

3

Scripture and Its Reception: A Buddhist Case

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INTRODUCTION

In many of the religious traditions of the world certain words and texts, whether preserved and transmitted orally or in written form, are regarded in ways somewhat similar to the ways Westerners regard their scriptures. Westerners tend to call these words and texts “scriptures” or “sacred texts,” but a concept of scripture that can illuminate these phenomena in many cultures, and that directs attention to the essential or distinguishing features of these texts as opposed to others, has so far proved elusive.

In discussing what these words and texts have in common, and what distinguishes them from other words and texts in the same tradition or culture, three approaches predominate. The first points to allegations about the genesis of these texts, or to claims about their ontological status. In this view, what distinguishes scriptures or sacred texts from others is that they are believed to be revealed by transhuman powers, to convey eternal truths, or to replicate the speech of the gods.

The second is a functional approach: one often hears that what distinguishes scriptural texts from others is that they are used as normative or authoritative bases for communal life in its relations to the sacred.

The third pursues the significance of an observation about the reception of such texts: they are treated as “sacred,” that is, powerful and inviolable.

Clearly all of these approaches bring into view essential features of what makes scripture distinctive. Yet there remain other aspects of scripture and its role in human communities which these approaches do not bring fully into view. Including these aspects in our search for a generic concept would permit us to see how multidimensional an experience the human experience of words and texts as scripture is.

These other features come into view with yet another approach that includes but goes beyond the approaches mentioned above. This approach involves seeking what essentially characterizes scripture by examining all of the ways in which individuals and communities *receive* these words and texts: the ways people respond to the texts, the uses they make of them, the contexts in which they turn to them, their understandings of what it is to read them, or to understand them, and the roles they find such words and texts can have in their religious projects.

Such an approach reflects a conviction that however the "scripturality" of scripture may originate in a community, what characterizes its scripturality for persons and communities is that the words or texts in question are understood to be able to play special roles in religious life. Being able to play these special roles, scriptures come to be read and used differently from other texts. They remain scriptural as long as they are found to sustain those different ways of being read and used (which I will call "modes of reception") in the context of a religious life.

Modes of Reception: The Need for Comparative Study

To achieve a generic concept of scripture that includes what modes of reception can tell us, a comparative study of modes of reception of words and texts in many different traditions is needed.

Modes of reception are of course tradition-specific. They are shaped by the concepts of the sacred or ultimate held by a given community, and by its understanding of relationship with the sacred and/or of ultimate self-transformation.

Yet it is nonetheless true that comparative study of these modes of reception, and the drawing of general concepts from the concrete specificity of the historically found traditions, should allow what we learn of each tradition to enhance our understanding of the others. This is particularly necessary because while in any given tradition many modes are present, in any tradition at a given socio-historical moment only certain modes are fully conscious and thematized. It is not too much to hope that knowledge of more than one tradition's modes of reception, and more than one way of interpreting the meaning of such reception, will expand our awareness of the possibilities of relation to ultimacy mediated through scriptural texts, even in the traditions we know best.

A preliminary survey indicates that four fundamental modes of reception are found wherever words and texts are scriptural. These are:

1. the informative mode: allowing texts to shape one's understanding of the world. (An exploration of the informative mode should also include exploration of the views of many subtraditions that word, text and tradition are of limited value as midwives to wisdom.)
2. the transactive mode: "doing things with words"—the text is scripture because reciting or reading it enables one to act in the power of the ultimate.
3. the transformative mode: finding words a gateway to a deeper encounter with an Other or to a transformation of self; exploring the power of the text as symbol to mediate transformation and enhancement of personality.
4. the symbolic mode: finding that word or text can be itself a symbol of the ultimate.¹

A Chinese Buddhist Example

In what follows I offer a description of the reception of words and texts in a contemporary Buddhist convent in the Chinese cultural tradition of Taiwan. I will also supply some historical background to enable the reader to sense the place of the present practice in the context of the tradition that informs it.

BACKGROUND

I will begin by sketching briefly the development of different attitudes toward words and texts within the Indian and Chinese Buddhist traditions. The attitudes described here should not be confused with the modes of reception themselves. Rather, such an overview should provide a context for understanding the specific forms of those modes within the Chinese Buddhist tradition.

Indian Buddhist Attitudes toward the Tradition-Sanctioned Word

In what seems to historians to be the earliest strata of the teachings in surviving records, Buddhists, probably beginning with the Buddha, take what we might call an anti-authoritarian position with respect to the word. They assert that the words of a tradition, whether it be the Brah-

manical Vedic tradition with its revealed texts or their own Buddhist teachings, should not be taken as authoritative because of their source, but should be regarded as true only when proved to be so by the individual practitioner using her own reason and experience.²

On the other hand, the tradition never denied the importance of words and texts in transmitting the Buddha's teaching. Properly understood, the words do convey the truths one needs for successful practice toward enlightenment. This understanding of the value of words in the tradition was given greater emphasis following the disappearance of the living teacher at the Buddha's death. The tradition relates, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, that when the Buddha was asked on his deathbed who should be his successor as supreme teacher, he told his disciples to take the *Dharma* (teaching) as their refuge and their lamp.³ The tradition also relates that shortly after the Buddha's death five hundred realized disciples (*arhats*) met to recite the Buddha's teachings in order to agree on a reliable and authoritative body of teachings, since it was these which would now have such importance in guiding present and future practice.⁴ Although the teachings of the Buddha were handed down orally exclusively for many centuries after the Buddha's death, yet their importance as teaching was reflected in the stress within the tradition on accurate memorizing and reciting of these texts. Teachings were authenticated by the fact that one could demonstrate that the teachings were credible, that they had been heard by a specific hearer, that he had heard the Buddha teach them at a particular time and place, under a particular sponsorship, and to a particular assembly of listeners.⁵ This emphasis on the importance of the Buddha's words as teaching, and of clarifications and extensions of them by later disciples, we might call the kataphatic or informative reception of the word as authoritative teaching.

We find this informative, pedagogical dimension extended in early Mahāyāna *sūtras* such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, where there is an extraordinary emphasis on the importance and status of the *sūtra*, tending toward an orientation toward the text that can be termed "iconic" or "presentational."⁶ *Sūtras* now are seen as embodying, and providing a direct means of access to, all of the Buddha's knowledge, wisdom, and supernatural powers. Thus in the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example, the Buddha Śākyamuni says:

... All the *Dharmas* possessed by the Thus Come One [i.e., the Buddha], all the Thus Come One's supernatural powers of self-mastery, the treasure house of all the Thus Come One's secrets, all the Thus Come One's profound affairs are entirely proclaimed, demonstrated, revealed and preached in this scripture.⁷

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, a *sūtra* whose message is that everything, including *sūtras* and teachings, is “empty” of substantial existence, and which thus offers an authoritative teaching that teaches detachment from authoritative teaching, Śākyamuni Buddha says to Ānanda:

Therefore then, Ānanda, again and again I entrust and transmit to you this perfection of wisdom, laid out in letters, so that it may be available for learning, for bearing in mind, preaching, studying and spreading wide . . . For the Tathāgata has said that “the perfection of wisdom is the mother, the creator, the genetrix, of the past, future, and present Tathāgatas, their nurse in all-knowledge.” . . . You should attend well to this perfection of wisdom, bear it well in mind, study it well, and spread it well. And when one learns it, one should carefully analyze it grammatically, letter by letter, syllable by syllable, word by word. For as the *Dharma*-body of the past, future and present Tathāgatas is this *Dharma*-text authoritative. In the same way in which you, Ānanda, behave towards Me who at present reside as a Tathāgata—with solicitude, affection, respect and helpfulness—just so, with the same solicitude, affection and respect, and in the same virtuous spirit, should you learn this perfection of wisdom, bear it in mind, study, repeat, write and develop it, respect, revere and worship it. That is the way for you to worship Me, that is the way to show affection, serene faith, and respect for the past, future and present Buddhas and Lords . . . [I]n the same way in which I am your teacher, so is the perfection of wisdom.⁸

Lay Buddhists at first, and then all Buddhists (as the distinction between monastic and lay decreased in importance in the new Mahāyāna movements) had developed the practice of showing reverence and making offerings to the relics of the Buddha enshrined in large reliquary mounds called “*stūpas*.” In the Pali texts this practice is specifically sanctioned by the Buddha; in the *Dīgha Nikāya* the Buddha specifically recommends this practice to laypersons, saying that it will bring them peaceful minds.⁹ The *stūpa* with its relics became the place where the continuing life of the Buddha was most powerfully felt.¹⁰ In Mahāyāna texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* the text symbolically becomes assimilated to the relic of the Buddha as the locus of the Buddha’s presence and power,¹¹ and the object of offerings and reverence. In Mahāyāna *sūtras* such as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Perfection of Wisdom sūtras* the reader is told that *sūtras* are more worthy of offerings and reverence than the relics of Buddhas, because the truth (*Dharma*) that *sūtras* contain and the training that they prescribe is the source from which Buddhas come.¹²

The Mahāyāna *sūtras* emphasize that there is an all-important practical reason why *sūtras* must be memorized, copied, recited, and expounded: without this transmission, no future Buddhas would arise.¹³ *Sūtras* are to be the teachers of future generations in the same sense that Śākyamuni was the teacher of his contemporaries. Yet beyond this, it is clear that to the authors of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*, *sūtras* themselves manifest and embody the activity, wisdom, and power of the transcendent *Dharma*. *Sūtras* as words that can be recited and copied are neither clearly distinguished from the teaching that the words convey, from the transcendent wisdom to be realized through their study and practice, from the Buddha whose words they are, nor from his supernatural powers. All four of these are treated in the texts as dimensions of the same reality. A person who is reciting or copying the words or making offerings to the text or its preachers is worshipping and giving joyful attention to the *Dharma* they convey, and through doing so is in the presence of, has direct access to, and will definitely come to realize, transcendent wisdom and all-knowledge. In this understanding, words do not merely express truth, they are the living presence of true and powerful reality.

In contrast, another attitude that appears from the early days of the tradition and in the earliest texts is the suggestion that the real essence of the Buddha and the *Dharma*, namely, the ultimate truth to which the Buddha was enlightened, is beyond the grasp of words, particularly metaphysical categories, and its apprehension requires leaving words behind. In this aniconic or apophatic attitude, words are useful only in so far as they mediate immediate perception of truth, which is discovered to be inexpressible in words. This apophatic attitude becomes quite marked in later Indian and Central Asian strands of Mahāyāna, where it was explicitly taught that the word of the Buddha, as word, is not fully adequate to the communication of the experience of the Buddha's enlightenment.¹⁴ That truth transcends words and that words are 'empty' as vehicles for the transmission of truth is shown, the tradition suggests, by the Buddha's silence when asked metaphysical questions, by Vimalakīrti's "thunderous silence" when asked to express his understanding of the meaning of non-duality¹⁵ and by the oft-repeated statement that the Buddha taught for forty-nine years and never said a thing.¹⁶ In this view the words of the Buddhas are medicines to cure specific mental diseases; one who is well not only does not need them, but might be made ill by grasping onto them. These apophatic understandings of the relation between words and truth were never eclipsed; indeed, the attitude toward words within the Mahāyāna in particular may be described as a polarity between apophasis and kataphasis, with one sometimes stressed more than the other, but with both continually present and in creative tension and relationship. /

Finally, within Indian and Central Asian Mahāyāna, in both its exoteric and esoteric traditions, we find the view that certain words (*mantra*, *dhāraṇī*) are given to adherents by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to supply empowerment (*adhiṣṭhāna*) and protection in the course of their practice and preaching, support for wholesome mental states, and certain powers for mundane and transmundane purposes.¹⁷ In some conceptualizations these words are powerful because they are the very speech of cosmic Buddhas, reproduced by the adherent in its very sounds (often unintelligible to human listeners). Here the transhistorical Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are not only teachers of *Dharma*, but sustainers of practice by their empowerment (*adhiṣṭhāna*) and protection through *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs*. It is significant that here also they offer their powers and protection through the gift of words. In this essentialist view, it is understood that in the case of these words, there is an ineradicable correspondence between the specific words as mediators of ritual agency and the cosmically grounded powers they communicate.

Chinese Transformations of Indian Models

From the early days of Buddhist missionary activity in China, Chinese Buddhists drew upon a native model in order to understand how to receive the *sūtra* literature to which they were being introduced. The Buddha, they concluded, was, like Confucius, a great sage (*sheng-jen*), whose infinite wisdom led him to create a teaching (*chiao*) through which to benefit and transform the human world. To transmit this teaching he created "*ching*," a word used to translate the Sanskrit term "*sūtra*," but which was already in use as a term referring to the normative texts of the Confucian sages. Thus, *ching*, texts which are reliable in that they are the word of the Buddha, are the precious teaching of the Buddha and the means by which he transforms the world through transforming the minds of sentient beings. Were there no texts, there could be no authentic teaching, and the transformation could not take place.¹⁸

The Chinese also needed no encouragement from their Indian Buddhist counterparts to revere the faithfully transmitted written text. In India the teachings of the Buddha had at first been passed down orally; it was only much later, approximately at the time of the rise of the Mahāyāna, that the teachings were written down and that we find, as we do in early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, adherents being urged to copy and preserve written texts as well as to memorize and recite them accurately. But the Chinese received most of the Buddhist teachings in written form at a time when they already had an established tradition of placing great value upon and preserving the written classics (*ching*).¹⁹

yāna *sūtras* and commentaries grew in China, Chinese Buddhist scholars sought ways to grasp their teachings systematically and to see their inter-relationships. These scholars created hermeneutical systems that classified the various teachings, and the *sūtras* which contained them, into categories such as provisional and ultimate, abrupt and complete.²⁰ Each school within which a hermeneutical system was developed identified a *sūtra* or a group of *sūtras* as conveying the highest, complete and perfect teaching of the Buddha, while others contained teachings suited to students at lower stages of understanding. These schools, such as T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen, seem to have taught that devotion to and study of the *sūtra* containing the perfect teaching could bring one to the highest enlightenment, not simply because that *sūtra* contained the truest doctrine, but also because it embodied the full expression of the Buddha's mind. These schools combined the informative with the iconic views of *sūtras* as the words of the Buddha.

Other Chinese Buddhists, however, who began with the Indian view that the word of the Buddha is a skillful device by which the Buddha enables the adherent to make progress toward *nirvāṇa*, and from the *śūnyavādin/prajñāpāramitā* paradox that, although the Buddha preached for forty-nine years and his disciples studied his teachings (*Dharma*), the Buddha had never spoken a word and there had never been a teaching to study, arrived at a more aniconic or apophatic understanding. Here the native Chinese tradition also played a part, as Chinese Buddhists such as Seng Chao incorporated the insight of the author of the statement found in the *Chuang-tzu* that the books of the sages contain only the tracks left by their mind; there is much that they cannot communicate directly at all, and much else that contact with their living presence might communicate to later generations that their words cannot. Even with respect to what words can convey, unless the meaning of the words is grasped in everyday experience, the words remain a dead thing. Ultimately the experience of the meaning indicated by the words shows that meaning to transcend all distinctions upon which words depend. Chinese Ch'an (Zen) Buddhists in particular often affirmed that the object of study of the Buddha's words is to "get their point," that is, to discover for oneself the intuitive wisdom of *prajñā*, not to be attached to, or misled by, the study of their words and concepts. The following exchange is illustrative of the encounter between Chinese Buddhists of apophatic and kataphatic persuasions.

A lecture-master (a monk who devoted himself largely to giving lectures on the Buddhist *sūtras* and treatises) asked: "The Three Vehicles' twelve divisions of teachings (that is, the totality of the Buddhist scriptures) reveal the Buddha-nature, do they not?" "This

"Surely the Buddha would not have deceived men!" said the lecture-master. "Where is Buddha?" asked Lin-chi. The lecture-master had no reply....

... [To the whole group Lin-chi then said:] "Does anyone else have a question? If so, let him ask it now! But the instant you open your mouth, you are already way off. Why is this so? Don't you know? Venerable Śākyamuni said: '(Dharma) is separate from words, because it is neither subject to causation nor dependent upon conditions.'²¹ Your faith in this is insufficient, therefore we have banded words today."²²

From the lecture-master's pedagogical-iconic point of view, the totality of the Buddhist *sūtras*, the record of the words spoken by the Buddha himself, were not only the authoritative repositories of doctrinal theory, they also revealed by their very nature the ultimate truths of Buddhism. From the Ch'an point of view, to try to grasp the *Dharma* through stating it in words or trying to say something about it is to make it an object of thought and thereby miss it. The student must ultimately discover that the Buddha and the teaching (*Dharma*) are realities that transcend words, and that they are completely present everywhere.

THE CONVENT

The Convent Community

Briefly, the religious community of the convent from which the following observations are drawn consists of four temples, located in different cities, towns and counties, all under the supervision and administration of one *shih-fu* (roughly equivalent to abbess). Around sixty *pi-ch'iu-ni* (*bhikṣuṇī*, nuns) and a few laypeople live in the four houses taken together. The community is in a Ch'an Buddhist *Dharma*-transmission lineage, but does not emphasize seated meditation or *kung-an* (= *kōan*) practice. Nor does the practice reflect an exclusive commitment to the Pure Land tradition, though Pure Land faith is very strong, and many of the nuns say that rebirth in the Pure Land is their goal. The convent should be thought of as belonging to the catholic Chinese Buddhist community of the present day, where sectarian distinctions and *Dharma* lineages exist but often mean very little. The Chinese monastic order (*saṅgha*) as a whole follows the eclectic, synthetic tradition prevalent at least since the seventeenth century, with each abbess or abbot constrained only by custom in her or his selection of communal practices. As to individual practice, each nun is free to select from among many forms of practice and many guiding texts those

world beyond its walls.²⁴ It must offer lay people a place where they can pay reverence to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; where by offerings to the nuns and to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas they can cultivate merit to be transferred to their relatives and ancestors;²⁵ and where by the power of the good karma and cultivation of the nuns, lay people will feel an attraction to the Buddha's way out of suffering.

RECEPTION OF TEXTS IN THE CONVENT

In relation to both of these meanings of the convent's existence, the study and recitation of tradition-sanctioned texts, particularly "*sūtras*," "*mantras*" and "*dhāraṇīs*," play a very large part. Nuns recite *sūtras*, *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs* daily or continually, mentally or aloud. They copy *sūtras*, expound *sūtras*, listen to recitations and expositions of *sūtras*, meditate by visualizing personages and scenes described in *sūtras*, and read *sūtras*. Laypeople recite *sūtras*, *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs* at home silently or aloud, and go to monasteries to listen to monks and nuns expound *sūtras*. They copy *sūtras*, and sponsor the publication and distribution of *sūtras*. They form lay societies to recite *sūtras* together at the convent biweekly or monthly. If the convent and its lay associates are typical, holding these words of the tradition present in the mind, ear and mouth may be considered a central and pervasive form of practice chosen by nuns and laypeople in contemporary Chinese Buddhist communities. For these communities the tradition-sanctioned word supports, undergirds, and symbolizes their religious aspirations as much or more than the Bible supports religious life in Protestant Christian churches.

The Informative Mode: Individual Study and Attending Sūtra Lectures

The Goals of Study. One nun told me that there is a central reason why there must be monks and nuns: the *sūtra* literature is so vast that, for it to be passed down with understanding, there must be those who devote their whole lives to its study. Since there are so few monks [in Taiwan], the burden of this task now rests on nuns.

But why should this massive task be undertaken? Why is it so important to the society that there should be persons who devote their whole lives to it?

The answer was that it is by following the Buddha's teachings as they were preached by the Buddha himself that one can cross the sea of suffering and attain *nirvāṇa*.

The Hermit and the Study of Sūtras. Several of the nuns regularly read *sūtras* on their own. But the most revealing conversation that I had about this

was with a man who after various enlightenment experiences had taken up the life of a hermit in a cottage adjoining the property of the convent. He planted a garden, and placed in the cottage a complete copy of the Ta-tsang-ching, the authoritative text collection (often somewhat misleadingly called "canon") of the Chinese Buddhist tradition.²⁶ His daily routine consisted of meditating, cooking, gardening, and reading the *sūtras* and other texts in the Ta-tsang-ching, all fifty-odd volumes, massive and difficult to read, from cover to cover. When asked why he was doing this, his answer had several parts.

First, he said, for progress on the path to Buddhahood one must have both *chien-ti* and *ching-chieh*. *Chien-ti* is a matter of having correct ideas on which to base one's practice. If the ideas are wrong, the practice will go wrong. The study of *sūtras* and their commentaries, as well as the recorded sayings of Ch'an masters, leads to correct *chien-ti*. But one must also do meditation, since correct *chien-ti* alone is nothing without *ching-chieh*, advancement to a higher stage in one's mental training and concentration.²⁷

But surely one could attain a correct understanding without reading through the entire Ta-tsang-ching? He replied that his teacher had read through the entire Ta-tsang-ching after his initial enlightenment experience. His teacher had commented that it would be boring and stupid to read it through prior to an enlightenment experience, but that after such an experience, it was very helpful. He himself had had an enlightenment experience that had enabled him to enter the path, and thus was ready for the same project.

The hermit's attitude provides insight into the problems and opportunities of receiving *sūtras* in the informative mode on one's own. On the one hand, it must be done. But even with the help of commentaries, it is likely to be difficult, to the point of futility. *Sūtras* are technical, repetitive, and refer to phenomena occurring only to meditators in higher states of concentration. Above all, there are too many of them. For most people, it is appropriate to confine study and recitation to a selection only. To set out to read them all, as the hermit and his teacher have done, is unusual and admirable because of the aspiration it symbolizes.

Attending Sūtra Lectures. Given the difficulties of individual study, the most popular approach to becoming informed by the words of the Buddha is attending lectures offered by eminent monks and nuns.

In the Indian Mahāyāna, preaching the *Dharma* on the basis of *sūtras* seems to have been an early and important institutional development. Early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, such as the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, urge the practice of preaching the *Dharma* based on the *sūtras* upon all "bodhisattvas" that is, adherents of Mahāyāna. If

the picture described in these *sūtras* can be taken to reflect in some measure the reality of early Mahāyāna communities in India and Central Asia, then preaching on the basis of *sūtras* must have been one of the basic activities by which communities were built and the teaching spread.²⁸ The writing of commentaries on *sūtras* was also a principal expression of the study and the teaching of the *Dharma* within the Mahāyāna.

In China this tradition of preaching and writing commentaries on *sūtras* continued to develop. Early biographical collections called *The Lives of Eminent Monks* and the *Continued Lives of Eminent Monks* included a classification of monks as "exegetes" (*i-chieh*), indicating that from early times explanation of the meaning of *sūtras* was an important activity at which certain monks and nuns excelled. Similarly the great scholars and systematizers of Chinese Mahāyāna frequently expressed their ideas as commentaries on *sūtras*. More broadly, since early times the Chinese Buddhist tradition has institutionalized the office of "Dharma-master" (*fa-shih*). This title and function are given to the scholarly monk or nun who is qualified to expound *sūtras* orally—usually only certain *sūtras* in which he or she has specialized.²⁹ Although today in Taiwan most monks and nuns are called by the courtesy title "Dharma-master," the tradition of regarding this as a specialized office continues, as seen in the fact that only certain learned monks and nuns are regarded as truly qualified to expound *sūtras*. As in the past, such monks or nuns continue the practice of offering periodically a series of lectures on a given *sūtra*.³⁰

In the convent that is the subject of this study, no one has yet become qualified to be a lecturer or expounder of *sūtras* or of any of the Chinese Buddhist scholastic traditions. Several, however, do regularly attend lectures given at one of the larger monasteries by a monk whose learning in the field of the *Hua-yen (Avataṃsaka) Sūtra* and its commentarial tradition is widely recognized. Others attend lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra* offered by a nun who heads a Buddhist academy and specializes in the T'ien-t'ai scholastic tradition. These lectures usually take a commentarial form: the nun or monk recites and comments on each passage in the *sūtra* in turn, starting at the beginning; the entire exposition may take years if the *sūtra* is a long one.

The Transformative Mode in Lecturing and Listening to Lectures

Clearly the informative mode is not an unimportant mode of receiving texts in the religious lives of these practitioners. Yet the testimony of my informants was that transformative mode of reception—listening to exposition and reading for the sake of attainment of insight and the resulting formation of character—is an equally important dimension of the reading and study of texts.

For example, it was pointed out to me that the reading and expounding of *sūtras* is preceded by reciting the following verse to establish the right frame of mind:

The unsurpassed, profoundly deep, fine, wonderful *Dharma*,
 Difficult to meet with in hundreds of thousands of *kalpas*,
 Now I can see and hear, accept and hold it;
 My only hope is to grasp the real intention of the *Tathāgata*.

Another profound comment on the experience of listening to *sūtra* lectures was made by an intelligent and devout young lay woman, a teacher of English at a Buddhist high school. She said that as a young student she had attended *sūtra* lectures “to get something out of it.” She had noticed many old ladies just sitting back and doing their recitation of Amitābha’s name on their strings of beads as they listened, not taking notes or even appearing to listen too closely.³² She had come to see that these ladies had the right attitude: not to listen with the intent to gain something, but to let the mind become calm (the name recitation would help), and let what struck you strike you. That was the only way that what was living in the text and in the spirit of the expositor would call forth what was living in you.

She also said that in the old days a teacher would expound a passage from a given *sūtra* in the morning, and in the evening the students would be called upon to expound the same passage again. If they just spouted what they had heard the teacher say that morning, they were scolded, for the ultimate result of such rote learning would be that with each generation the life of the teaching would be further lost.

She also said that in *sūtra* lecturing, as in preaching, the authority of the exposition comes both from the fact that the text is the Buddha’s word and from the perceived degree of inner understanding and attainment of the *sūtra* lecturer. Merely clever or learned expositions of the *sūtras*, and even rhetorically moving ones, are not ones to which people listen day after day or week after week. This is because the listener listens both to the text and to the heart/mind of the expounder, and the aim is both deeper knowledge of the teaching and personal transformation of the hearer.³³

Thus there is continuity between contemporary attitudes and those of the earlier Indian and Chinese Buddhist traditions. The pedagogical, kataphatic approach to the sanctioned word vital in both the Indian and Chinese traditions still remains important. Study of the Buddha’s words is seen as essential to the correct understanding on which sound practice is based. One chooses to read them, lectures on them carefully, treats

them with reverence as one seeks instruction from them, immerses oneself in them with a mind open to insight.

Yet at the same time, contemporary nuns and their lay friends emphasize the transformational dimension of study and listening to lectures. All of the persons I talked with told me, in one way or another, that words are meaningless or useless without insight, and that study should not be carried out in such a way as to block the insight, causing the teaching and the learner to become more nearly dead rather than more fully alive. In this sense, truth is transmitted not through words or intelligence or cognitive understanding alone, but from an enlightened mind to a mind capable of insight. I would suggest that this kind of reflection on the transformative dimension of informative reception is typical of persons who are receiving texts as scriptures, and that only texts that can sustain such dual reception continue to be scriptures.

The Transactive Mode

From one point of view, this essay in its entirety could have been entitled "The Reception of Scriptures as Ritual Action." To read, listen to, recite, study, copy, and meditate upon scriptures in religious traditions is in every case an action, and one that takes place in a ritual context.

In discussing the transactional mode, however, we are concerned with reception of texts specifically *for the purpose of* taking some kind of action or establishing some kind of relationship. We will speak here of the transactional mode where scriptural words are received as given to be used in ritual action, not principally with an eye to one's own transformation but in order to obtain protection or powers; to create merit; to bring benefits to others; to enact confession or repentance; to make vows; to offer devotion and praise; and to express and bring into effect relationships between members of the community living and dead, and between those members and transhuman agents.

Action as Understood within Mahāyāna Buddhist Traditions. In the Buddhist tradition all of human existence is understood on one level as consisting of actions (Sk. *karma*) (of body, speech, or mind) and the fruits (Sk. *phala*) of actions. Thus, any interaction with a text is seen as a meaningful action that bears fruit (has consequences) for the attainment of one's highest aspirations to Buddhahood and for one's life in this world (the realm of *samsāra*). In Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist *sūtras* the concept of merit (Sk. *puṇya*) is invoked to refer to the capacity of good actions to bear good worldly fruits for the actor.³⁴ Likewise merits incurred by one person that would ordinarily produce one kind of fruit may be transformed so that they bear fruits of another kind for that same person, or transferred to another person.

In addition to the notion that actions in general are marked by being meritorious, harmful or neutral, there is the idea that specific actions of body, speech and mind are appropriate to those who seek Buddhahood. This is the case not only because they are highly meritorious, but also because they are 'skillful,' that is, directly instrumental in the pursuit of the religious goal. These include among others: repentance; feeding hungry ghosts; giving; practicing concentration (*dhyaṇa*); and reciting names of Buddhas, *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs* as a way of establishing connection and receiving empowerment offered by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

These specific actions must, however, be supplemented by the deliberate creation of merit through all kinds of good actions. The need for this kind of merit creation is presented within the rhetoric of contemporary Chinese Buddhist practice as a function of the vast store of negative habit energies that our past actions have brought about through countless aeons. Due to the power of delusion, every thought, word and deed of each sentient being during countless lifetimes has been tinged with ignorance and selfish desire, and thus has created negative fruits. This is a tremendous force working against enlightenment, as well as against ordinary, mundane well-being. To have any hope at all, a practitioner has to act to create enormous positive merit and eliminate past negative accumulations.

Reciting and Copying Sūtras as a Generalized Meritorious Action. Reciting, reading and copying *sūtras* are among the vastly meritorious actions that can eliminate past negative accumulations.³⁶ Most Mahāyāna *sūtras* teach that their own propagation through memorizing, reciting, and copying is an act of immense merit. In China as in other Mahāyāna countries, monks and nuns have taken up *sūtra* recitation as a form of practice. This is encouraged, for example, by the *Sūtra of Brahma's Net*, a rule book for monks and nuns probably written in China. This text, which from earliest times has served as a fundamental guide to monastic practice, is studied today by every nun and monk at the time of ordination. It gives ten major commandments and forty-eight minor commandments for monks and nuns, and including the following, the 44th minor commandment:

As a child of the Buddha, one must always with singleness of heart accept, observe, read and recite the *sūtras* and *vinaya* of the Mahāyāna.³⁷

Not only was reciting *sūtras* always enjoined on practitioners, but it also was specifically selected by some monks and nuns as a practice on which to concentrate their efforts. In China from early times monks and nuns took the continual recitation of a particular *sūtra* as a special prac-

tice.³⁸ Many believed that chanting a given *sūtra* continually was also an especially effective means for generating supernormal powers.³⁹

Monks and nuns were by no means the only practitioners to devote themselves to merit creation and devotion through *sūtra* recitation. Since earliest times in China, as in other Mahāyāna countries, laypeople have participated indirectly by making offerings to monks and nuns as “fields of merit” for the recitation of *sūtras*; the merit that grows as a fruit of this planting is transferred to the ancestors or relatives of the lay donors or devoted to the fulfillment of other desires. Indeed, the chanting of *sūtras* is the most common form of merit cultivation and transference by monks and nuns that occurs as a result of lay sponsorship. The Buddhist publishing industry also is largely supported by lay donors planting merit by sponsoring the copying and publication of *sūtras* and other Buddhist texts.

More directly, lay people also formed societies that met regularly to recite *sūtras*. The one founded in Hang-chou in A.D. 822 by the monk Nan-ts’ao illustrates the fully developed form that these *sūtra*-recitation societies were to take. In A.D. 826 the famous poet Po Chü-i (722-846) wrote an account of the society:

Monk Nan-ts’ao . . . invited monk Tao-feng of the Ling-yin Monastery to lecture on the *Hua-yen Sūtra*. When he heard about [the Buddha] Vairocana in the section of the Lotus-womb World, [Nan]-ts’ao became so elated that he uttered an earnest wish, hoping that he could urge a group of one hundred thousand people, monks and laymen, to recite the *Hua-yen Sūtra*. Each of the one hundred thousand people would in turn urge a thousand others to recite one chapter of the same *sūtra*. The entire assemblage would meet together quarterly. [Nan]-ts’ao also carried out his earnest wish and organized the group into a society, and regulated the proceedings through quarterly vegetarian feasts. From the summer of 822 to the present autumn, fourteen such vegetarian feasts have been held. At each feast, [Nan]-ts’ao offered incense respectfully and knelt before the image of the Buddha, making the following supplication, “May I and every member of the society be reborn before Vairocana in his paradise within the Golden Wheel of the Precious Lotus, floating on the Great Ocean of Fragrant Waters in the Lotus-womb World. Then I will be satisfied.” [Nan]-ts’ao solicited enough funds from the members to purchase an estate of ten *ch’ing* of land, the income from which was used to defray the expenses of the vegetarian feasts⁴⁰

Po Chü-i's own comments on this lay society give an indication of how such practices were conventionally regarded:

I have heard that the merit of donating one strand of hair or one grain of rice will never be lost; how much greater is the merit gained in preparing with ceaseless energy the boundless offering of four vegetarian feasts annually, supplied by the income of a thousand *mou*? I have heard that the power of one earnest wish and the merit of [reciting] one verse will never be lost; how much greater then is the merit accruing from a thousand mouths uttering the twelve divisions of the canon? Moreover, how much greater also when hundreds of thousands of ears are listening to myriads of *sūtras*?⁴¹

In the convent these traditions of recitation of *sūtras* for the sake of the creation and transfer of generalized merit continue, most notably in four forms:

First, at the death of relatives of lay members (*hsin-t'u*), or on memorial days and anniversaries of their deaths, a certain number of nuns are invited to the homes of lay members to recite *sūtras*. The merit is transferred to the dead relatives. This practice is conducted chiefly in the homes of families marking a day in the funeral cycle of forty-nine and then one-hundred days following the death, and then marking yearly anniversaries of the death of a relative.⁴²

Second, *sūtras* are recited intensively during the special *Dharma* assemblies (*C. fa-hui*) held several times a year (see the discussion of *Dharma* assemblies below).

Third, the *Sūtra of the Past Vows of the Earth Store (Kṣitigarbha) Bodhisattva*⁴³ is recited daily by the nuns throughout the seventh month, with the merit transferred to the ancestors of the lay members of the convent.⁴⁴ The context is provided by Kṣitigarbha's "birthday" on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, and by the fact that the whole month is devoted to expressing compassion and filial piety through assistance to those reborn as hungry ghosts and in the hells. Lay people come to join in those daily recitations, taking their places at long tables at which the *sūtra* texts are set before them. During that month also, a special hymn to Kṣitigarbha is read as part of the daily office. The *sūtra* itself describes the hells and their punishments in vivid detail, as well as the sins to which they correspond. It then describes the vows and acts of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha to free those reborn in the hells. Kṣitigarbha vowed to devote all his merit to that purpose until all were freed.

Fourth, on lay initiative a lay society similar to the ones mentioned

above meets regularly twice a month throughout the year at one house of the convent to recite the *Lotus Sūtra* together and sponsor a vegetarian meal. The members of the society, called the “Lotus Association,” are all women. From ten to twelve o’clock in the morning on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, the women recite as many chapters as they can in the time allotted. The nuns lead them in this recitation on their rhythm instruments, and then at noon perform with them an extended service of offerings to the Buddha. This service includes requests for the transfer of the merit that has accrued from the recitation to the members’ relatives and to all sentient beings. After a short sermon by the abbess, the twice-monthly event ends in the convent refectory with a vegetarian lunch prepared by the nuns. The activities of this Lotus Association constitute one of the main organized ways in which this house of the convent interacts with lay people.

Reciting Texts as Action for Specific Purposes: The Daily Office and the Dharma Assemblies. More important to the nuns than the practice of simply reciting *sūtras* in order to create and transfer generalized merit is the practice of reciting certain words and texts to bring about specific effects. To recite these texts sincerely and single-mindedly is to take the action of creating those specific fruits. Examples include texts that bring the practitioner powers for specific uses; texts that transfer merit toward a specific fruit (e.g., rebirth in the Pure Land); texts that enable one to take actions to help others, such as those that release the denizens of the hells and bring them to the convent to receive food and preaching; texts that invoke the names of many Buddhas for the purpose of repentance to wipe out past transgressions; and texts that consist of vows to set the direction for the future.

Often specific modes of receiving these words are mandated in the canonically preserved versions of the text. That is to say, not only are the words to be spoken prescribed, but also what she is to do as she recites the text, what she is to imagine and think about as she is saying the prescribed words and carrying out the prescribed actions, and what effects she should expect. Often a narrative is included, to provide the reason and context for the Buddha’s original gift of the word or text, as well as a model of the way it should be received. These texts exist so that actions can be carried out in a ritual context.

In addition, one can distinguish still another kind of text whose recitation constitutes a kind of action: the “expressive text.” An example would be the hymns included in the morning and evening recitation services that express gratitude and praise.

Ritual Action and Texts in the Daily Offices. One important context for this kind of reception of texts is the “daily office” carried out in most convents and monasteries morning and evening.⁴⁵

Commentaries tell us that one purpose of these morning and evening recitations is to guide and sustain the practice of monks and nuns by providing them with a “daily work.” Performing this daily work will assure that they are doing enough toward enlightenment (and making enough merit) to justify their continuing to receive offerings from the laity. It also will guarantee that beginners have the right understanding of practice.⁴⁶

Still other goals of these recitations, however, are evident from the content and purposes of the text chosen. The daily offices consist primarily of transactive texts (including *dhāraṇīs*) found in the Ta-tsang-ching. The actions that are taken by reciting these texts include:

i. Protecting the practice of the nuns from disturbing forces such as demons and sexual desires, and invoking, through *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs*, various special conditions and powers to promote successful practice, and to protect the monastery and the nation.

The morning daily office begins with a recitation of the *Śūraṅgama Mantra*, which has the specific purpose of dispelling sexual temptations, and thus facilitating single-minded practice the rest of the day. Its effectiveness in defeating sexual imaginings was mentioned to me specifically by more than one nun. For example, one of the nuns told me that sometimes in the night she experiences feelings of sexual longing or imagination. The remedy, she says, is to recite a *mantra* like the *Śūraṅgama Mantra* immediately. If one does this, the feeling will go away.

The *Śūraṅgama Mantra* is followed by ten other *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs* that protect the practitioners and foster practice in specific ways; for example, one assures that the practitioner will have enough material resources to continue to practice. Another important *dhāraṇī* included in the daily office is the Great Compassion *Dhāraṇī* of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. This specifically invokes Avalokiteśvara’s protection against all kinds of demonic forces.

ii. Feeding hungry ghosts, through a tantric-derived ritual called the “*Meng-shan shih-shih*”.

A short form of this ritual is done daily; it makes up a rather large part of the evening office. By the use of *mantras*, those who suffer as hungry ghosts, unable to eat or drink but perpetually hungry, are enabled to eat and drink; then seven visible grains of rice are multiplied, thanks to another *mantra* that must be said with single-minded concentration, into millions of grains of rice so that the hungry ghosts may be satisfied.

This done, the *Dharma* is preached to them, and the “Three Refuges” are taken on their behalf. The nuns told me stories about the necessity of keeping one’s mind on rice while the multiplication *mantra* was being said. One nun had found her mind wandering to the question of where she had left her room key, and thus had created millions of room keys for the hungry ghosts!

iii. Offering praise and gratitude to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

This is done by reciting and chanting hymns of Chinese origin. At the very beginning of the morning and evening offices a hymn, called the “incense hymn,” invokes the presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Later hymns, particularly in the evening office, praise Amitābha Buddha and describe his Pure Land.

iv. Repenting all faults.

This is another rather large sub-ritual of the daily office. Rituals of repentance have a long history in Indian, Central Asian and Chinese Buddhism, and at times have constituted a principal activity of monks.⁴⁷ The particular sub-ritual used today in the daily office is not found in this form in a canonical text, and the tradition holds that this particular ritual was compiled in China.⁴⁸ This ritual accomplishes repentance through the recitation of the names of eighty-eight Buddhas.

v. Establishing connection with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas by invoking their names.

Within the office, certain names of *sūtras* and names and titles of Buddhas are recited because they serve as a channel of invocation or connection between the individual and powerful Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The notion here seems akin to the notion of the *mantra*: the name, title, image, *mudrā* or *mantra* of a Buddha is provided for the explicit purpose of providing a means of participating in the reality of that Buddha, with the expectation that a bond will be formed and the worshipper transformed.⁴⁹

vi. Reciting Amitābha Buddha’s name and seeking rebirth in Amitābha Buddha’s Pure Land.

The evening office includes a rather long passage of repeated recitation of Amitābha’s name, done as a chant, while the nuns proceed ceremonially around the Buddha Hall.⁵⁰

vii. Refuges and vows.

Repeatedly within the offices nuns take refuge in the Buddha, chiefly through reciting different versions of the “Three Refuges”: “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the *Dharma*, I take refuge in the *Saṅgha* (the Assembly of the Buddha’s followers).” The nuns also take vows concerning their intention to practice the path and reach Buddhahood. This is done chiefly through reciting the four “Bodhisattva Vows” in various versions.

ix. Transferring merit.

On every occasion that merit is made, it is transferred to the benefit of all sentient beings. This is done by a formulaic verse.

The Yearly Dharma Assemblies. A second context for recitation as action was the cycle of *Dharma* assemblies on a regular schedule each year. At each of these a central liturgical and merit-making activity was the recitation of texts. On all of these occasions lay associates of the convent would come to the convent to participate in the services and in the recitation of texts, and would sponsor these occasions, so that the merit derived therefrom would be transferred to their ancestors or living relatives.

The most important of these *Dharma* assemblies is held for several days surrounding the fifteenth day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar. This is the *Yü-lan-p'en* festival.⁵¹ Its themes are: (a) the compassion of the Buddha in allowing the living to assist the dead with merit and sermons, so that the dead may escape the punishments they have earned, and speedily attain a better birth; and (b) the filial devotion of children who act to free their parents and ancestors. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the *Fo-shuo Yü-lan-p'en ching* (a text probably written in China, but sometimes referred to in the West as the *Ullambana Sūtra* on the assumption that it had a Sanskrit prototype of that name) is read.⁵² This describes the efforts of the monk Maudgalyāyana to free his mother from intense suffering as a hungry ghost, the compassion of the Buddha who enables him to do so, and the specific method given to him by the Buddha. The prescribed method is to call together all of the monks of the ten directions on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (the end of the rain retreat) and give them a spectacular feast. The monks then transfer merit to the parents and ancestors of seven generations, and Maudgalyāyana's mother is released.

Further, for each of three days during this festival, one part of a three-part sermon is read to those reborn in the realms of suffering (in the hells, as a hungry ghost, or as an animal). Each of the three sections takes two hours to chant, and a large number of lay people participate. This text, named *San-shih hsi-nien fo-shih*, is a basic exposition of Buddhist teaching on the Buddha, the *Dharma* and the *Saṅgha*.⁵³ It is recited with the intention of inducing, in the hungry ghosts and denizens of the hells, wisdom and the desire to be reborn in the Pure Land.

In the eleventh month another *Dharma* assembly is held, at which the *Diamond Sūtra* is recited, along with the *Water Penance* (*Shui ch'an*), a text attributed to a T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618–907) monk.⁵⁴ The *Diamond Sūtra* is a short Mahāyāna Wisdom School (*Prajñāpāramitā*) work teaching that the ultimate truth is that all things are empty of self-existence, and

therefore cannot be grasped onto. Again, lay people participate in the recitations, and the merit is transferred to their ancestors and relatives.

Finally in the spring a third *Dharma* assembly is held, this time featuring a reading of the *Penance of Liang Wu-ti*, a sixth century emperor famous for his support of Buddhism.⁵⁵ At this *Dharma* assembly, as at all the others, the ritual popularly called “*Fang yen-k’ou*” (Release of the Burning Mouths) is performed. This ritual is performed by reciting an esoteric Yoga ritual text called the “*Yü-chia yen-k’ou*.”⁵⁶ Lay people bring food offerings. The nuns, through the *dhāraṇī*, *mantras* and *mudrās* prescribed by the text, invite the denizens of the hells and the hungry ghosts into the convent worship hall, opening the gates of the hells to make this possible. Through the ritual *mantras* and *mudrās* the nuns then open the mouths of the hungry ghosts, preach *Dharma* to them, feed them, and send them away from the convent. This is a more extended version of the “*Meng-shan shih-shih*” that is part of every evening liturgy.

A Theoretical Note. We will return below to a somewhat more extended note on the general theory that underlies the modes of reception found in the convent. I wish here only to mention that on several occasions the nuns explained to me how they think transactional reception is effective. Their explanations show that they entertain simultaneously two metaphors, one of external transaction and one of transaction taking place within Mind, with the latter metaphor considered to be the more true one. An example from my field notes:

I was talking today with Ch’en-ta shih about my family situation. She said that I should seek the help of Kuan-yin (Avalokiteśvara), that Kuan-yin is compassion, is very powerful, and meets every need. I said that another teacher had advised me to practice the visualization of Kuan-yin. She replied that that was an excellent idea, but that I could also profit from walking around my room reciting Kuan-yin’s name. This was also a good way of practicing *ting* (Sk. *samādhi*), since one’s mind quieted down as one did so. She showed me how to walk, reciting the name on a four-beat pattern. I asked whether she herself had ever sought help from Kuan-yin. Yes, over this matter of her brother’s military service, about which she had told me. She had made a vow to recite the “Universal Gate” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* every morning as part of her petition to Kuan-yin to help her brother. It is important, she said, that one is sincere, single-minded, in one’s petition, and that one keep on seeking Kuan-yin’s help until the problem is resolved. It is sincerity that makes the response (C. *kan-ying*) by Kuan-yin possible. It is like electricity—both the electric cord and the light bulb are necessary

to produce light. The Bodhisattva is in your mind, and it is your mind that is disturbed and is seeking, and it is the sincerity in your seeking mind that makes the connection possible.

Almost all of the world's sacred texts contain material which is, like many of the texts mentioned above, explicitly understood to be of a ritual nature, that is, useful in bringing about an action or a transaction of some kind. What is striking in the Buddhist case is the degree to which all interactions with all texts, all receptions, are understood to be actions and transactions. Any contact with a tradition-sanctioned text is meritorious, and is urged on practitioners as such.

I have chosen the word "transactional" rather than, for example, the word "performative" to name this category, to call attention to the importance of the fact that in any transactional reception, actions are being taken, and transactions occurring, on many different levels. In the cases we have looked at, transactions take place on the level of *karma*, and also between persons and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They also occur symbolically, economically and socially between lay people and nuns, and lay people and their families. Acting in the power of the ultimate is clearly a very important dimension of the reception of texts in this tradition. I would suggest that important parallels exist in other traditions as well, though perhaps not always so explicitly underlined by the theoretical dimension of the tradition.

The Transformative Mode

Texts would not become and remain scriptural unless in and through their reception people experienced transforming power. While the informative and transactional dimensions of the reception of texts as "scripture" are universal and important, religious communities regularly point to the transforming power experienced in and through texts as the special mark of their sacredness. In accordance with the importance that they place on this dimension, religious people often receive texts with attitudes and in contexts that invite experiences of transformation through them.

I have noted above that as Chinese Buddhists read, listen to, study and comment on *sūtras* in order to become informed by their account of reality, they also seek at the same time to be transformed in their personal capacity to experience wisdom and compassion.

Looking at other areas of their religious practice, an interesting pattern emerges. As we have seen above, certain *sūtras*, *mantras*, *dhāraṇīs*, tantric rituals, essays and sermons are specifically intended for transactive purposes, or are recited with transactive intentions. Other texts (e.g.,

repentance rituals, hymns of invocation and praise, certain *dhāraṇīs* and *mantras*) are intended to aid the practice of the practitioner herself rather than some other person. These texts and their ritual contexts intend and expect transformative effects. The nuns and lay people say little about transformation experienced in connection with the communal transactive *sūtra* and *dhāraṇī* recitations of the daily office or the *Dharma* assemblies. They also seem to take for granted the transforming power of the recitations of transformative texts included in their communal practice, though if questioned they attest to their transformative power. In contrast, they speak voluntarily and enthusiastically about the transforming power experienced through reciting, reading or copying *sūtras* and *dhāraṇīs* in their individual elective practice, whether that practice was principally transactive or transformative in intent.

Sūtra Recitation. In connection with the practice of *sūtra* recitation, for example, I was told a good deal about the changes the nuns had observed in an elderly lay woman.

There were living in the convent community several older women who, although retaining lay status, intended to end their days there. When I asked them why they were there, they replied that they had chosen to live there so that they would be able to spend their time reciting *sūtras* and worshiping the Buddha, while enjoying the merit of a vegetarian diet. One of these women indeed did spend the whole day every day in the large Buddha Hall, sitting by a window where the light streamed in, silently or softly reading aloud the words of *sūtra* texts that she held in her lap.

I saw this woman at the convent at intervals over a ten year period. When I first knew her, she was clearly a difficult person. Her face had a habitually sour expression, and she seemed constantly to be finding fault with the nuns. When I returned to the convent several years after our first meeting, she appeared to be a different person. She smiled often and seemed to have only kind things to say. She expressed affection for the younger nuns, who were clearly quite fond of her. On one of my last visits to the convent I learned that she had died the previous day. The younger nuns were most moved and impressed by the manner of her death. Despite the fact that she was not ill, she had seemed to know that she would die very soon, and had made a special trip to the city to see a young nun with whom she was close. When the nun, busy at the time, had suggested that she come the following week, the elderly woman had insisted that the visit must take place immediately. The day following the visit she had died suddenly and peacefully. The nuns saw in this sequence of events a pattern familiar from the tradition: the person whose practice is advanced can foretell her death, and dies peacefully, usually in a state

of mental composure (*samādhi*) and without suffering. The nuns attributed this evidence of the lay woman's progress on the path to her years of reading *sūtras* in the Buddha Hall.

Copying Sūtras. The following excerpt from my field notes contains a telling account of the transformative effects of copying *sūtras* as a way of concentrating the mind:

T'an Lao-shih (a lay woman) has gradually admitted to me her interest in Buddhist understandings of the world. She says sometimes that she is not a scholar like me, but rather "just a superstitious worshiper of Bodhisattvas" (an altogether too modest disclaimer). She reads *sūtras* like the *Heart Sūtra* and the *Diamond Sūtra* over and over, not worrying as a scholar would about whether she understands the occasional transliterated Sanskrit words, but just reading. She is also a painter, and showed me one day at her home her paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. She is a wonderful painter of eyes—all of the beings in her paintings seem alive because their eyes have real spirit.

She says that she has learned to let things go, not to get upset about things. To see that the things of this world are like smoke, soon over. One day at lunch, T'an Lao-shih told the story of how she had come to Buddhist faith. She had arrived in Taiwan with a child and no husband, herself only seventeen. (I gather that her husband had fought on the communist side and died in the civil war.) She was very shy and had led a sheltered life, and finding herself having to confront all kinds of problems, was overwhelmed. The government read her mail and searched her drawers on suspicion that she might be keeping in touch with her husband's friends. She worked in a factory by day and went to school at night, eventually earning a graduate degree at a highly respected university. No one understood why she did not remarry immediately. She said that she began to discipline her mind to see everything as not worth worrying about. It took a long while, but gradually this discipline began to take effect. She trained herself not to care what others thought or said, not to get involved in the conversations of her colleagues at the school where she taught, conversations about what this colleague had said or that colleague had done. Having been trained as a child in calligraphy, she began to copy *sūtras* as a mental discipline, not worrying about whether she understood all the words. She also practiced Buddha-name recitation, and began the practice of thanking the Bodhisattvas for their protection. Gradually these practices began to have an effect, and her mind was able to become very still.

She continues the practice of copying *sūtras*, copying in the morning before work, and painting in the evening.

T'an Lao-shih's practice has several dimensions; for our purposes I wish to call attention particularly to her practice of copying *sūtras* as a mental discipline. T'an Lao-shih says that she reads and copies the *sūtras* not so much to understand their content but to drive unworthy distractions from her mind. Yet, the fact that she copies *sūtras*, and not the daily newspaper, shows that they have meaning for her as symbols and expressions of *Dharma*. The inner intention here is to let go of all deluded thoughts, of all mental objects other than those symbolized by these texts. The act of copying is an aid to concentration for the purpose of realizing within the mind the infinite wisdom and stillness symbolized by the text.

Sūtra and Dhāraṇī Recitation. One popular focus of such practice is two texts provided within the canon that serve as a special channel between the practitioner and the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (C. Kuan-yin), the Bodhisattva who promises to rescue all who call upon her/him from difficulties and dangers in the present life.

In the following instance it is clear that the nun Ch'en-chih shih, who has taken a vow to recite a chapter of a *sūtra* every morning, does not understand herself to be doing this solely because she wants to impress her memory with its content, or even to have ever fresh acquaintance with it. She is doing it in the context of establishing a link or resonance between her own mind and that of Avalokiteśvara, and text is the preferred symbolic means of doing this, a means provided by Avalokiteśvara her/himself:

Ch'en-chih shih said that she has an image of Kuan-yin (Avalokiteśvara) in her room, and every morning gets up and goes through a book that contains the "Universal Gate" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*⁵⁷ and the "Great Compassion *Dhāraṇī*."⁵⁸ The latter is divided into eighty-four phrases; each phrase is illustrated by a picture of Kuan-yin that represents the form of compassionate activity invoked by the phrase. She prostrates herself from a standing position after reciting each phrase and looking at each picture—that makes eighty-four prostrations. In the winter, she says, the result is that her whole body is wonderfully warm.

Here Ch'en-chih shih tells of the transforming effect on her body of this practice that links her mind and the mind of Avalokiteśvara. (Within this tradition the warming effect of bowing is not attributed

solely to the heat normally generated in any physical exercise.)

These morning recitations and prostrations are only the beginning, however. Ch'en-chih shih told me that throughout the day, as she does her work in the kitchen or sweeps the front garden, she is mentally reciting the Great Compassion *Dhāraṇī*. When someone speaks to her and she finds herself interrupted, she starts over. In addition to this constant recitation, she also makes sure that she does it with full concentration twenty-one times a day. She says that as a result her mind is very quiet and accepting.⁵⁹ Ch'en-chih shih also says that another reason for reciting the Great Compassion *Dhāraṇī* is that it provides protection from ghosts and other misfortunes. "When you recite it as far as the syllable 'ang,'" she said, "the ghosts bow down in homage."

In the above examples, we have seen a number of ways in which interactions with words—*sūtras*, *mantras*, *dhāraṇīs*—have been understood to be related to transformation in the practitioner herself. What is valued is a transformation in one's experience of daily life; the experienced transformation is valuable for its own sake, but perhaps more valuable for being understood to be a step forward along a path toward the total transformation symbolized as 'enlightenment' or *nirvāṇa*.

In some cases the transformation is thought to come about through the greater concentration of mind (*śamādhi*, the second of the "three studies") that recitation or copying makes possible. In other cases (e.g., that of the formerly sour old lady), it is the transforming power of attending to the Buddha's word (*Buddhavacana*) as *Dharma* that is given the credit.

In still other cases the effects are understood to result from the specially constituted power of the *mantra* or *dhāraṇī*, or from the power of the compassion of the Bodhisattva invoked by that *mantra* or *dhāraṇī*. Avalokiteśvara gave practitioners the Great Compassion *Dhāraṇī* in order (among other things) to protect them from demonic disturbance in their practice, an effect that is noticeable in a transformation of one's own experience.⁶⁰

The Symbolic Mode

One of the intriguing features of the history of the Buddhist tradition is the appearance of "the cult of the book" in the early Mahāyāna. As mentioned above, there is evidence that *sūtras* at times replaced relics as the supreme symbol of the presence of the living power of the Buddha. It is no longer common practice for *sūtras* to be enshrined as the central object of worship in a monastery or convent. Yet enough remains of this idea—that *sūtra* is the most appropriate symbol to stand for Buddha or *Dharma*—to make it unsurprising that a study of the role

of words in a Chinese convent would lead one to attend to a fourth mode of reception, the reception of words as symbols of ultimate truth and power.

In this mode, words and texts are received as symbols that stand for and convey a sense of the ultimate truth and its power. Here texts are read and recited, or alluded to in representation, not so much with their content in mind, nor even with an eye to their transformative and transactional powers, but rather as symbols of the powerful truth in which they are grounded.

Two kinds of symbolic meaning can be distinguished, even though a given symbol usually carries both. The first kind is social meaning. For example, a text serves as a symbol that carries social meanings when it symbolizes the sources and bearers of the authority of the tradition, and even when it symbolizes the nature of the tradition and of the world it imagines.

The second kind is ultimate meaning. Religious symbols have the power of pointing to that which transcends even traditions, that which is ontologically and ethically ultimate. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith says in an article on "Religion as Symbol":

There is more to human life than meets the eye. More to oneself; more to one's neighbor; more to the world that surrounds us. There is more to the past out of which we come; and especially, it would seem, more to the present moment, maybe even infinitely more. There is more to the interrelationships that bind us together as persons. And the further we probe, men have always found, the deeper the mystery, or the reward, or the involvement. It is this "more," perhaps, that provides at least one of the bases for human religion. We men have seldom been content to be "superficial," to remain on the surface, to imagine that reality does not transcend our finite grasp; and throughout most of our history on this planet we have ordered our lives, both personal and cultural, in terms of that transcendence.

Yet how is one to point to what one does not visually see? How to resort to a milieu beyond all space? How to talk or to think about what transcends not only words but the reach of the mind? How even to feel about what one does not touch? Man's inherent and characteristic capacity to do these things finds expression through his special relation to symbols. These have proven over the centuries sometimes more, sometimes less, adequate to such a task, but in any case indispensable, and ubiquitous.⁶¹

A text in a religious tradition carries this kind of meaning when it

is a symbol of the true nature of things and of the locus of true power for good.

Both are important dimensions of the symbolic reception of scripture, which like other religious symbols, is polysemic. But the most important dimension to the continued reception of scripture as scripture is undoubtedly the second.

It is important to remember that symbols do more than “express” or “represent” ultimate truth or meaning. As Smith continues:

Such symbols, it turns out, have the power not merely to express men’s otherwise inchoate awareness of the richness of what lies under the surface, but also to nurture and to communicate and to elicit it. They have an activating as well as a representational quality, and an ability to organize the emotions and the unconscious as well as the conscious mind, so that into them men may pour the deepest range of their humanity and from them derive an enhancement of the personality. Without the use of symbols, including religious symbols, man would be radically less than human⁶²

To point out that symbols have this activating power is to draw attention to the deep connection between the symbolic mode of reception and the modes discussed above—particularly, of course, the transformative mode. Indeed, the burden of my argument is that scripture is what it is because of the ways it is read and used, and because it can sustain being read and used in such ways: informative, transactional, transformative. In turn, the fact that scripture can be read and used in such ways enables it to become a symbol of the transcendent, a sacralizing agent, even at times an icon of the sacred, within a religious community. Thus symbolic reception depends upon the other modes of reception, and vice versa.

The Symbolic Reception of Words in the Buddhist Tradition. In the Buddhist tradition, words become symbols not only of social relationships, that is, of the authority and power of the tradition, but also of that which transcends. One way of stating this is to say that they not only are, but also symbolize, *Dharma*.

At the outset it is useful to distinguish two different degrees of symbolizing that words and texts are understood to be able to do. Words and texts can be symbols in a weak sense and in a strong sense.

In the weak sense, words can stand for the truth of the tradition, or make it present symbolically in ritual action without in themselves being understood as agents of power in any strong sense.

Words can also be symbols in a stronger sense, one that might be called “magical.” In this understanding, powers are given to the human

mind and to human agency through words, due to a cosmically instituted link between the words as essential mediators of ritual agency and the cosmic powers they invoke. The ways in which *mantras* and *dhāraṇī* are understood in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist communities often exemplifies this mode. They are interpreted as representation-in-sound of cosmic powers (or, since the cosmos is often understood to be also the mind, of mental powers); they elicit those; but beyond this, they give those powers a real presence, understood in a way partly analogous to the way the presence of the divine is understood in Western Christian sacraments or in Eastern Orthodox Christian icons.⁶³

It is on the weaker of these senses, the ways in which *sūtras* symbolize *Dharma*, that I wish to focus, for this is the sense that illustrates the symbolic mode of reception at the point of its widest comparative applications. What is the basis for saying that *sūtras*, which are *Dharma*, also at the same time symbolize *Dharma*?

In Buddhism the authority and power of *Dharma* and the authority, mystery and power of Buddha are closely linked. The Buddha did not vest authority and transforming agency in a lineage of gurus; he did not even appoint a successor as supreme teacher. The tradition records that he instead told his disciples to take refuge in the *Dharma* that he had taught. The implication seemed to be that it is *Dharma*, correctly understood and diligently followed, that has the power of transforming the life of the disciple. The *Dharma* at the same time is the supreme truth, full knowledge of which is equivalent to liberation. Later in the tradition, in accord with what seems to be a general Indian assumption that in the realm of gnosis one becomes the Truth that one knows, it is stated that he who sees *Dharma* sees the Buddha, and, beyond that, in the Mahāyāna, that the fundamental 'body' of Buddhahood, transcending time, space and all apprehension by the discriminating mind, is the 'body of *Dharma*' (*Dharmākāya*). Similarly, the true nature of things as they really are comes, among other names, to be called "Dharmaness" (*Dharmatā*).

Thus *Dharma* on one level is expressed in words; on that level, *sūtras* not only symbolize *Dharma*, they are *Dharma*, teachings. They are *Buddhavacana*, the Buddha-word, a chief medium through which the Buddha chose to make Truth present in the world of thought and perception.⁶⁴

Yet the teaching in words also provides the bridge to a gnosis, a perception of *Dharmatā* (the true nature of things), and *Dharmākāya* (the true nature of Buddhahood). Both of these are beyond form and inexpressible in words. Thus *Dharma* stands not only for the words, the bridge, within the temporal, conditioned realm, but also that ultimate, unconditioned to which the bridge leads and on which it depends. Most

Mahāyāna schools maintain that *Dharma*, as the true nature of things, also transcends words; words and thought cannot grasp it. It is intriguing that the recitations of words can serve as symbols, indeed in the convent the most important symbols, of the ineffable Truth that grounds them. The accessible to mentation and imagination stands for the inaccessible ground of that mentation and imagination.⁶⁵

The Symbolic Reception of Words in the Convent. Indeed, where the convent is concerned, the recitation of *sūtras* and the making of offerings are its most important acts symbolizing: 1) its intentions and role; 2) the nature of the transforming process that it fosters; and 3) the tradition that it continues. The very large role that preaching, explication and recitation of the tradition-sanctioned words plays in the Chinese convent conveys the message that the Buddhist monastic order is that body that “turns the wheel of the *Dharma*,” continuously re-presenting and offering the words of the Buddha to the minds of sentient beings.

The convent’s library continues this theme, while at the same time conveying a social message about the nature and authority of the tradition. Convents and monasteries that can afford them want to have a complete copy of a Chinese *Ta-tsang-ching*, and the four houses of this convent community were not exceptions. Each one had a complete *Ta-tsang-ching*, kept as a precious possession in a locked but transparent bookcase, and virtually never opened. Although it was certainly intended to be available to any scholarly nun who might need it, its importance was at least partly symbolic. This *Ta-tsang-ching* symbolizes, as does the monastic library in larger monasteries, the extent of the Buddha’s teaching and the tradition’s claim to be a part of the high culture, as nothing else can do.⁶⁶

Furthermore, it is significant that in the convent’s public practice the sacredness (*Dharma* nature) of many sacred acts is expressed by symbolic reference to the *sūtra* as symbol of *Dharma*. To take an example from rites of passage, in funerals and all ceremonies of merit-making and transference for the dead the reading/reciting of a *sūtra* is the central, even defining, practice, and therefore the central symbol of what is being done for the dead. On one level this can be explained away by saying that *sūtra*-recitation is one of the more convenient forms of merit-making. But why is this particular meritorious activity chosen? Perhaps to recite *sūtras*, rather than to perform some other merit making act, invokes the mystery and power of *Dharma*, and asserts (makes present) the whole authority of the tradition, at the moment of crisis, in a way other forms of merit-making could not do.⁶⁷

A number of other examples that include a significant symbolic dimension have already been mentioned. Two in which the symbolic

dimension is most striking are the case of the hermit who has vowed to read through the entire Ta-tsang-ching, and the case of T'an Lao-shih's copying of *sūtras* as a meditative discipline. In both of these instances it is clear that there is a central informative or transformative purpose: encountering useful reflection on experience, concentrating the mind. Yet in both cases it seems that there is an important symbolic dimension. T'an Lao-shih in choosing *sūtras* to copy, even ones she does not understand, expresses her rededication to *Dharma* in all of its senses. The hermit gives himself through its symbol to the entirety of *Dharma*, even the vast amount of it which he may never in this lifetime understand.

A CHINESE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A sixth century Chinese or Central Asian text attributed to Aśvaghōṣa provides an ontology *cum* psychology that may be helpful in understanding Chinese Buddhist reflection on the power and activity of sacred words. According to this text, called the "*Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*," there is only one reality, which can be pointed to by the term 'Suchness' and by the term 'One Mind.'⁶⁸ About this reality in its absolute self-nature nothing can be said, except by analogy—thus the ultimate inadequacy of all words in conveying ultimate truth referentially. But this one reality manifests itself as the phenomenal world. In individuals, it is manifest in two dimensions. In its true nature as reality, it is manifest as the originally enlightened mind which all possess, and which is one with Suchness or the One Mind itself. This mind knows no distinctions, sees things as they are, and in its freedom is infinitely creative of wise and compassionate acts.

Due to beginningless ignorance, however, this originally enlightened mind is covered over by deluded mind. Deluded mind arises because of its fundamental ignorance of its oneness with Suchness or the One Mind of enlightenment. Hope lies in the fact that although deluded mind is continually contaminating and obscuring enlightened mind, within us, enlightened mind is also, and more powerfully, influencing deluded mind so that within deluded mind will arise those thoughts and motives that will lead to its destruction.⁶⁹ Within the world of distinctions—that is, the world created by deluded mind—the appearance of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, teachings, *sūtras*, and other forms of sacred word such as *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs* that have powerful effects on the mind are on the deepest level to be understood as beneficial forces which are created by our deluded mind under the influence of, and due to the activity of, our originally enlightened mind. This latter, since it is universal,

is also the mind of the Buddha. Those who are on the lower stages of the path will perceive these Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, *sūtras*, *mantras*, and so forth as encountering us, or being given to us, from outside ourselves. Their origin is indeed outside deluded mind, in a sense, yet even they are skillful creations of deluded mind under the influence of enlightened mind within us.

Modern Chinese Buddhists would add to this, as we have seen, that faith and sincerity provide the connective, the electric cord, by which deluded mind allows enlightened mind to penetrate its delusion and make its influence felt. Similarly it is that same enlightened mind in Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (to use the external metaphor) that is capable of creating *sūtras*, *mantras*, *dhāraṇīs* and other forms of sacred word, of iconic symbol, which are perfectly suited to the condition of deluded mind within their hearers and reciters, so that they produce beneficial effects. To express this in the internal metaphor of the *Awakening of Faith*, one might say that enlightened mind creates within deluded mind the perception of apparently external Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who offer *sūtras*, *mantras*, and other forms of symbols as devices (Sk. *upāya*, C. *fa-men*) suited to the condition of deluded mind.

Thus, if words as symbols of *Dharmakāya* were not in some sense revelation—that is, did not come to us in some sense from beyond deluded mind—we could not rely on them to bring our minds further toward enlightenment. Yet, being words (or images) they fit the condition of deluded mind, and can in a sense occur within it as its creations, bridging the ‘other’ of ‘enlightened mind’ and the immediately experienced ‘self’ of deluded mind to bring about an ultimate transformation.

THE MODES OF RECEPTION AND SCRIPTURE

I hope that the above examples have supported my suggestion that texts are scripture for their readers when they can sustain a variety of ways of being received, including in some manner the four that I have tried to illustrate here. Texts in the Buddhist tradition worthy of the name “scriptures” are texts in which communities and individuals find authoritative information and guidance, texts through the reception of which they are enabled to act in the power of the ultimate, texts that come to symbolize that ultimate, and texts that can be approached in the confident expectation of personal transformation. I would suggest that comparative study would disclose, not a uniform pattern of similarity in the form or content of scriptures, but the presence of at least these four fundamental *modes of reception*.

NOTES

1. A book that became available to us after these essays were in press is Frederick M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor, eds., *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* (Columbia University of South Carolina Press, 1985). This excellent book contains an essay by Sam D. Gill suggesting a two-fold way of looking at how sacred texts are used: "informative" and "performative". As best I can tell from the brief essay, his "performative" category would include my "symbolic" mode as well. Likewise, what I call the "transactive" and "transformative" modes would perhaps both be intended within his discussion of the "performative" dimension of sacred texts. Reflection on the Buddhist case, in which "transactive" and "transformative" dimensions are clearly conceptually distinct, as well as reflection on other examples leads me to believe that a four-fold characterization has distinct advantages. It allows one to give due weight to the transformative and symbolic modes of receiving scripture, without which scripture would not continue to be scripture on the level of personal piety. Further, I believe there are benefits from clearly distinguishing the performative (which I call the transactional) and the symbolic, the power of text to serve as an icon of the sacred; certainly this is true in the Buddhist case, where such a separation is necessarily made.

2. The classic reference here is *Majjima Nikāya* I, p. 265 (Pali Text Society edition). Etienne Lamotte translates from the Chinese translation of this text, *Chung a-han ta-p'in ch'a-t'i ching*, as follows: "[The Buddha] addressed his monks in these terms: 'Now, monks, that you understand and think thus, should you say: We honor the Master, and out of respect for the Master, we say this or that?'—'We would not do that, Lord.'—'What you shall affirm, O monks, is it not that which you have yourselves well recognized, seen and grasped?'—'The same, Lord.' Lamotte, "La Critique d'authenticité dans le Bouddhisme," *India Antiqua* (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1947), pp. 220–21; my translation from the French. The text is contained in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe, eds; Tokyo: Taishō Issai-kyō Kankō Kai, 1924), no. 26, vol. 1, p. 769b., lines 14–19 (Hereafter cited in the standard Buddhological form of T.26.1.769b.14–19.) A translation is also found in I.B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings* I (Pali Text Society Translation Series, no. 29; London: Luzac and Co., Ltd., 1954, reprinted, 1967), p. 321. The best translation of this passage seems to be by Rune E.A. Johansson in his *Pali Buddhist Texts* (Stockholm: Studentlitteratur), pp. 19–22. On the topic of Indian Buddhist attitudes toward the verbal tradition of the Buddha, cf. James P. McDermott, "Scripture as the Word of the Buddha," *Numen* 31:22–39.

3. Cf. T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *Buddhist Suttas*, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 11 (reprinted in Delhi India by Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), pp. 37–8. (Also in T.W. Rhys-Davids and C.A.F. Rhys-Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. 3, 4th ed. [London: Luzac and Co. Ltd. vol. 3, 1959], p. 108.) *Sutta* is the Pali word for the Sanskrit *sūtra*. As a rule, the Sanskrit form of the Buddhist term is used in this book, but here the Pali word is used to distinguish it from a later Mahāyāna text, the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*.

4. This meeting is usually called the "First Council," but the term translated "council", *sāṃgiti*, means "reciting together"; the notion of reciting for the sake of arriving at a "canon" is included in the term. On this council, cf. J. Przyluski, *Le Concile de Rājagṛha* (Paris, 1926), especially Ch. V, and André Bareau, *Les Premiers Conciles Bouddhiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), pp. 21–30.

5. Cf. Kōgen Mizuno, *Buddhist Sūtras: Origin, Development, Transmission* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., English edition 1982). On the "canonizing" of the Tripiṭaka, see Andre Bareau *et al.*, *Die Religionen Indiens III: Buddhismus – Jinitismus – Primitivvölker* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1964), pp. 23–32. Concerning later criteria for inclusion of newly reported teachings in the "canon" of authentic *Dharma*, see E. Lamotte, "La critique d'authenticité," where criteria, articulated in the Pali and Sanskrit versions of the *Mahopadeśa* and in certain other later texts (such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, the *Bodhicaryāvatārapañjikā*, and the *Abhidharmakośa*) are discussed.

6. The term "presentational" is used here in the special sense of "making present," as an icon or a sacrament makes the sacred present to Eastern Orthodox Christians, or an image makes the sacred present to many Hindus. My usage of this derives from Roger Schmidt, *Exploring Religion* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1980), p. 89–92.

7. Leon Hurvitz, trans. from the Chinese of Kumārajīva, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 288. (Hereafter cited as "*Lotus*.")

8. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, translated by Edward Conze as *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and its Verse Summary* (Bollingen: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), p. 266–67. Hereafter cited as "*Perfection*."

9. "And on account of what circumstance, Ānanda, is a *Tathāgata*, an Able Awakened One, worthy of a cairn? At the thought, Ānanda, 'This is the cairn of that Exalted One, of that Able Awakened One,' the hearts of many shall be made calm and happy; and since they there had calmed and satisfied their hearts they will be reborn after death, when the body has dissolved, in the happy realms of heaven. It is on account of this circumstance, Ānanda, that a *Tathāgata*, an Able Awakened One, is worthy of a cairn." (Trans. by T.W. Rhys Davids in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II, p. 156.

10. On this topic, see especially Akira Hirakawa, "The Rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its Relationship to the Worship of *Stūpas*," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Tōyō Bunkō* 22 (1963), pp. 57–106, and B.C. Bagchi, "The Eight Great *Caityas* and Their Cult," *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 17 (1941): 223–235.

11. Cf. Gregory Schopen, "The Phrase '*sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*' in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in the Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 17, (Nov.-Dec. 1975): 147–87. Cf. Lama Govinda, *Psycho-Cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa* (London: Luzac and Co. Ltd., 1976

and Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1976); and Sukumar Dutt, *The Buddha and Five After Centuries* (London: Luzac and Co. Ltd, 1957).

12. Cf. *Perfection*, pp. 105–108.

13. Cf. *Lotus*, p. 178–79

14. For a general discussion of this, see Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1930), pp. 105–10. (Hereafter cited as “*Studies*.”)

15. This forms the climax of chapter 9 of Kumārajīva’s translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*, T.14.551c.23–24.

16. See, e.g., Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki’s reference to this statement in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* in his *Studies*, p. 17. For very radical statements of its pole of the tradition, see the two excerpts from the *Viśeṣha-cinta Brahma-paripṛcchā* translated in Edward Conze, *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York: Harper and Row Torchbooks, 1964), pp. 278–280.

17. On *adhiṣṭhāna* (the spiritual power of the Buddha which is added to a Bodhisattva and sustains him through his course of discipline), *prabhāva* (sovereign power) and *anubhāva* (the power of the Buddha moving the devotees from within, and enabling them to act in this way or that way), see Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Studies*, pp. 202–205 and p. 356, and glossary.

18. Cf. Shih Tao-an, *Jih-chiao lun*, T. 52. 136b–143c; and Shih Fa-lin, *Pien-cheng lun*, “San-chiao chih-tao p’ien,” T. 52. 449a. Cf. Kobayashi Masami, “Sankyō kōshō ni okeru kyō no kannen,” in Yoshioka Yoshitoyo hakase kanreki kinen ronshu kangyokai, eds., *Dōkyō kenkyū ronshu* (Yoshioka Hakase kanreki kinen) (Tokyo: Kokushō kangyokai, 1977), pp. 249–69.

19. Cf. J.W. De Jong, *Buddha’s Word in China* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1968), for a discussion of this process.

20. Indian and Central Asian Buddhists had distinguished between authoritative texts whose meaning was expressed directly, and texts, no less authoritative, whose meaning required interpretation. In the case of the latter, the Buddha was assumed to have had some motive for not expressing the plain truth fully, or for saying something at variance with the fundamental principles of his teaching. (Cf. E. Lamotte, “La Critique d’interprétation dans le bouddhisme,” *Annuaire de l’institut de philologie et d’histoire orientales et slaves*, Université Libre de Bruxelles, IX [1949], pp. 341–61.) The Chinese classification schemes built upon these distinctions and insights, but went somewhat beyond the earlier models in their sweep and creativity. A factor that probably affected the creation of this more sweeping, more radical hermeneutical form was a difference between the ways in which Indian and Central Asian Buddhists had understood their relation to the tradition and the way the Chinese Buddhists understood it. Indians and Central Asians appear to have felt free to preserve their fresh discoveries of the meaning of *Dharma* by creating new *sūtras*. Some Chinese also created new *sūtras*; but many

Chinese, perhaps feeling themselves to be heirs of the Buddha at one remove, introduced fresh meanings of *Dharma* through these hermeneutical strategies instead.

21. Lin-chi quotes scripture back to the scripturalist! The quotation seems to be made up of phrases from two *sūtras*, the *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*.

22. T. 47. 496b-c. The translation is that of Ruth F. Sasaki in her *The Record of Lin-chi*, (Kyoto: The Institute for Zen Studies, 1975), pp. 1-2.

23. On the "three studies," cf. Andrew Rawlinson, "The Ambiguity of the Buddha-nature Concept in India and China," in Lewis Lancaster and Whalen Lai, eds., *Early Chan in China and Tibet*, (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), pp. 259-279. Another useful threefold division of the path is that into 'view' (*dārsana*), practice (*caryā*) and action (*karma*). Cf. Reginald A. Ray, "Buddhism: Sacred Text Written and Realized," in Denny and Taylor, eds., *Holy Book*, p. 166.

24. Leon Hurvitz writes that "'*tao ch'ang*,' the standard equivalent of the Sanskrit *Bodhimaṇḍa*, is, in purely Chinese terms, the name for the meditation hall in a monastery." ("Hsüan-tsang [602-664] and the *Heart Scripture*," in Lewis Lancaster, ed., *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze* [Berkeley: Regents of the University of California, 1977], p. 121, no. 58.) This may be true of an earlier period. Now, however, the term seems to refer to a place for religious offerings, to a place where the Way is cultivated, and by extension to the temple or monastery as a whole, and thus to have a meaning more similar to the original meaning of *bodhimaṇḍa*. Cf. Ting Fu-pao, *Fo-hsüeh ta-tz'u-tien*, (1921; reprint ed. Taipei: Hsin-wen-feng ch'u-pan kung-ssu, 1978) p. 2368a-b.

25. The concept is that the lay people cultivate merit in their gifts to the nuns, with the nuns serving through their practice as particularly fertile "fields" in which to grow merit.

26. The Ta-tsang-ching includes all of the text classes included in the Buddhist Tripiṭakas of the various Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, that is, *sūtra*, *vinaya*, *abhidharma* and *śāstra*. In addition, it includes: ritual texts, tantric texts (*mantra* and *dhāraṇī*), treatises, essays and commentaries written by Chinese Buddhists, collected sayings of Ch'an (Zen) masters, and histories of Buddhism written in China. One might consider it a rather inclusive archival canon. Decisions about what texts were worthy of inclusion in the Ta-tsang-ching were often made at the Chinese imperial court.

27. Although the Chinese terms are different, I take this to be parallel to the view set out in the following passage of the *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra*, an important Mahāyāna text of the Yogācāra school:

Twofold are the aspects of personal realization (*siddhānta*) . . . the personal realization itself (*siddhānta*) and the external teaching (*deśanā*) about

it. . . . The "personal realization" itself indicates the incomparability of personal experience, and is characterized by having nothing to do with words, discriminations and letters. . . . What is meant by the external teaching (*deśanā*)? It is variously given in the nine divisions of the doctrinal works; it keeps one away from the dualistic notions of being and non-being, of oneness and otherness; first making use of skillful means and expedients, it induces all beings to have a perception (of this teaching) so that whoever is inclined towards it, may be instructed in it. (D.T. Suzuki, trans., *The Lankavatara Sutra*, [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1932] pp. 128–29.)

On this topic see also D. T. Suzuki, *Studies*, pp. 348–50.

28. Cf. Schopen "Cult," and Graeme MacQueen, "Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism I," *Religion* 11, (1981): 303–19. Cf. also J. Leroy Davidson, "Traces of Buddhist Evangelism in Early Chinese Art," *Artibus Asiae*, 11 (1948): 251–65.

29. Cf. J. J. M. DeGroot, *Le Code du Mahāyāna en Chine: son influence sur la vie monacale et sur le monde laïque* (Amsterdam: Johannes Muller, 1893), pp. 133–43.

30. For a description of *sūtra*-lecturing and study in monasteries in China prior to 1949, cf. Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism. 1900–1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 310–14. (Hereafter cited as "Practice.") Holmes Welch comments:

Lectures have played an important role in Chinese Buddhism from the earliest days. Probably one of the reasons why Buddhism succeeded in China was that it included the very Chinese institution of having disciples study a canonical text under the guidance of a master who used it to shape their character. There was a certain parallel to Confucius and Mencius in the monks who even in this century traveled from place to place, a few followers at their side, lecturing on the *sūtras*.

31. Cf. the translation in Seikan Hasegawa, *The Cave of Poison Grass* (Arlington, Virginia: Great Ocean Publishers, 1975), p. 3; cf. also his comments in footnote 1, p. 167.

32. A popular practice in the Pure Land tradition is recollection of a Buddha called Amitābha by reciting his name over and over, aiming for perfect concentration on the name.

33. This attitude toward the teaching and hearing that take place in *sūtra* lecturing doubtless has a long history in the Mahāyāna. The attitude of the preacher or expositor has long been regarded as important to the goal of transformation. For example, the "Preachers of *Dharma*" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* contains the following passage:

O Medicine King! If a good man or good woman after the extinction of the Thus Come One [i.e., the Tathāgata, a title for the Buddha] wishes to preach this Scripture . . . , how is he or she to preach it? This good man or good woman is to enter the room of the Thus Come One, don the cloak of the Thus Come One, sit on the throne of the Thus Come One, and only then preach this scripture broadly to the fourfold assembly [i.e., the assembly of Buddha's followers that includes monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen]. The room of the Thus Come One is the thought of great compassion toward all living beings. The cloak of the Thus Come One is the thought of tender forbearance and the bearing of insult with equanimity. The throne of the Thus Come One is the emptiness of all dharmas. It is only by dwelling securely among these that he or she can with unabating thought broadly preach this Scripture of the *Dharma Blossom*.... (*Lotus*, p. 179–80.)

Furthermore, the notion that the hearer is to be transformed by listening is an idea that informs the very form of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna *sūtras*. After the Buddha's sermon, there is regularly an account of the transformation undergone by the hearers in response.

34. For a useful brief discussion, see Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Concept of Hell* (New York: Philosophical library, 1972), pp. 23–39. They note that in early Buddhism wholesome acts (Pali *kusala kamma*, Sk. *kuśala karma*) were

further divided into two different spheres: the first relating to worldly actions (*sava*), which largely pertained to the laity; and the second, to religious or non-worldly actions (*asava*). It was on the level of wholesome worldly actions that *punna* was considered to be merit. . . . Although *punna* signified a form of good conduct, it was believed to be confined mainly to the sphere of worldly morality since its goal was deemed to be birth in a happy heaven. . . . (A)s one advanced to the level of religious spiritual awareness, the aim of attaining *punna* for happy rebirth had to be renounced in favor of the nonworldly *Brahmacariya* conduct. (p. 25)

35. Cf. Yuichi Kajiyama, "Transfer and Transformation of Merits," unpublished paper delivered at the Kuroda Institute Conference on Buddhist Hermeneutics, June, 1984. See also section on the question of whether lay people can transfer merits in Helen Hardacre, *Lay Buddhism in Contemporary Japan: Reiyukai Kyodan*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 128–31.

36. Cf. the *Yü-lin Kuo-shih yin k'o-sung shih-chung*, attached as a preface to the *Fo-men pi-pei k'o-sung pen*, one of the two daily office texts used in the convent. On the connection between reciting a *sūtra* and merit, even when one does not understand the meaning of the *sūtra*, cf. the following passage from the *Samḍhinirmocana Sūtra*, a proto-Yogācārin work:

There are beings who do not understand the true meaning (of this text), nevertheless they adhere to (the text) and have faith in it. They adhere to it saying, "This *sūtra* preached by the Blessed One is profound, and (its

meaning) is difficult to see, difficult to know, beyond (verbal) discussion, alien to (verbal) discussion, subtle and known by the wise ones. . . . The knowledge and the view of the Tathāgata are infinite; our own knowledge and view are like the plodding of a cow." In this spirit, they revere this *sūtra*, they copy it out, they transmit it, spread it abroad, venerate it, teach it and read and study it. All the while, they do not understand my true intention, they are incapable of carrying out the meditation. In this way, their accumulation of merit and wisdom grows and finally, those who had not ripened their beings, do ripen their beings.

[Etienne Lamotte, ed. and trans., *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra: l'Explication des Mystères* (Université de Louvain, Recueil de travaux, 2^e series, 34^e fasc. Paris: Maisonneuve, 1935), pp. 199–200; quoted in Ray, "Buddhism: Sacred Text Written and Realized," p. 166.]

37. *Fan-wang-ching*, T.24. 1009a.20. Tradition held that this was a translation from Sanskrit into Chinese, and attributed it to Kumārajīva, but it was probably written in China ca. A.D. 431–481. Translated into French by J. J. M. de Groot in *Le Code de Mahayana en Chine*.

38. On this subject, see Jan Yun-hua, "The Power of Recitation," in *Studo Storico Religiosi*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1977).

39. Cf. Peter N. Gregory, "The Teaching of Men and Gods: The Doctrinal and Social Basis of Lay Buddhist Practice in the Hua-yen Tradition," in Robert M. Gimello and Peter N. Gregory, eds., *Studies in Ch'an and Hua-yen* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 283–93 for some examples of this expectation from reciting the *Avatamsaka (Hua-yen) Sūtra*.

40. *Po-shih ch'ang-ch'ing-chi*, *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an* edition, p. 59.7a–8b. My translation is modified from that of Peter N. Gregory, "Teaching," pp. 292–93. Also translated in Kenneth Chen, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1973), pp. 210–11.

41. *Ibid.*

42. For more on this, see Welch, *Practice*, pp. 179–202.

43. *Ti-tsang-p'u-sa-pen-yüan-ching*, T.442.13.777c–790a; could be reconstructed in Sanskrit as *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva prañidhāna sūtra*, but no Sanskrit original has been found. The "*Sūtra of the Original Vow*" has been translated into English by Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua and the Buddhist Text Translation Society as *Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva* (San Francisco, 1974). On *Kṣitigarbha*, Marinus Willem de Visser, *The Bodhisattva Ti-tsang (Jizo) in China and Japan* (Berlin, 1914), though not informed by more recent research, remains the best reference in English.

44. The recitation thus takes place in a context of special invocation of this *Bodhisattva* and the special remembrance of ancestors. Still, the chief stated purpose of reciting the *sūtra* is to create merit to be transferred to ancestors. That is,

the *sūtra* is recited primarily for the merit of the act, which is not connected to its content, but to its status as a *sūtra*.

45. Two daily office texts frequently used today in Hong Kong and Taiwan are the *Fo-men pi-pei k'o-sung pen* and the *Fo-chiao ch'ao-mu k'o-sung*. The Buddhist Association of the People's Republic of China under Chao P'u-ch'u has recently (between the summer of 1985 and the summer of 1986) published a version entitled *Fo-chiao nien-sung chi* for use in monasteries and convents throughout the country. (I am grateful to Raoul Birnbaum for showing me a copy.) All contemporary daily office texts are quite similar, and owe a great debt to Yün-ch'i Chu-hung's compilation of 1600 entitled *Chu-ching jih-sung*, found in *Yün-ch'i fa-hui* (Collected Works of Master Yün-ch'i, hereafter abbreviated YCFH), *chüan* 12. For a fuller description of the meaning of the texts in the daily office, though from a particular sectarian point of view, see Huang Ch'ing-lan, *Ch'ao-mu k'o-sung pai-hua chieh-shih*, reprinted in Taiwan in 1978 by the Fo-chiao Ch'u-pan she. A short description appears in Welch, *Practice*, pp. 53-58 and 71. I am currently working on a book-length study of these offices.

46. Cf. the *Yü-lin Kuo-shih yin k'o-sung shih-chung*.

47. Cf. N. Dutt, *Early Buddhist Monachism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1924), pp. 90-106; for a brief discussion, see Helen Hardacre, *Lay Buddhism*, pp. 132-33.

48. Actually, by a monk who lived in the non-Chinese Tangut kingdom of Hsi-hsia, in what is now Chinese territory. Cf. Huang Ch'ing-lan, *Ch'ao-mu, chüan* b, p. 12.

49. The notion seems related to the idea of selecting to focus on establishing a connection with the "pen-tsun" (J. *go-honzon*), that Buddha or Bodhisattva with which it is suitable for persons in a current world or circumstance to have a special connection.

50. This of course reflects a Pure Land Buddhist influence on the daily office dating back at least as far as Chu-hung in 1601.

51. A Sanskrit version of this name is sometimes reconstructed as "Ullambana."

52. T. 16.779a-c. For a recent and comprehensive study of the festival of Yü-lan-p'en, which includes a summary of much previous scholarship on both the festival and the *Yü-lan-p'en ching*, see Stephen F. Teiser's doctoral dissertation, "The Yü-lan-p'en Festival in Medieval Chinese Religion" (Princeton University, February, 1986) and his forthcoming book, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*. See also his article "Ghosts and Ancestors in Medieval Chinese Religion: The Yü-lan-p'en Festival as Mortuary Ritual," *History of Religions* 26, (August, 1986): 47-67. There is so much speculation involved in positing an original Sanskrit word for which "yü-lan-p'en" is a translation that it seems wiser to do as Teiser and others have done and leave the word in Chinese.

53. Text can be found in Kamata Shigeo, *Chūgoku no Bukkyō girei* (Tokyo: Tōkyō Daigaku Tōyō Bunka Kenkyūjō, 1986), pp. 873–87.

54. For a description of this text, see Welch, *Practice*, p. 188.

55. *Liang-huang ch'an-fa*; Cf. text entitled *Liang-huang pao-chuan ch'uan-chi* in Kamata Shigeo, *Girei* pp. 888–912.

56. Cf. Welch, *Practice*, pp. 185–87; cf. also Kamata Shigeo, *Ginei*, pp. 117–22 and 214–21; text is included, pp. 826–872.

57. *Lotus*, pp. 311–319.

58. Found in *Ch'ien-shou ch'ien-yen kuan-shih-yin p'u-sa kuang-ta yüan-man wu-ai ta-pei-hsin to-lo-ni ching*, T. 20.106a–111c; the *dhāraṇī* is on p. 107c.

59. I frequently worked with Ch'en-chih shih in the kitchen, and found this to be true. She is an admirable person: warm, simple, clear, completely genuine, and at peace with herself and others.

60. Even in instances in which the metaphors used place the source of transformation outside the mind (in the Bodhisattva, in the externally given *mantra*, in the *Buddhavacana* of the *sūtra*, in the merit earned from recitation), the transforming powers (the Bodhisattva, *mantra* and so forth) are at the same time understood to be aspects of one's own true mind (e.g., the compassion of the Bodhisattva is not other than the compassion of one's own true mind or buddhanature). The nuns and lay people with whom I spoke almost always used both internal and external metaphors in describing how and why practices that take true words as mental objects lead to transformations. The words become not merely references to *Dharma*, representational symbols, referential use of language, but constitute the activity of *Dharmakāya* acting within the mind at some level other than that of rational content.

61. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Introduction to Part Eight: Religion as Symbolism," in the Introduction to "Propaedia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (Chicago, 1974), Vol. I, p. 498.

62. *Ibid.*

63. An illuminating comparison is possible between the understanding of *mantra* in the yogic tradition and the understanding of icon as hypostasis in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

64. There are of course others: it might be argued that silence is another, and visible form (image) and gesture (*mudrā*) a third.

65. In our calling the words and structures of the *sūtras*, *mantras*, and *dhāraṇī* that constitute the teaching, "*Dharma*," they become like metaphors through which we speak of and partially understand the nature of eternal Truth. We establish the metaphor, "*Dharma* is, among other things, transforming, powerful word." This in turn goes along with, even implies, a second metaphor, "Buddha

and sentient beings are (at least) mind." *Dharma* is, at least, an address in words to that which is capable of consenting inwardly to them, of seeing things anew in their light. And sentient beings are, at least, those whom words transform, those who find enlightenment through listening to, reciting, understanding, and embracing the meanings of words.

66. It would be interesting to trace the development of the iconographic representation of Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva particularly associated with Wisdom, with a *sūtra* scroll in his hand.

67. It is both interesting and significant that this practice of reciting *sūtras* (*C. ching*) at funerals and rites of intervention on behalf of the dead (including "all souls" festivals) appears also in Taiwan in ceremonies where the officiants are Taoists and specialists in "folk" religious traditions. It seems to be a general concept that one thing one does for the dead is recite texts for them.

68. T. 32.575b-583a; translated into English by Yoshito S. Hakeda as *The Awakening of Faith* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1967).

69. The metaphor used is "perfuming," in the sense of permeating with an invisible odor.