

“‘God’ in the Lotus Sūtra: A Question of Function.”

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Let me begin my paper with a brief word of introduction. I am a Christian theologian who specializes in Comparative Theology, which, in brief, is a field of study that operates out of the conviction that interreligious dialogue can provide transformative insights for one’s own faith tradition. So, through deep engagement with Buddhism, for example, a Christian can learn fresh ways of understanding and interpreting important Christian doctrines and practices. For me, then, this question of the concept of God in the Lotus Sūtra is a very interesting one, as it relates not only to my understanding and appreciation of Buddhism, but also as it relates to my understanding of the concept of God in Christianity.

As is well known, the existence and concept of God is a frequent topic for Buddhist/Christian dialogue, with the Triune God of Christianity being compared at various times to the historical Buddha, any number of bodhisattvas, and even with the concept of *śūnyatā*. In this presentation, I take a different approach. Instead of making what I consider to be an “ontological” comparison, whereby one begins with a definition of divine being and then asks whether or not this being exists in Buddhism, I propose to examine the concept of God in the Lotus Sūtra from the perspective of a *functional* understanding of the word “God,” based on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language philosophy.

Wittgenstein famously argued that the meaning of a word comes in its *use*: that is, how it functions in the context of a specific “language game.” In this vein, I argue that rather than asking the general question: “Is Buddhism a theistic religion”—or even the more specific question, “Does God exist in the context of the Lotus Sūtra”—it is both more fruitful and constructive to ask: “Is the word “God” meaningful in the language game of the Lotus Sūtra, based on the Buddha’s own words and descriptions?” [And here, let me note that in this presentation, in general, when I say “the Buddha,” I mean “the figure of the Buddha as found in the Lotus Sutra” and not the historical Buddha.]

That is, not is “Buddha” another word that can be used to describe a specific “object”—the supernatural being—“God,” but rather, is the way in which the Buddha is described in the Lotus Sūtra—and the “form of life” he engenders in his followers—intelligibly and meaningfully conveyed through the use of the word “God?” The answer to that question, I argue, is “Yes”—without making any further claims that would either

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identify or distinguish this concept of God from that found in Christianity.

Thus, in this presentation, I develop a concept of God in the Lotus Sūtra by looking at how the Buddha describes his own activity in divine terms vis-à-vis not only humanity but also the whole cosmos; and also the “form of life” the Buddha commends to his followers.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I introduce and explain the relevant pieces of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, emphasizing his understanding of language as use, the metaphor of language games, and the concept of family resemblances. From there, I turn to the Lotus Sūtra, and examine three specific aspects of the text: the Buddha’s use of *upāya* and his compassion, the heavenly, cosmic descriptions of the Buddha and the “form of life” the Sūtra commends to his followers. Using these examples, I illustrate how there is indeed a functioning concept of God present in the Sūtra.

Ludwig Wittgenstein: Use, Language Games and Family Resemblances

This article was first delivered as a presentation in Vienna, which necessitated a word of background on Wittgenstein himself, since he was born in Vienna, and his family was one of the richest in Europe. The family was large, and their house was a cultural center in the city, hosting some of the most famous musicians of the time for private concerts. And, finally, a famous house he helped design here in the city, Das Haus Wittgenstein, still stands, and currently serves as the cultural department of the Bulgarian Embassy.

Wittgenstein is a wonderful example of a brilliant scholar who wasn’t afraid to change his mind—and in quite a significant way. In his first major work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein argued that the world consists of existing objects, and language functions in that it creates pictures that correspond to those factual objects. However, in his most famous book, *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously, he criticized this earlier work and discarded much of the language theory it presents in favor of a new way of understanding how language works. It is this later theory of language for which he is best known, and that became so influential in the 20th century.

Wittgenstein begins the *Investigations* with a quote from St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, in which Augustine explains how he came to understand language. Augustine records that as a child, he watched his elders name an object and then move toward it; he then surmised that the word corresponded to the thing, and he trained himself to make the same sound to signify the same object.

Wittgenstein summarizes this way of viewing language as follows: “The individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. In this

picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.”¹

However, he then spends the rest of the book challenging this limited view of language with a new way of thinking: language doesn’t primarily serve to identify discrete objects, but rather conveys meaning through the active use of words in a particular context. What does this mean?

Use

Wittgenstein says plainly that “...the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”² Basically, his point is that a word, standing by itself, may well signify a variety of objects, but it doesn’t actually have any *meaning* until it is placed in the larger context of a sentence, a context. Only there, *in situ*, does it come to life and “make sense”—literally. For example, if I say the word “ball”—you might immediately think of a soccer ball, or a fancy dinner and dancing kind of event, but until I say more, the word “ball” in and of itself doesn’t actually convey meaning, even if you can correlate it to an object. In another place, he says it this way: “*Practice* gives the words their sense.”³ And finally, “Let the use of words teach you their meaning.”⁴

Yet, this is not the end of the matter. When Wittgenstein talks about the “use” of words, and the necessity of contextualization, he doesn’t mean merely the place of words in a sentence. Instead, for words to “work”—that is, to convey meaning and to “make sense”—they have to function not only within a larger sentence, but even more within a specific “language game” in which the rules of the game dictate what can and cannot be meaningfully said. As Fergus Kerr notes, Wittgenstein realized that “all our concepts are rooted, not in intellectual reasoning but in *speaking*, and that means speaking as a component of an *activity*, such as (his examples) being told a story, being taught to sing, to guess riddles, to make a joke, to ask, thank, curse, greet and pray.”⁵ This is where the concept of a “language game” becomes important.

Language Games

Wittgenstein uses the concept of a “language game” to describe a specific, delineated form of discourse that has its own rules and its own conventions. So, for example, telling

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 1.1.

²Ibid., 1.43.

³ *Culture and Value*, 85.

⁴ *Philosophical Investigations*, IIxi, 220.

⁵ Fergus Kerr, “Transubstantiation after Wittgenstein,” in *Modern Theology* 15:2 (April 1999), 118.

a joke is different from conducting a job interview, which is different from telling a story, which is different from giving a public lecture.

The same words may be used in all four games, but their meaning might differ greatly in each. And, before you can use words correctly in a specific game, you need to know the rules. The point here is that words, then, also reveal something of the game itself—and also the players, and the way they understand reality.

This has important ramifications for how one understands religious discourse. So, for example, imagine two people who use “God” regularly in their daily discourse: one person says “God was really looking out for me today,” and the other person says, [excuse my language] “Goddamn it.” In each case, the meaning of the same word reveals a very different language game, and may well indicate that the two individuals have very different understandings of the word “God. The former statement reveals a language game in which God exists and is active in the world, and the latter reveals a form of life in which God does not exist [one doubts that particular curse is meant to literally draw down divine wrath, whatever that would look like].

Thus, Wittgenstein says, “The way you use the word ‘God’ does not show *whom* you mean – but rather, what you mean.”⁶ His point is that the word “God” doesn’t so much as indicate a specific object or “person,” but rather conveys much more than that: who I am and the sort of relationship I have to God—or not. In short, it reveals something of the larger framework that shapes my life.

Ultimately, then, it is fair to say that Wittgenstein came to the conclusion that religious language is less about convincing someone of the truth of this or that doctrinal proposition, but rather it is about living a certain kind of life. Thus, he said, “Life can educate one to a belief in God.”⁷ His point was that even the words “belief” and “God” find their meaning not even simply in this or that sentence, but in the larger life “game” in which those sentences are formed and conveyed.

Family Resemblances

Another important point remains to be said about this idea of language games, and that is that they are not entirely self-contained and independent. Instead, much like “games” in general, they have some characteristics in common, and thus some overlap—even though there isn’t one single thing that unites them all: these common characteristics Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances.”

⁶ *Culture and Value*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

He writes, “I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?...For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that ...the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’.”⁸

His point is that in the same way that you can see certain characteristics popping up again and again in a picture of a large extended family, although not in everyone—red hair, tallness, dimples, etc.—all games have certain things in common, though there is no one thing they all share. This means that, for example, even if I don’t know how to play chess, if I know how to play checkers, some aspects of the game will be familiar to me. Much must be learned, of course, in the new game, but if I know something about how games work—especially board games—I already have some frame of reference that can guide me as I learn the rules of chess. The concept of family resemblances is of critical importance. It is what keeps the lines of communication open between game-players, and keeps connections between the use of words in different games.

Ramifications and Relevance for the Work at Hand

There are two important ramifications of Wittgenstein’s thought for the analysis of the Lotus Sūtra that follows. First, we must seek the criteria for using “God” in the context of the Lotus Sūtra within the sutra itself, and not simply impose criteria from another language game onto the Sūtra from without. Again, Wittgenstein says: “The criteria of what can sensibly be said of God are to be found *within* the religious tradition....the criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion, since they are given by religious discourse itself.”⁹ This allows us to examine the meaningfulness of the concept of “God” using the standard set by the Sūtra itself, not demanding that it conform to the rules of a very different game.

But, at the same time—and this is the second key point—the use of “God” in the Lotus Sūtra may well bear some “family resemblance” to the way it is used in the Bible, specifically, and in Christianity more generally. This means that one can and should expect that there might be some interesting correspondence and complementarity in the way “God” is described and used in both games.

⁸ *Philosophical Investigations*, I.66-67.

⁹ D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, (London: MacMillan Press, 1993), 3.

Yet, at the same time, it means that I do not have to prove that it is the “same” God in both, nor do I have to prove some unitary, universally-agreed upon definition of God in order to be able to talk meaningfully about the concept of God in the Lotus Sūtra. Thus, Wittgenstein’s understanding of language guards both the unique context of the Lotus Sūtra and allows it its own integrity when speaking of God, and also leaves open the possibility for comparison and correspondence with other religious language.

The Lotus Sūtra

At this point, I want to turn to the Lotus Sūtra itself, arguing that, according to the “language game” of the Sūtra, it does in fact makes sense to talk about the concept of “God” within it. And, let me also note here at the beginning of this section that some of my sources come out of the Rissho Kosei-Kai interpretation, which I am finding interesting and fruitful—but I recognize there are other differing perspectives on the Sūtra as well.

The Liberating Work of the Buddha: Skillful Means & Compassion

First, the Lotus Sūtra clearly emphasizes the liberating work of the Buddha, whose boundless compassion stretches through all realms of the world. In fact, one might argue that this is a main theme—if not the main theme—of the Sūtra as a whole. Gene Reeves writes, “There are, obviously many ways to read a sutra, perhaps especially this sutra! I take it to be primarily a religious text, that is, a text whose primary aim is soteriological.”¹⁰ I recognize the problems inherent in the language of “soteriological,” but I accept Reeves’ premise that the point of the sutra [indeed, I would say the overarching point of the Buddha’s teachings in general] is enlightenment, deliverance from suffering and “rescue.” If this is the case, then asking the question, “Who is the Buddha in the Lotus Sūtra?,” we are led to the answer, “The Buddha is the one who saves.” But that’s not all: the Buddha doesn’t just “save,” the Buddha saves everyone, even those that one would assume are beyond saving.

Perhaps nowhere do we see this more clearly than in chapter 12, “Devadatta.” Stephen Teiser and Jacqueline Stone write that this chapter “...was widely interpreted as extending the promise of Buddhahood to persons seen as having particular obstacles to liberation....Devadatta would have been well known to the sūtra’s early devotees as the Buddhist archetype of an evildoer.”¹¹

¹⁰ Gene Reeves, “The Lotus Sutra as Radically World-affirming,” in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope*, 178.

¹¹ Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone, “Interpreting the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, edited by Stephen Teiser and Jacqueline Stone, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 21.

In this chapter, not only does the Buddha promise that Devadatta will attain Buddhahood, he also encourages Manjushri to recount the story of the eight-year old daughter of the dragon king Sagara, who attained enlightenment quickly—to the disbelief of all. However, despite their doubts, before their eyes, she [well, “he”—she changes into a man first] attains enlightenment and preaches the Law “for all living beings everywhere in the ten directions,”¹² with limitless results. This story—as well as many others—supports the idea that the Lotus Sūtra clearly teaches that the Buddha is in a positive relationship to all beings, and seeks to facilitate their liberation.

Upāya

Intimately related to the Buddha’s boundless compassion is his use of *upāya*—skillful means, which is another central teaching of the Sūtra. It is widely accepted that it is only the compassionate purpose for which these means are used that can justify and even commend the Buddha’s use of *upāya*, which, in any other context would be interpreted as deceitful behavior and unworthy of the Buddha.

Why does a Buddha appear in the world? The Buddha says, “The Buddha Bhagavat appear in this world to cause sentient beings to aspire toward purity and the wisdom and insight of the buddhas. They appear in this world to manifest the wisdom and insight of the buddhas to sentient beings...They appear in this world in order to cause sentient beings to enter the path of the wisdom and insight of a Buddha”¹³ And, in order to do this, the buddhas have a variety of means, and they use them all—whatever best serves the needs of the listener.

The place *par excellence* in the Sūtra where this tool of *upāya* is explained and justified is the parable of the burning house, of course. But this same message is repeated over and over with a variety of different images: the fabricated city of rest, the poison, the father and the wayward son. Even though the images vary, the message stays the same: “Be it in the parable of the magic city or the parable of the burning house, the suggestion is clear that skillful means are to be used for getting the willing cooperation of those whose despondency, disinterest, bad habits, or ignorance prevent them from doing what is ultimately for their own benefit.”¹⁴

We see this also in the parable of the medicinal herbs, in which the Buddha compares his teaching to a great cloud of rain that waters every kind of different plant in the world,

¹² *The Lotus Sutra*, 188.

¹³ All quotations from *The Lotus Sūtra* are from *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Tsunonari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center, 2007), 30.

¹⁴ John Mayer, “Reflections on the Threefold Lotus Sutra,” in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sutra*, edited by Gene Reeves, (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 2002), 154-155.

according to its optimal allotment. Thus, he says, “The Tathāgata, perceiving the faculties of sentient beings—whether they are sharp or dull, diligent or idle—explains the teachings according to their capacities in a variety of immeasurable ways, gladdening and benefiting them all.”¹⁵

Another metaphor, used by Nikkyo Niwano, expresses the same idea:

Radio and television stations emit electric waves,
in the hope that as many people as possible will
receive them through their television sets and radios.
In the same way, the Original Buddha exists in every
part of the universe, ready to save all beings of the
universe. He instructs [humans], animals, and plants;
and salvation means the full manifestation and
complete development of the life essential to each
form of life according to its true nature.¹⁶

The Buddha’s Omniscience, Omnipresence, Timelessness

Clearly then, the Buddha as presented in the Lotus Sūtra cannot be simply equated to Gautama Buddha—Śakyamuni. In reality, the Buddha possesses all the attributes one might imagine being associated with ‘God’: specifically for the purposes of this argument, the Sūtra is clear that the Buddha is omniscient, omnipresent, and timeless. Nowhere is this more clearly stated than in Chapter 16, “The Life Span of the Tathāgata.”

In this chapter, the Sūtra teaches that the human lifespan of Gautama Buddha was itself an expedient means, because the Buddha knows that if he were simply to remain in the world, people would take him for granted, and disparage his teaching. He says, “If they see the Tathāgata always existing without extinction, they then become proud, self-willed, and negligent. The thought that the Buddha is difficult to meet and that he is to be respected cannot awaken in them.”¹⁷

The Buddha then makes clear that “...his birth, renunciation, practice, awakening, and entry into nirvāṇa are...the expedient devices by which he constantly teaches and liberates others. In other words, the doctrine of skillful means expounded earlier in the sutra as the Buddha’s method of teaching is here transposed to the very events of his own biography.”¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Lotus Sutra*, “Herbs,” 96.

¹⁶ Nikkyō Niwano, *Buddhism for Today: A Modern Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra*, (New York: Weatherhill, 1980), xxvi.

¹⁷ *The Lotus Sutra*, “The Lifespan of the Tathāgata,” 225.

¹⁸ Teiser and Stone, 23.

However, the Buddha is not only timeless, he also has the supernatural powers one would associate with divinity. We see this throughout the Sūtra, but this point is emphasized particularly in chapter 21, “Transcendent Powers of the Tathāgata.” This short chapter is focused on the display of the Buddha’s powers before an immeasurable host of worshippers: he extends countless beams of light from his body—extending his tongue to heaven in the process—and shakes the earth with the sound of his snapping fingers—multiplying his actions in the manifestation of countless Buddhas.

The point here—as in other similar examples throughout the Sūtra is to emphasize that “The Buddha here is a master of space and time, playing with them as he likes. His revelation from the stupa of Many Jewels tells us why: he is a being of almost infinite extent and duration who appears in particular times and places through the expedient device of self-conjuring.”¹⁹ This particular revelation, found in chapter 11, “The Appearance of a Jeweled Stupa,” depicts the Buddha as manifesting his body as a great jeweled tower: “five hundred *yojanas* in height and two hundred and fifty *yojanas* both in length and depth,” festooned with jeweled bells, banners and precious stones, and giving off a fragrance of sandalwood.²⁰

Thus, we must conclude that the Lotus Sūtra makes a decisive effort to enlighten the reader to the fact that “...the Śākyamuni Buddha referred to here is not the historical Gautama but rather the Awakened One who occupies a realm beyond history...who chooses to reenter history and engage in human events in order to save living beings from their state of misery and dissatisfaction. He is the constantly abiding Śākyamuni, the father of the world, who, as depicted in Chapter 3 of the sutra, behold his children trapped in a burning house and offers all kinds of expedient devices to free them.”²¹

Buddhist “Form of Life”

This, then, relates directly to another characteristic of the Buddha, according to the Lotus Sūtra—the relationship he engenders with all living beings, particularly those who hear his teaching and trust him. One of the most important aspects of Wittgenstein’s description of how language works is the way it which it facilitates a specific kind of life as you “practice” it—remember his quote about believing in God. Thus, to conclude this article I want to say a bit about the “form of life” the Sūtra commends to its hearers: both the specific actions to which listeners are called, but even more, specific dispositions for those who hear it. There are many places in the Sūtra one might go to find examples, but let’s begin with chapter 10, “The Expounder of Dharma.” This

¹⁹ Carl Bielefeldt, “Expedient Devices,” in Teiser and Stone, 77.

²⁰ *The Lotus Sutra*, 167.

²¹ Ruben Habito, “Bodily Reading of the *Lotus Sūtra*, in Teiser and Stone, 192.

chapter is dedicated to the power of the Lotus Sūtra and its unquestioned status as the highest wisdom. In particular, in this chapter, listeners are exhorted to “preserve, recite, explain, and copy even a single line of the *Lotus Sutra*.”²²

Indeed, even simply hearing a single verse of the *Sutra* ensures that they will receive the Buddha’s prediction of attaining “highest, complete enlightenment.”²³ Throughout the Sūtra these particular activities—hearing it, attending to it, speaking it and writing it—are all commended to those who would receive its benefits.

The point here, is that the Sūtra intends to *do* something—to affect a change in one’s life: in short, hearing and taking the Sūtra to heart is meant to make a difference—facilitating a particular way of being in the world, that accurately can be called the “bodhisattva way.” Gene Reeves writes:

What, then, does it mean to be a bodhisattva?

Basically, in the Lotus Sutra it means using appropriate means to help others. And that finally, for the Lotus Sutra, what Buddhism itself is....The Lotus Sutra, accordingly, is a prescription of a medicine or religious method for us—and, therefore, at once both extremely imaginative and extremely practical.²⁴

Thus, he goes on to say: “That is, I think [the Sutra’s] main purpose is not to teach Buddhist doctrines or refute other interpretations or forms of Buddhism, but to induce the reader’s heart, and especially behavior, in a certain way.”²⁵ Jan Nattier says something similar: “In place of gradual self-cultivation, the *Lotus* proposes a model of sudden progress...in which the definitive turning point is the realization that there is just one vehicle and that we are all destined for Buddhahood. The proper response, then, is one of joy, gratitude, and acceptance.”²⁶ For Wittgenstein, this is a central component of the meaning of language—and specifically its use: the creation of certain patterns of behavior and shared responses among people formed by a specific language game.

Conclusion:

In this brief examination, I hope to have demonstrated that, if we use the understanding of language use proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, we can indeed

²² *The Lotus Sutra*, 157.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Gene Reeves, “Appropriate Means,” 386.

²⁵ Gene Reeves, “Appropriate Means,” 384.

²⁶ Jan Nattier, “Gender and Hierarchy in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in Teiser and Stone, 100.

recognize a viable—even robust—concept of God present within the Lotus Sūtra. And, we can do this without having to make any ontological claims about God’s being, specifically whether or not this is the “same” God we find in Christianity. It is enough to say that Buddhists who read and embrace the Lotus Sūtra, for all intents and purposes, understand the Buddha, as described in the Sūtra, as “God”—and relate to him that way.

Michael Pye has written: “...the status of the Buddha is not much different from the status assigned to God in the theistic traditions, even if the functions and the relation to the world are differently conceived...In short, the Buddha is approached devotionally by many Buddhists in Asian countries more or less as God is approached, still today, by a significant number of people in Western countries.”²⁷ I would argue this certainly is true for Buddhists who locate themselves in traditions where the Lotus Sūtra has authority. Clearly, then, if the word “God” has any meaning at all, it can be used to describe the Buddha as he is found in the Lotus Sūtra.

²⁷ Michael Pye, “The Length of Life of the Tathāgata,” in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope*, 165.