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Dōgen's Appropriation of *Lotus Sutra* Ground and Space

The *Lotus Sutra* is prominent among the many sources quoted by Dōgen in his writings, highlighting the Mahāyāna context of his teachings and worldview. In this paper I focus on Dōgen's use of the pivotal story in *Lotus Sutra* chapters fifteen and sixteen—the myriad bodhisattvas emerging from underground and the inconceivable life-span of the Buddha—to express his own worldview of earth, space, and time as enlightening forces. The shift in perspective expressed in this sutra story reflects a fundamental shift in East Asian Buddhist soteriology. A close reading of Dōgen's references to this story discloses how his hermeneutical play with its imagery of ground, space, and emptiness expresses immediate awakening, beyond stages of cultivation; he cites the inconceivable life-span story as an encouragement to present practice. The contrast between Dōgen's response to the enduring Śākyamuni and that of his older contemporary Myōe is revealing.

KEYWORDS: Dōgen – *Lotus Sutra* – Life-span of Buddha – Mahāyāna cosmology – earth and space imagery in Zen – Dōgen on time – Myōe

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ZEN MASTER Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253) quotes the *Lotus Sutra* far more than any other sutra.¹ His use of the *Lotus Sutra* helps define the worldview that is essential to his teaching and his recommended praxis. Along with the *Lotus Sutra*, Dōgen employs a wide range of sources in his writings, including the Ch’an kōan tradition, the Japanese poetic aesthetic tradition, various Mahāyāna sutras, and the Chinese monastic regulations.² But his teaching cannot be understood outside of the context of his view of earth, space, and time as dynamically vital agents of awakening. This worldview resonates strongly with the story in the pivotal chapters fifteen and sixteen of the *Lotus Sutra* about the bodhisattvas emerging from under the ground, and the resulting revelation of the inconceivable life-span of the Buddha.

In this paper I will look at some of Dōgen’s references to chapters fifteen and sixteen of the *Lotus Sutra*, and how they are interpreted in some of his writings about earth, space, and (to a more limited extent) about time. The dynamic worldview Dōgen thereby portrays is congruent with the complex episteme that pervaded Kamakura Buddhism, related to many sources. These potential sources and influences include to varied degrees both Tōmitsu and Taimitsu esoteric teachings; the integration of native spirit veneration in Japanese Buddhism; Hua-yen/Kegon views of the universal network of interconnectedness; and Tendai original enlightenment thought.³ Furthermore, Dōgen’s view of the *Lotus Sutra* is certainly influenced by the readings of the Lotus prevalent in Kamakura Tendai, in which Dōgen was originally ordained.

A thorough tracing of the impact of all of these influences and sources for Dōgen, and the reverse influence of early Japanese Zen, including Dōgen, on the development of Tendai, is far beyond the scope of this current essay. Herein I will simply point out how some aspects of Dōgen’s teaching echo underlying themes of this pivotal story as it is related in the *Lotus Sutra*, and how these

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1. A list of *Lotus Sutra* references in Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* appears in NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, pp. 293–321.

2. For Dōgen’s use and development of the kōan literature see HEINE 1994. For his relation to the Japanese aesthetic tradition see KAWABATA 1969, and HEINE 1997. For Dōgen’s relationship to the Chinese monastic tradition see LEIGHTON and OKUMURA 1996, and FOULK 1993. For a major source, quoted extensively by Dōgen in his *Eihei Shingi*, see YIFA 2002.

3. For background on *hongaku shisō*, original enlightenment thought, see HABITO 1996 and STONE 1999. For the impact of *mikkyō* thought in the general context of Kamakura Buddhism, see the works of Kuroda Toshio, for example KURODA 1996a & b. For influence of Hua-yen thought in Japanese Tendai, see STONE 1999, pp. 6–9, 194–95.

direct comparisons serve to clarify Dōgen's standpoint. While Dōgen's writings employ many sources, probably along with his own intuitive meditative awareness, his direct citations of the *Lotus Sutra* indicate his conscious appropriation of its teachings as a significant source.

Dōgen's primary literary source was certainly the vast Ch'an kōan literature, which he was introducing as a new, foreign language into Japan, and which he had mastered to an astonishing degree. On the other hand, in his prominent use of the *Lotus Sutra*, he was referencing the Buddhist text that was perhaps most familiar to his Kamakura audience. His wide use of the *Lotus Sutra* raises many questions. His devoted dissemination of the alien kōan literature suggests that he was not citing the *Lotus Sutra* simply to match audience expectations or familiarities.

Some aspects of *Lotus Sutra* teaching were clearly useful to legitimization of Zen positions. For example, Dōgen widely quotes the passage in Kumārajīva's translation of chapter two of the sutra that, "Only a buddha together with a buddha can fathom the Reality of All Existence."⁴ Dōgen appropriates this saying for his essay "Yuibutsu Yobutsu" [Only Buddha and Buddha], which appears in his masterwork *Shōbōgenzō* [True Dharma Eye Treasury], as a support for the Zen face-to-face Dharma transmission tradition (TANAHASHI 1985, pp. 161–67). The *Lotus Sutra* focus on Śākyamuni also fits the main Buddha figure in Zen, rather than the Buddhas Amida or Vairocana venerated in the contemporary Pure Land and Esoteric (and Kegon) movements. But perhaps most fundamentally, the significant presence of the *Lotus Sutra* in Dōgen's teaching highlights the substantial foundation of Mahāyāna thought and practice underlying his worldview and teachings.

The Story and its Structural Role in the Sutra

Turning to the story itself, I offer the following paraphrase of key points of the narrative that appears in chapters fifteen and sixteen of the *Lotus Sutra*.⁵ A group of bodhisattvas have been visiting from a distant world system in order to hear the historical Buddha Śākyamuni preach the *Lotus Sutra*. At the beginning of chapter fifteen, they ask the Buddha if he would like them to return in the future to maintain the *Lotus Sutra* teaching. Śākyamuni Buddha has been soliciting such future assistance in previous chapters for the period to follow his imminent demise and passage into nirvāṇa, and especially for the distant future "evil age."

4. See KATO et al., 1975, p. 52. Compared to the Sanskrit original, which simply denotes plural "buddhas," Kumārajīva's rendition emphasizes the relational aspect of a buddha "together with" a buddha. I am indebted to Jan Nattier for pointing out this shift from the Sanskrit by Kumārajīva.

5. I am using the Chinese/Japanese edition of Kumārajīva's translation, SAKAMOTO and IWAMOTO, ed., 1996. English translations consulted (with page numbers for these chapters) are: HURVITZ 1976, pp. 225–44; KATO et al., 1975, pp. 237–56; and WATSON 1993, pp. 212–32.

As soon as the visiting bodhisattvas make their offer, Buddha declares their help unnecessary, whereupon, “from under the ground,” from “within the open space of this sphere,” simultaneously spring forth vast numbers of experienced, dedicated bodhisattvas. The immensity of their numbers, and of their retinues of attendant bodhisattvas, is expressed in conventional Mahāyāna cosmological metaphors about grains of sand in the Ganges, and each offers appropriate ritual veneration to the Buddha. The names of their four leaders are mentioned, Superior Conduct, Boundless Conduct, Pure Conduct, and Steadfast Conduct.⁶ The Buddha declares that for countless ages all of these numerous bodhisattvas have been diligently practicing under the ground, have been present to help aid and awaken suffering beings, and will continue their beneficial practice and promulgation of the teaching even through the future evil age.

Maitreya Bodhisattva, predicted to be the next future incarnated buddha, voices the questions of the startled and puzzled assembly of Śākyamuni’s disciples as to the identities and backgrounds of these emerging bodhisattvas, previously unknown to the regular disciples. Śākyamuni declares that he himself has trained all these underground bodhisattvas. Even more perplexed, Maitreya asks how that could be possible, since these unfamiliar underground bodhisattvas are obviously venerable sages, some considerably more aged than Śākyamuni. This would be like a twenty-five-year-old saying he is the father of a hundred-year-old son. Maitreya recounts that all the disciples know that Śākyamuni was born some eight decades before, left his palace in his late twenties, and after undergoing austerities discovered the Middle Way and awakened under the bodhi tree four decades previous to his present expounding of the *Lotus Sutra*.

This question leads to the climactic teaching of the whole sutra, the revelation in chapter sixteen by Śākyamuni Buddha that he only seems to be born, awaken, and pass away as a skillful means of teaching, or upāya. He declares that, in actuality, he has been awakened and practicing through an inconceivably long life-span, and for many ages past and future is present to awaken beings. The extent of this time frame is depicted with vast astronomical metaphors. The Buddha explains that he appears to live a limited life and pass away into nirvāṇa only as a skillful means for the sake of all those beings who would be dissuaded from their own diligent conduct, and miss the importance of their own attentive practice, by the knowledge of the Buddha’s omnipresence.

Both doctrinally and in terms of literary structure, this is the sutra’s pivotal story, which presents central aspects of the *Lotus Sutra* teachings about the meaning of bodhisattva activity and awareness in space and time.⁷ Going back to early Chinese commentators, Tao-sheng (ca. 360–434) considered the first

6. The second character of their names (*gyō* 行 as in *shugyō* 修行 or practice) might also be translated as “practice” or “action” as well as “conduct.”

7. For the significance of these chapters in the literary structure of the whole sutra, see SHIOIRI 1989.

fourteen chapters of the sutra to be the cause, or practice section, and the last fourteen chapters, beginning with this story, as a separate section indicating the effect or fruit of practice. Chih-i (538–597), founder of the Chinese T'ien-t'ai school, designated this demarcation as between the “trace teaching” (*shakumon*) and the “origin teaching” (*honmon*) (STONE 1999, pp. 24–25). This indicates that Chih-i, and much of East Asian Buddhism after him, considered the *Lotus Sutra* sections prior to this story to be the “trace” teachings about the historical Buddha as the manifested trace of the fundamental teaching, and of the fundamental, or original Buddha, who is revealed in chapter sixteen as having an inconceivably long life-span. The remainder of the sutra, after this revelation, is designated the fundamental teaching.

The visions portrayed in this story of the underground bodhisattvas and the Buddha's inconceivable life-span demonstrate a foundation for the development of East Asian Mahāyāna practices of transcendent faith and ritual enactment of buddhahood, not dependent on lifetimes of arduous practice, but rather upon immediate realization of the fundamental ground of awakening. Paul Groner has described this shift as “shortening the path,” in which there is the possibility of the path to liberation occurring rapidly (GRONER 1992; STONE 1999, pp. 31–33). Jan Nattier describes this same shift as from a “progress philosophy” to a “leap philosophy,” referring to Karl Potter, in which progress over lifetimes of cultivation is replaced by a leap, whether of faith or realization (NATTIER 1997). This shift to rapid awakening is most directly exemplified in the *Lotus Sutra* by the speedy arrival at buddhahood of the eight-year-old Naga princess in the Devadatta chapter, chapter twelve in the currently prevalent version of the Sutra. But the theoretical context for this shift is revealed in the story in chapters fifteen and sixteen, with its depiction of Buddha's omnipresence throughout vast reaches of time. Dōgen's perspectives on the key teachings in these chapters may illuminate the possibilities for contemporary twenty-first century approaches to understanding fundamental Mahāyāna orientation and awareness, and its shift in East Asia.

Dōgen's Comments on the Story: The Dharma Blossom Turning

As well as quoting the *Lotus Sutra* more by far than any other sutra, Dōgen speaks of it with great veneration. In the *Shōbōgenzō* essay “Kie Buppōsō-hō” [Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures] he says that the *Lotus Sutra* “may be said to be the great king and the great master of all the various sutras that the Buddha Śākyamuni taught. Compared with this sutra, all the other sutras are merely its servants, its relatives, for it alone expounds the Truth” (YOKOI with VICTORIA 1976, pp. 129–30).

Among all of the numerous references to the *Lotus Sutra* in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, he refers in more of the essays to chapter sixteen on the Buddha's

life-span than to any other chapter, with the exception of chapter two on skillful means.⁸ Dōgen often mentions from the second chapter the one great cause for buddhas manifesting in the world—to lead beings into the path to awakening; or that a buddha fully realizes the deep meaning of Dharma only together with another buddha (KATO et al., 1975, pp. 52, 59–60). But the following discussion will not address Dōgen’s numerous references to upāya, or to many other sections of the *Lotus Sutra*, but will attempt to speculatively explore his primary responses to chapter fifteen especially, and to a more limited extent, to chapter sixteen.

The essay in *Shōbōgenzō* which most directly and fully focuses on the *Lotus Sutra* is called “Hokke-Ten-Hokke” [The Dharma Flower Turns the Dharma Flower], and so in itself is worthy of some consideration in this context. Therein Dōgen celebrates the value of sutras while explicitly responding to the Zen axiom about sutra study that privileges direct mind-to-mind teaching above study of words and letters.⁹ The essay centers on a dialogue from the *Platform Sutra* in which the Ch’an Sixth Ancestor, Hui-neng, tells a monk who has memorized the *Lotus Sutra* that this monk does not understand the sutra. Hui-neng says to the monk, “When the mind is in delusion, the Flower of Dharma turns. When the mind is in realization, we turn the Flower of Dharma” (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 208). Dōgen clarifies how this story implies the necessity for an awakened hermeneutical approach to the active, practical applications of sutra study, rather than being caught by reified scriptural formulations.

Much of the essay involves intricate wordplay and discussion concerning the polarity of turning the Dharma flower, in realization, or being turned by it, in delusion, which Dōgen eventually resolves in characteristically non-dualistic fashion. He says, for example, near the end of the essay, “The reality that exists as it is, . . . is profound, great, and everlasting [specifically referencing the Buddha’s life-span in chapter sixteen], is mind in delusion, the Flower of Dharma turning, and is mind in realization, turning the Flower of Dharma, which is really just the Flower of Dharma turning the Flower of Dharma” (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, pp. 219–20). So in Dōgen’s reality, ultimately the Lotus turning the practitioner, as well as the practitioner turning the Lotus, are both simply and non-dualistically the Lotus Dharma turning the Wondrous Lotus Dharma.

On the way to this non-dualistic conclusion about turning the sutra or being turned by it, in the structure of this essay, “The Dharma Flower Turns the Dharma Flower,” after the initial presentation about the Sixth Ancestor’s story, Dōgen presents an extended section on the aspect of “the mind in delusion, the Flower

8. Based on the detailed table in the Appendix “Lotus Sutra References,” in NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, pp. 293–321. It may be noted that some rather minor or extraneous references are included in this table, but I calculate that the overall proportions of *Shōbōgenzō* citations for each *Lotus Sutra* chapter are still generally reliable.

9. For the original *Shōbōgenzō* I am using MIZUNO 1993. For translations of “Hokke-Ten-Hokke,” I am consulting NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, pp. 203–20; and also TANAHASHI and WENGER 2003.

of Dharma turns.” Dōgen finally expresses his non-dualism by saying that this being turned by the Lotus is also part of the one vehicle, so, “Do not worry about the mind being deluded” (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 211).

This section on the deluded mind is followed by an extended section on “the mind in realization, we turn the Flower of Dharma,” near the beginning of which is a substantial reference to and comment on chapters fifteen and sixteen. It begins:

The multitudes of the thousandfold world that spring out of the earth have long been great honored saints of the flower of Dharma but they spring out of the earth being turned by circumstances. In turning the Flower of Dharma we should not only realize springing out of the earth; in turning the Flower of Dharma we should also realize springing out of space. We should know with the Buddha’s wisdom not only earth and space but also springing out of the Flower of Dharma itself. In general, in the Time of the Flower of Dharma, inevitably, the father is young and the son is old. It is neither that the son is not the son, nor that the father is not the father; we should just learn that the son is old and the father young. Do not imitate the disbelief of the world and be surprised. [Even] the disbelief of the world is the Time of the Flower of Dharma. This being so, in turning the Flower of Dharma we should realize the one Time in which the Buddha is living. Turned by disclosure, display, realization, and entering, we spring out of the earth; and turned by the Buddha’s wisdom, we spring out of the earth. (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, pp. 215–16)

In this passage, which well illustrates Dōgen’s characteristic style of wordplay in unpacking texts, he discusses the significance of the bodhisattvas springing out of the earth and the time of the Buddha’s inconceivable life-span. Dōgen first points out that the veteran underground bodhisattvas spring out of the ground in response to circumstances, to karmic causes and conditions, including the needs of suffering beings, and in this case the need of Buddha. One implied meaning of this *Lotus Sutra* ground for Dōgen is thus the conditioned reality of this present space, as in Dōgen’s frequent teaching about abiding in, or totally exerting, one’s own Dharma position (*hō-i*; 法位), which is the totality of the present circumstances, including the multiplicity of effects of previous causes and conditions (KIM 2004, pp. 154–58). Dōgen often emphasizes ordinary, everyday reality, such as the activities of daily monastic practice, as the locus of awakening and of the sacred, and the importance of not seeking liberation outside of the grounding of immediate everyday circumstances.

Dōgen compares the springing out of the earth by the bodhisattvas to springing out of space, “We should not only realize springing out of the earth; in turning the Flower of Dharma we should also realize springing out of space.” Here Dōgen implies a correlation between earth and space. Indeed a number of Dōgen’s references to space contain the use of earth imagery to signify spatial dimension.

A significant example is the “Self-Fulfillment Samādhi” (*jijuyū zanmai*) section of Dōgen’s important early writing, “Bendōwa [Talk on Wholehearted Practice of the Way], which is now considered part of *Shōbōgenzō*, in which he describes the enlightenment of space itself, “When one displays the Buddha mudra with one’s whole body and mind, sitting upright in this samādhi even for a short time, everything in the entire dharma world becomes buddha mudra, and all space in the universe completely becomes enlightenment.” In explicating this declaration of the awakening of space itself, Dōgen identifies the earth with the whole of space and all the things that are space—grasses, trees, fences and so forth:

At this time, because earth, grasses and trees, fences and walls, tiles and pebbles, all things in the dharma realm in the universe in ten directions carry out buddha-work, therefore everyone receives the benefit of wind and water movement caused by this functioning, and all are imperceptibly helped by the wondrous and incomprehensible influence of buddha to actualize the enlightenment at hand. (OKUMURA and LEIGHTON 1997, p. 23)

In *Shōbōgenzō*’s “Kokū,” “Space,” Dōgen further clarifies that space is not an empty container, the absence of forms, or the air between things, but rather that things themselves are space.¹⁰

Returning to the above-cited passage in “Hokke-Ten-Hokke,” after relating earth and space as the source from whence the bodhisattvas emerge, Dōgen adds, “We should know with the Buddha’s wisdom not only earth and space but also springing out of the Flower of Dharma itself.” The correlation of earth and space is described as the context for emergence from the *Lotus Sutra* itself. This correspondence represents for Dōgen the awakened realm as non-dualistically present right in the ground of this phenomenal world.

A further passage in this section of “Hokke-Ten-Hokke” about space reads, “Vulture Peak [where the *Lotus Sutra* was preached] exists inside the stupa and the treasure stupa exists on Vulture Peak.” This is a reference to the story in *Lotus Sutra*, chapter eleven, of the ancient Buddha Prabhūtaratna, who appears in his stupa hanging in mid-air above Vulture Peak. He comes to hear Śākyamuni, the historical buddha of this age, preach the *Lotus Sutra*. But it is also said that this ancient buddha always appears whenever this *Lotus Sutra* is being expounded. Dōgen says about this, “The treasure stupa is a treasure stupa in space, and space makes space for the treasure stupa” (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, pp. 217–18) In saying that “space makes space” for this relic of an ancient buddha, Dōgen implies that space is not just an object in a dead, objective world. The space that makes space is an active agent.

10. For “Kokū” see TANAHASHI 1999, pp. 201–4. My fuller commentary on “Kokū” is in LEIGHTON forthcoming.

The Form of Space as Emptiness, and the Bodhisattva Leap

Referring to the line in a verse section of chapter fifteen about the realm from whence the underground bodhisattvas emerge, which reads, “in the under side, in open space, they dwell,” (下方空中住) Dōgen says that, “The meaning of this downward direction [under side] is exactly the inside of space” (HURVITZ 1976, p. 233; NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 216). Dōgen continues that “This *downward*, and this *space*, are just the turning of the Flower of Dharma and are just the lifetime of the Buddha. We should realize, in turning the Flower of Dharma, that the Buddha’s lifetime, the Flower of Dharma, the world of Dharma, and the wholehearted state, are realized as *downward*, and also realized as *space*. Thus *downward-space* describes just the realization of turning the Flower of Dharma” (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 216). Here Dōgen is explicitly emphasizing that the open space below the ground, where the underground bodhisattvas dwell, is itself the realization of the *Lotus Sutra*, and of the life-span of the Buddha. For Dōgen the realization is both specific, this place down here, and inclusive, as all space.

In this section of the essay, Dōgen also clarifies that in his discussion of earth and space he is interpreting the Lotus by characteristically indulging in a significant pun, using the double meaning of *kū* 空 as both space and emptiness. Soon after affirming the open space underground as the realization of the Lotus and as the life-span of Buddha, Dōgen quotes the famous *Heart Sutra* passage, stating that, “There is turning the Lotus of ‘Form is exactly emptiness,’ and turning the Lotus of ‘Emptiness is exactly form.” (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 217) Thus Dōgen recognizes the bodhisattvas’ underground open “space” as also emptiness, or *śūnyatā*. This verifies the immanence of the emptiness, or the insubstantiality of all existents, within the ground of earth/space, and the empty nature of all the forms that compose earth and space. By recognizing the *Lotus Sutra* space under the ground as, in part, a metaphor for emptiness, Dōgen also here implies the study of emptiness as the study that propels the *Lotus Sutra* underground bodhisattvas. By encouraging the realization that, “in turning the Flower of Dharma, . . . the Flower of Dharma, . . . is realized as downward [within the ground], and also realized as space [or emptiness],” Dōgen indicates the importance of his practitioner audience’s own realization of the bodhisattvas as emerging from space, and from emptiness. This double meaning of *kū* 空 as both space and emptiness appears elsewhere in Dōgen’s writings, for example in his *Shōbōgenzō* essay “Kūge,” which might be read as “Flowers in the Sky,” “Flowers of Space,” or “Flowers of Emptiness,” depending on the context in various parts of the essay (CLEARY 1986, pp. 64–75).

In considering or interpreting Dōgen’s interpretations of the *Lotus Sutra*, it is clear that Dōgen is in accord with modern principles of hermeneutics, deriving from Schleiermacher and Dilthey.

Since the time of Schleiermacher and Dilthey,... interpretation has certain subjective connotations, such as the implication of the reader in the processes of understanding and the reciprocity between interpretation of the text and self-interpretation. This reciprocity is known by the name of the hermeneutical circle; it entails a sharp opposition to the sort of objectivity and non-implication which is supposed to characterise the scientific explanation of things. (RICOEUR 1981, p. 165)

Clearly Dōgen uses his discussions of the *Lotus Sutra*, as he surely does with his discussion of the *kōan* lexicon, to proclaim his own subjective teachings, and to encourage the primary text as a vehicle for the self-interpretation of his audience, as well as himself.

A full investigation of the roles of metaphor, polysemy, and intertextuality in Dōgen's writing would be illuminating, but is far beyond the scope of this essay. However, Dōgen's use of metaphor as applied to "ground," "underneath," and "space" may be somewhat clarified by some of Paul Ricoeur's discussion of metaphor. Ricoeur says, "The understanding of a work taken as a whole gives the key to metaphor.... The hermeneutical circle encompasses in its spiral both the apprehension of projected worlds and the advance of self-understanding in the presence of these new worlds" (RICOEUR 1981, p. 171). Dōgen's playful interpretations of the world of the *Lotus Sutra* certainly express a pre-understanding of a "projected world," and also a self-understanding, or rather, Dōgen's particular understanding of the inner nature of self itself, from his Buddhist perspective. His interpretive play with the world of the *Lotus Sutra*, in turn, further informs and explicates the world of Dharma and practice he is expressing.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory further supports the free-style interpretation that Dōgen seems to relish as Ricoeur says, "All of the connotations which are suitable must be attributed; the poem [or text] means all that it can mean" (RICOEUR 1981, p. 176). Like Dōgen, Ricoeur encourages the readers' or listeners' active interpretation of the text as part of the necessary process of understanding. "Interpretation thus becomes the apprehension of the proposed worlds which are opened up by the non-ostensive references of the text" (RICOEUR 1981, p. 177). In his own interpretations, whether of *kōans* or the *Lotus Sutra*, Dōgen reads various references into texts, and inverts conventional grammar, in order to more fully express his worldview and realm of practice.

Dōgen does not make the following connection explicitly, but, as Ricoeur suggests, we might follow Dōgen's hermeneutic lead in creative interpretation, his active turning of the Dharma Flower through playful pursuit of metaphors. Thus we may also recall that the "ground" (*chi* 地), in the "open space under the ground," is the Chinese character used for *bhūmi*, the stages or grounds in the system of the ten stages of bodhisattva development, as expressed in the *Daśabhūmika Sutra* (CLEARY 1993, pp. 695–811; HONDA 1968). This might then imply that the underground bodhisattvas in chapter fifteen of the *Lotus Sutra*

emerge through immediate insight into the emptiness of all *bhūmis*, or stages, emblematic of Paul Groner's shortening of the path or Jan Nattier's leap of faith (as discussed above). These bodhisattvas, diligently practicing in the open space, or emptiness, under the ground, would thus be ever ready to emerge and benefit beings in any future evil age, thanks to their seeing into the ultimate emptiness of all systems of progressive cultivation, and the unmediated emptiness of any and each particular stage or position in such systems.

Thus the scene at the beginning of chapter fifteen, and the numerous bodhisattvas' emergence, would aptly coincide with the juncture in the *Lotus Sutra* that has been considered the commencement of the half of the sutra of the "fruit" of the practice, and the "origin teaching," dating back to Tao-sheng and Chih-i. Such a leap out of lifetimes of practice through insight into emptiness certainly jibes with Dōgen's conclusion to "Hokke-Ten-Hokke," which celebrates the ultimate non-duality of being turned by the Dharma Flower or turning the Dharma Flower, "which is really just the Flower of Dharma turning the Flower of Dharma" (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 220). Dōgen expresses this conclusion after clarifying that the reality of the Lotus teaching is not bound by the traditional lifetimes and stages of practice.

Do not see this turning the Flower of Dharma only as the bodhisattva-way practiced in the past.... How joyful it is! From kalpa to kalpa is the Flower of Dharma, and from noon to night is the Flower of Dharma. Because the Flower of Dharma is from noon to night, even though our own body-and-mind grows strong and grows weak, it is just the Flower of Dharma itself.

(NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 219)

But along with Dōgen's view of earth's space and emptiness, this conclusion obviously involves the dimension of time, and the Buddha's life-span, to which we presently turn.

The Inconceivable Life-span and Dōgen Time

In the first passage cited above from "Hokke-Ten-Hokke," after referencing ground and space, Dōgen then turns to "the Time of the Flower of Dharma," and the revelation of the Buddha's vast life-span as, "the one Time in which the Buddha is living." Referring to this ultimate time outside of our conventional time, and reaffirming Śākyamuni's teaching relationship to the underground bodhisattvas disclosed in the sutra, Dōgen says that, "Inevitably, the father is young and the son is old." Given his poetical style and hermeneutical sophistication, as indicated above, Dōgen's interpretations often invite his readers' own reinterpretation. "The father as younger than the son" appears to be for Dōgen an expression of the ephemeral and multidimensional aspect of time, hidden from our conventional time-sense, and perhaps revealed by our shifting perspective on time through the natural course of time and aging. An example of

this inevitable temporal perspective shift might be Bob Dylan's line in "My Back Pages" about looking back at his own youth, "I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now" (DYLAN 1985, p. 139). The ultimate *Lotus Sutra* buddha time, within which the variability of our own human time frame is set, is highly important to Dōgen, as in his injunction in the culmination of the above passage, "We should realize the one Time in which the Buddha is living."

Dōgen elaborates on the reference to young and old fathers and sons in another essay that focuses on the *Lotus Sutra* from his *Shōbōgenzō* "Sangai-Yuishin" [The Triple World is Mind Only]:

Sometimes a father is old and a child is young; sometimes a father is old and a child is old; and sometimes a father is young and a child is young. One who imitates the maturity of a father is not being a child, and one who does not pass through the immaturity of childhood will not be a father.... All such children—"my children" and "childlike me's" [*sic*]—are true heirs of the compassionate father Śākyamuni.... The point of the Tathagata's words is only to speak of "my children." (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1997, pp. 45–46)

Here Dōgen uses the time frame of Śākyamuni as teacher of the seemingly much older underground bodhisattvas to discuss the inclusion of all beings, regardless of their level of spiritual maturity, as children of the Buddha, and the potential of all beings as themselves developing buddhas.

Dōgen discusses the Buddha's life-span and the teaching of the venerable underground bodhisattvas as children of Buddha not only in the realm of sutras, but he also applies it to the Zen transmitted lineage of buddha ancestors. In his discussion of the document of heritage used in the Zen Dharma transmission ceremony in *Shōbōgenzō*'s "Shisho," Dōgen says that the seven primordial buddhas inherited their Dharma from Śākyamuni, and quotes Śākyamuni as even saying, "All buddhas of the past are disciples of myself, Shakyamuni Buddha" (TANAHASHI 1985, p. 188).

In another *Shōbōgenzō* essay "Nyōrai Zenshin" [The Tathagata's Whole Body], Dōgen mentions the Buddha's life-span after equating the sutra itself and the entire phenomenal world with the totality of the Buddha's body. "The sutra is the whole body of the Tathagata.... The mark of reality of all things in the present time is the sutra." Thus Dōgen relates the sutra and the whole of reality itself to this enduring Śākyamuni, whose "life span resulting from the merits of the original bodhisattva practices is not limited in size to even such things as the size of the universe.... It is limitless. This is the whole body of the Tathagata, it is this sutra" (COOK 1978, p. 173). A prime significance of this long life-span for Dōgen is that the Buddha is still continuing his beneficial practice and teaching. Dōgen immediately follows the preceding reference to the essence of the sutra (and reality itself) as Buddha's long life-span with a quotation from the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. "For countless eons Śākyamuni has prac-

ticed difficult and painful practices, accumulated merits, and sought the Way of the bodhisattva, and thus even though he is now a Buddha, he still practices diligently” (COOK 1978, pp. 173–74). Dōgen emphasizes here the ongoing nature and power of the Buddha’s practice together with his long life. For Dōgen the crucial significance of the enduring Śākyamuni is not merely that the Buddha is immanent in the world, but that it is necessary for his descendants to actively continue Buddha’s practice.

Dōgen further turns the meaning of the Buddha’s life-span in *Shōbōgenzō*’s “Hotsu Bodaishin” [Awakening to the Bodhi-Mind], in which he discusses *bodhi-citta*, the first arousal of the thought of universal awakening, which he considers of utmost importance, mysterious, and in some sense equivalent to the whole of a buddha’s enlightenment. After quoting the Buddha’s statement at the very end of chapter sixteen, “I have always given thought to how I could cause all creatures to enter the highest supreme Way and quickly become Buddhas,” Dōgen comments, “These words are the eternal life of the Tathagata” (YOKOI with VICTORIA 1976, p. 108). So here for Dōgen the inconceivable life-span is simply this intention to help all beings awaken, which mysteriously creates the ongoing life of the Buddha. As long as this vow and direction to universal awakening persists and has the potential to spring forth, the Buddha is alive.

Dōgen again uses the teaching of Śākyamuni’s life-span as a direct incitement to whole-hearted practice in *Shōbōgenzō*’s “Kenbutsu” [Meeting Buddha]. He quotes chapter sixteen’s discussion of the Buddha’s appearing to be born, awaken, and pass away as merely a skillful means, and the Buddha’s statement that when beings desire with unified or “undivided mind” to see and meet Buddha, at that time he appears with the assembly at Vulture Peak and expounds the *Lotus Sutra*. Dōgen concludes that, “The undivided mind is Vulture Peak itself” (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1997, pp. 198–99). Thus the whole of the *Lotus Sutra* and the inconceivable life-span of Śākyamuni is also an embodiment for Dōgen of the whole-hearted, single-minded practice he advocates in his instructions for *zazen*, or sitting meditation. Throughout his references to the enduring Śākyamuni, Dōgen uses the story to celebrate the importance of and encourage ongoing dedicated practice. Dōgen’s praxis of embodiment of awakening in this very body and mind, *sokushin zebutsu*, is linked to these descriptions of the enduring Śākyamuni as reality itself. Practice becomes the requisite ritual performance-expression of an active faith in this awakened reality as already, and ongoingly, being expressed and present in this conditioned, phenomenal world.¹¹

Dōgen’s view of time is most directly elaborated in his *Shōbōgenzō* essay “Uji,” [Being-Time], much celebrated in modern Dōgen studies.¹² This essay presents

11. Dōgen describes this, for example, in his relatively late *Shōbōgenzō* essay “Jinshin Inga” [Deep Faith in Cause and Effect]. See YOKOI with VICTORIA 1976, pp. 136–40; or COOK 1978, pp. 159–69.

12. Translations of “Uji” appear in WADDELL and ABE 2002, pp. 47–58; CLEARY 1986, pp. 102–10;

a complex vision of time as multi-directional, dynamic, and not separate from or independent of the existence, activity, and awareness of beings. “Uji” does not directly cite the inconceivable life-span from *Lotus Sutra*, chapter sixteen, and a full exploration of the complexity of Dōgen’s whole philosophy of time is far beyond the scope of this essay. But Dōgen’s many references to Śākyamuni’s inconceivable life-span, and its sustained time-frame as vitally present in the current time of wholehearted practice, are fully compatible and even illuminating of the quality of all time as present in the being-time that is expounded in “Uji.”

In *Shōbōgenzō*’s “Gyōbutsu Igi” [The Awesome Presence (or Dignified Manner) of Active Buddhas], Dōgen quotes Śākyamuni describing his long life-span in chapter sixteen, “In the past I practiced the bodhisattva way, and so have attained this long lifespan, still now unexhausted, covering vast numbers of years.”

Dōgen comments:

You should know that it is not that the lifespan of the bodhisattva has continued without end only until now, and not that the lifespan of the Buddha has prevailed only in the past. What is called “vast numbers” is a total inclusive attainment. What is called ‘still now’ is the total lifespan. Even if “In the past I practiced” is one solid piece of iron ten thousand miles long, it casts away hundreds of years vertically and horizontally.

This being so, practice-realization is neither nonexistent, nor is it existent. Practice-realization is not defiled. Although there are hundreds, thousands, and myriads (of practice-realizations) in a place where there is no buddha and no person, (practice-realization) does not defile active buddhas.

(TANAHASHI 2004, p. 80)

Here Dōgen uses the story of the Buddha’s life-span to support his often expressed view of the immanent, pure unity of practice-realization. The inconceivable life-span becomes a symbol for Dōgen of the ongoing present being-time. This is not an abstract time frame belonging to the realm of buddhas, but a way of expressing Dōgen’s view of time as the actuality of non-dual awakening and active practice in the concrete, present context.

As throughout his more famous masterwork *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen references the *Lotus Sutra* frequently in another important work of his, *Eiheī Koroku*, which consists mostly of his later teachings given in formal *jōdō*, or Dharma hall discourses, while training his monk disciples at Eiheiji. In *jōdō* number 182, Dōgen specifically cites the underground bodhisattvas in chapter fifteen of the *Lotus Sutra*, quoting Śākyamuni’s saying that when they first saw his body and

TANAHASHI 1985, pp. 76–83; and NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, pp. 109–18. Book length treatments focused on “Uji” and Dōgen’s philosophy of time are HEINE 1985, which includes a translation of “Uji,” and STAMBAUGH 1990. See also LEIGHTON 1992.

heard his teaching, they immediately accepted with faith, and entered into the Tathāgata's wisdom. Dōgen then comments:

Having heard the Buddha's teaching is like already seeing the Buddha's body. When one first sees the Buddha's body, one naturally is able to accept it and have faith, and enter the Tathagata's wisdom. Furthermore, seeing Buddha's body with your ears, hearing Buddha's preaching with your eyes, and similarly for all six sense objects, is also like entering and residing in Buddha's house, and entering buddhahood and arousing the vow, exactly the same as in the ancient vow, without any difference.

(LEIGHTON and OKUMURA 2004, pp. 201–02; HURVITZ 1976, p. 227)

Dōgen uses the quote about the underground bodhisattvas' training and faith in Buddha to encourage faith and acceptance of buddha wisdom in his own disciples. This implies that not only the Buddha's inconceivable life-span, but the enduring helpful work of the underground bodhisattvas in future ages, are actually accomplished for Dōgen through the dedicated practice of current practitioners.

In another reference to the *Lotus Sutra* bodhisattvas springing from underground, in his *Shōbōgenzō* essay "Keisei Sanshoku" [Sounds of the Valley Streams; Colors of the Mountains], Dōgen discusses the searching for insight and for guidance by beginning practitioners, who seek "to tread the path of the ancient saints. At this time, in visiting teachers and seeking the truth, there are mountains to climb and oceans to cross. While we are seeking a guiding teacher, or hoping to find a good spiritual friend, one comes down from the heavens, or springs out from the earth" (NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, p. 94; COOK 1978, p. 111). Here Dōgen cites the bodhisattvas emerging from the ground in chapter fifteen as an encouragement, explicitly referring to the story's promise that these bodhisattvas would remain available to continue the Lotus teaching throughout the future.

Contrast to Myōe: Affect and Interpretation

A revealing contrast to Dōgen's positive appropriation of the inconceivable life-span story is the reaction of his older contemporary Myōe Shōnin (1173–1232), noted as both a model monk and insightful Kegon and Shingon scholar. The only mention of the *Lotus Sutra* in Myōe's extant *Dream Diary*, a remarkable, reflective forty-year journal of his dreams and meditative visions, is one of the earliest entries in 1196, which specifically concerns chapter sixteen on the Buddha's life-span. In the dream entry, Myōe is making summaries of a commentary on this chapter. Pondering its meaning, "tears began to flow as I yearned for the Tathagata." Later in the entry he says that from that day on he concentrated on chanting the sutra (TANABE 1992, p. 161).

Myōe's response to the inconceivable life-span of Buddha varies strikingly

from Dōgen's. The sutra story's explicit good news of the skillful means nature of Śākyamuni's decease apparently was not interpreted as reassurance of the omnipresence of Śākyamuni by Myōe, but instead inspired his intense yearning to see the literal Śākyamuni, or at least the sites of his teaching in India. Myōe seriously planned pilgrimages to India in 1203 and 1204, even attempting to calculate the distance and duration of such an unprecedented journey from Japan using the woefully inaccurate geographical information then available. He was finally dissuaded through dramatic visions from the protector deity of the Kasuga Shrine in Nara, who Myōe eventually came to understand as in some sense manifesting the Buddha's body, thereby concretizing the *Lotus Sutra* promise of the Buddha's omnipresence.¹³ Fortunately Myōe did not actually accomplish his pilgrimage, since during the previous century, Buddhism in India had been exterminated by Islamic invaders.

The *Lotus Sutra* states that Śākyamuni's *parinirvāṇa* is simply a skillful means for the benefit of those who would slacken in their own practice and dedication should they see the Buddha as still present and taking care of the world. Therefore it is ironic that Myōe, who appears unsurpassed for his dedication to the Dharma and his diligent and intelligent efforts to find practical applications of the teachings for practitioners, seemed to derive from chapter sixteen an intense, never fulfilled yearning to actually see the Buddha, or at least his relics and sacred sites. Perhaps Myōe, despite his sincere devotion, could not quite make the leap of faith in the enduring Buddha that is suggested in the *Lotus Sutra*. So Myōe might be an example of the pre-Lotus Mahāyāna practitioner who still feels the need for myriad lifetimes of practice. Myōe further exemplifies those for whom the claim of Śākyamuni's *parinirvāṇa* is specifically designated as an upāya, according to chapter sixteen; those who will practice only when motivated by Buddha's absence.

Dōgen, on the other hand, uses the story of Śākyamuni's ongoing presence as an encouragement to dedicated practice, equating the Buddha's extraordinary life-span with the undivided whole-heartedness of single-minded practice. Dōgen promotes meditative practice as a physical, ritual embodiment and expression of this enduring Buddha. Dōgen emphasizes that practice is not in order to obtain some future acquisition of awakening, but is the practice of enlightenment already present in the continuing presence of the Buddha.

While Dōgen utilizes the story to express his teaching, he simultaneously shares some of Myōe's mournful yearning for Śākyamuni. In six of the seven Nirvāṇa Day *jōdō*, or Dharma hall discourses, that appear in *Eihei Koroku*, Dōgen either references the inconceivable life-span story, or in some other way plays with the tension between his own sadness at the passing of Śākyamuni,

13. See TANABE 1992, pp. 66–69, 71–72; and MORRELL 1987, pp. 47–48, 103–22. This event was the subject of a Nō play by Zeami, a translation of which is included in the Morrell citation.

and his realization and creative interpretation of Śākyamuni as alive and present, based on the *Lotus Sutra* story in chapter sixteen. This is perhaps most poignantly expressed in Dharma hall discourse number 486, in 1252 (Dōgen's last *jōdō* for this event before he succumbed to his own final illness later that year). Dōgen said, "This night Buddha entered nirvāṇa under the twin sāla trees, and yet it is said that he always abides on Vulture Peak. When can we meet our compassionate father? Alone and poor, we vainly remain in this world... Amid love and yearning, what can this confused son do? I wish to stop these red tears, and join in wholesome action" (LEIGHTON and OKUMURA 2004, pp. 432–33).

In Dharma hall discourse number 367 given to commemorate Nirvāṇa Day in 1250, Dōgen said, "All beings are sad with longing, and their tears overflow. Although we trust his words that he always resides on Vulture Peak, how can we not be sorry about the coldness of the twin sāla trees?" (LEIGHTON and OKUMURA 2004, p. 323). The creative tension for Dōgen between Buddha's historic absence and his spiritual presence, enduring by virtue of dedicated practice and hermeneutic insight, is apparent in all of the Nirvāṇa Day *jōdō*, but is perhaps most clearly articulated in Dharma hall discourse number 225 in 1247. Dōgen says therein, "If you say Śākyamuni is extinguished you are not his disciple. If you say he is not extinguished, your words do not hit the mark. Having reached this day, how do you respond? Do you want to see the Thatāgata's life vein? Offer incense, make prostrations, and return to the monks' hall [for meditation]" (LEIGHTON and OKUMURA 2004, pp. 230–31). Dōgen recognizes the same distance from the historical Śākyamuni in both space and time that Myōe feels. But Dōgen has appropriated the *Lotus Sutra* story of emerging bodhisattvas and the long-lived Buddha to experience and express the awakening presence right in the space of his mountain monastery in thirteenth century Echizen, Japan.

Conclusion

Despite his own longing for Śākyamuni, along with other ancient ancestral masters, Dōgen employs his creative hermeneutics to interpret the *Lotus Sutra* story of the bodhisattvas arising from under the ground, and the consequent revelation of Śākyamuni Buddha's inconceivable life-span, as expressions and representations of the pervasion of the sacred and of the capacity for awakening in space and time. In the writings of Dōgen, the world expressed in the *Lotus Sutra* provides the context and import of bodhisattva practice. The open space of the realm of the underground bodhisattvas and the inconceivable life-span of Buddha support a view of a present place and time that can function as a non-dual and integrated realm of realization.

This world expressed by Dōgen using these *Lotus Sutra* stories might be seen as a variety of pure land, somewhat comparable in function to his contemporary visions of exalted realms depicted by Nenbutsu followers and in the Tendai

hongaku, or fundamental enlightenment teachings. However, it is not a realm or realization that can be automatically bestowed without the active involvement of the Buddhist devotee/practitioner. Rather, this realm is realized through the active practice propounded by Dōgen, which is also the natural expression of Dōgen's vision derived, at least in part, from the *Lotus Sutra*.

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