, as taught in the *Lotus Sūtra*, that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging engaged exclusively in a

single practice. For persons other than himself he had nothing but reverence, regarding them as the tathāgatagarbha, as the Buddha nature, as future Buddhas-to-be, or as living Buddhas. Thus it is called single practice.” See *Dunhuang baozang* 22. 237c; Nishimoto, op. cit., p. 326.

⁷ See chapter five, “Busshō, Busshin jōjū no mondai to Chūgoku Hokkeshisō,” in Kanno Hiroshi, *Hokekyō no shutsugen*, Daizō shuppan, 1997.

⁸ See *Fahua xuanyi*, T 33. 744c–746a.

⁹ See *Fahua xuanyi*, second half of fascicle six, T 33. 744c, where it says, “Where the passage that follows says, ‘You are in truth my son, and I in truth am your father,’ it is the [Buddha] nature of proper cause. Moreover, where it says, ‘I formerly taught you the peerless way. Hence, we have not yet lost the desire for comprehensive wisdom,’ the word ‘wisdom’ is none other than the [Buddha] nature of comprehending cause; the word ‘desire’ is the [Buddha] nature of contributing cause.” In both of these passages, Zhiyi’s citations are done in paraphrase.

¹⁰ In the first part of fascicle six of the *Fahua xuanyi*, T 33. 744c, we find, “Moreover, where it says ‘I don’t dare belittle you, for you will all become Buddhas,’ it is the [Buddha] nature of proper cause. ‘At that time the fourfold assembly through reading and reciting the myriad sūtras...’ is the [Buddha] nature of comprehending cause; ‘cultivating all merits’ is the [Buddha] nature of contributing cause.”

¹¹ The citation is incomplete, but the *Fahua xuanyi* says in the first part of the sixth fascicle, T 33. 746a, “The *Treatise* states, ‘Water of Buddha nature. Bodhisattva Never Disparaging knew that living beings have the Buddha nature.’”

¹² A similar explanation appears at the end of the second fascicle of Jizang’s *Fahua tonglüe* 法華統略, where he says: “Prostrating with his body he thereby reveals the [Buddha nature of] proper cause; praising others verbally he thereby shows the [Buddha nature] of contributing cause.” See Kanno Hiroshi, *Hokekyō chūshakusho shūsei 7: Hokke tōryaku, ge*, Daizō shuppan, 2000, p. 813.

¹³ This is based on notes in the Inokuma edition of the *Hirasan kojīn reitaku*.

¹⁴ I have relied on the version of the text published in *Hōbutsushū, Kankyo no tomo, Hirasan kojīn reitaku, Shin Nippon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 40, Iwanami shoten, 1993. The edition and notations to *Kankyo no tomo* are by Kojima Takayuki.

¹⁵ It is recorded for any number of years in the diary of Fujiwara Teika (1162–1241), *Meigetsuki*, that on the 14th day of the seventh lunar month he would personally perform the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in the streets or have other people perform it for him, thereby substantiating Keisei’s account.

¹⁶ The first fascicle of Miyoshi Tameyasu’s *Goshūi ōjōden* records of Shōnyō that, in order to repay the kindness of his two parents, he took up the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. The number of persons to whom he bowed came to 167,800 (some texts say 167,600). It also states that wonders occurred when he undertook this bowing practice of Never Disparaging, such as, “On days when there was violent wind, thunder, and rain, the rain did not wet his clothes, and the wind blew and smelled sweet at the door.” Moreover, according to Minobe Shigekatsu (*Kankyo no tomo*, Miyai shoten, 1982), in the 28th tale contained in the 19th fascicle of *Konjaku monogatari*, [the monk] Ren’en, from Annichiji in Uji (Yamatonokuni), grieved by the thought that his mother may have fallen into evil lower realms, in order to produce merits to offer on her behalf, resolved to “travel throughout Japan, there being no place I will not visit, and as I do this I will undertake the practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, with the specific aim to pray for the repose of my mother’s soul.” So doing, it

is recorded that he wandered through the entire country, doing the bowing practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as he went.

Also, in the 10th tale of fascicle one of the *Hosshinshū*, by Kamono Chōmei, we find a beggar by the name of Butsumyō who had the appearance of a madman. (“Butsumyō” might mean “Buddha name.” However, the Jingu edition gives the reading “Buddha nature.”) He ate even fish and birds without revulsion, and with his clothes in complete tatters, when he encountered people he would say, “You monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen are all pure,” whereupon he would venerate them. Since the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen refer to members of the fourfold saṃgha, we can infer that he was someone who imitated Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s practice of bowing when he met members of the fourfold saṃgha.

¹⁷ Concerning Genjō, Chingen also records in the 74th tale in the second fascicle of the *Dai Nipponkoku hokkegenki*, “Whenever he met monks or lay people he always prostrated to them, and whenever he saw birds and animals, he bowed to them from the waist.” Also, *Konjaku mongatari* records in the 27th tale of fascicle 13, “When he encountered monks and laity he showed reverence to them, without considering whether they were noble-born or lowly. When he saw animals, he did not avoid birds and beasts...”

¹⁸ *Dai Nippon zokuzōkyō*, facsimile reprint, vol. 120, p. 24a.

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