

Contribution

The Tilting Stream of Dharma Metaphor in Mahāyāna Buddhist Exegesis

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The ‘stream of Dharma’ metaphor often occurs in the early layers of the Buddha’s teaching to illustrate how his followers may be carried to the ocean of nirvāṇa by implementing certain practices. A section found in the Saṃyutta-nikāya, the ‘Ganges repetition’ (gaṅgāpeyyāla), is devoted to these metaphors and receives interpretative attention in Pāli commentaries. Is this metaphor found in Mahāyāna Buddhist scholarly works? If so, how is the metaphor used and what principles does its use illustrate? This article compares the use of this metaphor among diverse Mahāyāna Buddhist exegetes found in India, Tibet, China, and Japan. It examines the use of this metaphor by select thinkers such as Zhiyi (智顓, 538–97), Atiśa (982–1054), Prajñāmukti (ca. 11th century), and Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–82) to demonstrate how this trope is appropriated in Indian and East Asian forms of Buddhism. Further, the article examines points of difference between these select scholars to illustrate important distinctions between Indian Buddhist and East Asian Buddhist soteriology.

THE ‘stream of Dharma’ metaphor often occurs in the early layers of the Buddha’s teaching to illustrate how his followers may be carried to the ocean of *nirvāṇa* by implementing certain practices. The metaphor in early usage occurs in Pāli with compounds functioning as adjectives that modify a pedagogical subject in the broader discourse given by the Buddha. For example, in *The Simile of the Great Log* the Buddha explains how right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*) leads to nibbāna like a wooden log floating in the Ganges River that “slants toward the ocean, slopes toward the ocean, inclines toward the ocean (... *samuddaninno samuddapoṇo samuddapabbhāro*)”.¹ The occurrences in the early

discourses of the Buddha include the phrases “slant, incline, headed toward” (*ninna*), “sloping” (*poṇa*),² and “bending, inclining, sloping” (*pabbhāra*).³ The Pāli expression ‘slanting’ (*ninna*)⁴ also occurs in the ancient hymns of the Vedas as ‘flowing down’ (*nimná*). As Jurewicz explains:

Waters freed by Indra symbolise waters that make the existence of the world possible: these are rivers and rain. The idea of movement downwards is ... present in the idea of rivers which have their sources in the mountains and flow down to the ocean.... In [Vedic] hymns the idea of waters conceived as flowing downwards is evoked in the source domain of similes explaining the movement of Soma (most frequently). This allows us to treat this image as conventional and the direction downwards as the essential feature of the movement of waters.⁵

This movement of rivers into the ocean is often a metaphor in early Indian religious thought to convey ideas of downward flow, points of convergence, cosmological homilies, and merging into the highest Brahman.⁶

The historical Buddha Siddhatta Gotama frequently utilized the metaphor of the slanting, sloping, and flowing downward of rivers into the ocean in his teachings. As Jones explains:

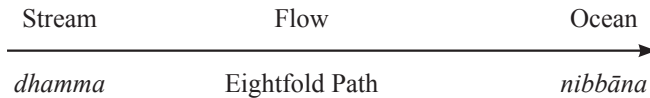
This river and ocean metaphor appears so often in the *Samyutta-nikāya* that it is called the ‘Ganges repetition’ (*gaṅgāpeyyāla*), appearing not only in reference to the eightfold path (*aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) (S 45:91 *et seq.*), but also in reference to the factors of awakening (*bojjhaṅga*) (S 46: 131f.), to the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) (S 47:51 *et seq.*), to the spiritual faculties (*bodhindriya*) (S 48:71 *et seq.*), to the spiritual powers (*bala*) (S 50:55 *et seq.*), and to the bases for success (*iddhipāda*) (S 51:33f *et seq.*).⁷

The metaphor is also applied by the Buddha to demonstrate that the “principle of conditionality that underlies the movement of *samsāra* also undergirds the path to liberation”.⁸ In a brief discourse found within the *Samyutta-nikāya* known as the *Upanisā Sutta*, after the Buddha outlines how conditions give rise to *samsāra* he then presents the conditions for what a number of Pāli based scholars call ‘transcendental dependent arising’ (*lokuttara paṭicca-samuppāda*). The Buddha states:

Just as, bhikkhus, when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slope and fills the cleft, gullies, and creeks; these being full fill up the pools; these being full fill up the lakes; these being full fill up the streams; these being full fill up the rivers; and these being full fill up the great ocean; so too ... with suffering as a proximate cause, faith; with faith as a proximate cause, gladness; with gladness as proximate cause, rapture; with rapture as proximate cause, tranquillity; with tranquillity as proximate cause, happiness; with happiness as proximate cause, concentration; with concentration as a proximate cause, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are; with the knowledge and vision of things as they really are as proximate cause, revulsion; with revulsion as proximate cause, dispassion; with dispassion as proximate cause, liberation; with liberation as proximate cause, the knowledge of the destruction [of the taints (*āsava*)].⁹

The metaphor also appears in early discourses that discuss a disciple's progress along the eightfold path, in reference to Noble beings (*ārya*) such as Stream-enterers (Skt. *srotaāpanna*) who have entered the stream leading to the ocean of *nibbāna*.¹⁰ Figure 1 provides an illustrative representation of this spatial and dynamic metaphor in early Buddhist discourses.

Figure 1. The 'Stream of Dharma' Metaphor in Early Buddhist Discourses¹¹



The 'stream of dharma' metaphor occurs in later Buddhist discourses as well. As the following brief selection of sources illustrates, the metaphor of slanting, sloping, and flowing may include more than just rivers and oceans. Likewise, the rivers flowing into the ocean metaphor may occur in Buddhist Sanskrit literature and Mahāyāna *sūtras* in a variety of different ways. For example, the *Eight-Thousand Line Perfection of Wisdom* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*) provides an early usage of the correlative compounds in chapter 15 of the discourse when Subhūti asks the Buddha how one should contemplate the *Perfection of Wisdom*. The Buddha, instead of employing the ocean as a metaphor, indicates cultivating *Perfect Wisdom* with the simile of space. The

discourse in the chapter states:

Subhūti: How does one consider the series of thoughts leading to Omniscience?

The Blessed One replied: Subhūti, through a series of thoughts inclined to space, prone to space, sloping towards space, Subhūti, is how the series of thoughts are considered in leading to Omniscience.¹²

Rather than the ocean, in the *Perfection of Wisdom* the metaphor is space and the stream of practice leads to Omniscience (*sarvajñatā*) rather than *nirvāṇa*.¹³

In *The Concentration of Heroic Progress* (*Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*), the Buddha explains to the bodhisattva Dṛḍhamati how a bodhisattva who cultivates the heroic progress concentration will also achieve all absorptions (*dhyānas*) and meditation attainments (*samāpatti*). The Buddha utilizes the river and ocean metaphor to illustrate the greatness of the heroic progress concentration:

Just as springs, streams, rivers, tributaries, and water courses flow into the great ocean (*mahāsamudra*), so all the bodhisattva possesses in the way of absorptions (*dhyānas*) and attainments (*samāpattis*) is to be found in the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*.¹⁴

In another early Mahāyāna *sūtra*, the *Infinite Jewels* (*Ratnaḥkoṭi*), the Buddha explains to Mañjuśrī:

As an analogy, Mañjuśrī, consider rivers that have distinct names, colors, and waters. When they flow into the ocean it becomes impossible to differentiate them or identify them, saying, ‘This is the Ganges,’ ‘This is the Sītā,’ or ‘This is the Yamunā.’ Likewise, Mañjuśrī, within the Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*), things that have different names cannot be distinctly labeled, saying, ‘These are the attributes of ordinary beings, and here are those of the hearers, solitary buddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddhas.’¹⁵

Although not utilizing the metaphor of the ocean and rivers, *The Inquiry of the Bodhisattva Gaganagañja* (*Gaganagañjaparipṛccha*), an important Mahāyāna *sūtra* from the first or second century, utilizes the phrases “slant, incline, headed toward” (*nimnatā*) and “bending, inclining, sloping” (*prāṅbhāra*) in its description of 32 purifications

of memory. Among the 32, “inclination towards the dharma” (*dharmanimnatā*) and “disposition to the dharma” (*dharmaṃprāgbhāratā*) are listed in the 28th section of the discourse.¹⁶

The *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* provides another example of rivers flowing into the ocean. In the *sūtra*’s chapter on long life, the Buddha addresses Kāśyapa on the measureless lifespan of the Tathāgata. The Buddha says to Kāśyapa:

Good son, it is like the eight great rivers that are named (1) the Ganges, (2) the Yamunā, (3) the Sarabhū, (4) the Aciravatī, (5) the Mahī, (6) the Indus, (7) the Vakṣu, and (8) the Śītā. These eight great rivers and the lesser rivers all flow into the ocean. Kāśyapa, so it is with all among humans and in the heavens above the earth and sky. Their life spans are like the great rivers. They all flow into the ocean of the Tathāgata’s life span. This is why the Tathāgata’s life span is measureless.¹⁷

In the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* chapter on birds:

Also, next, O good man! It is as in the case in which all rivers drain into the ocean. All *sūtras* and *samādhis* flow into the *Mahāyāna Great Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. How so? Because it ultimately expounds the Buddha-Nature. That is why I say: “Some dharmas are eternal; some dharmas are non-eternal. With non-Self, too, things amount to the same.” It is thus that I say.¹⁸

This brief survey of Mahāyāna *sūtras* on the metaphor of rivers flowing into the ocean demonstrates that the structure of the metaphor depicting certain practices leading to, or sloping toward, a higher aim or goal has been maintained from the earlier teachings found in common forms of Buddhism. The Mahāyāna *sūtras* have adapted the metaphor of rivers flowing into the ocean to illustrate the superiority of the teachings they advocate, whether that teaching concerns Omniscience, a special concentration, or the lifespan of the Tathāgata.

The adaptation of this metaphor by Mahāyāna Buddhist authors seems to follow the pattern established in Mahāyāna *sūtras*. Among traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist authors, the 10th century Bengali master Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna (982–1054 CE), his disciple Prajñāmukti (ca. 11th century), and Atiśa’s early Tibetan Kadampa followers provide a case study for how this metaphor is understood in Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhist exegesis. From the perspective of East Asian

Mahāyāna Buddhist exegesis, the masters Zhiyi (智顓, 538–97 CE) and Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–82 CE) provide an alternative account of the rivers and ocean metaphor.

Atiśa, also known as Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna, is a famous pre-modern Indian Buddhist master from Bengal known for his journeys in Indonesia and Nepal. In the last 13 years of his life, he became one of the most influential Indian Buddhist masters ever to set foot in Tibet.¹⁹ Among his numerous writings, Atiśa composed a short work in 28 verses on the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, theory and practice of the two realities known as *Entry to the Two Realities* (*Satyadvayāvātāra*). This versified work on the conventional and ultimate reality outlines the characteristics of these two realities and also presents Atiśa's views on valid cognition and reasoning. In the latter part of the 16th verse of the *Entry to the Two Realities*, Atiśa makes the following statement:

The articles of Dharma are said to number 84,000. All of them are inclined toward and lead to this [ultimate] reality. (vv. 16c–e)²⁰

An autocommentary to the *Entry to the Two Realities* attributed to Atiśa is not extant, but this verse is commented upon by his early Tibetan Kadampa (*bka' gdams pa*) followers. In the late 11th century Tibetan commentary *Collection on the Two Realities*, the anonymous author comments on Atiśa's statement that the number of the Buddha's teachings is 84,000, and then elaborates on the 'system of inclination' (*gzhol lugs*). The commentary states:

Well then, if one thinks of how the other 84,000 articles of the Buddha's Dharma are considered as teaching, the text states, "the articles of Dharma are said to number 84,000. All of them are continually inclined toward and directly lead to this [ultimate] reality." The meaning of "all" is said to be however much is the measure of the article of Abhidharma or however many pronouncements were taught, and this merely indicates that the articles of Dharma are immeasurable.

The system of inclination (*gzhol lugs*): through the teaching of worldly karma, cause and effect, and so forth, [the teaching] entirely proceeds to emptiness (*stong pa nyid* ≈ *śūnyatā*). In relation to this, even [if] not [initially] proceeding [to realizing emptiness, the teaching] is inclined to the aim of the three vehicles, the vehicles of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* are inclined toward the Great

Vehicle, the four immeasurables of the Great Vehicle are inclined toward the awakening mind (*byang chub kyi sems* \approx *bodhicitta*), the awakening mind inclines one toward the activity of a bodhisattva, the activity-factors of method up through concentration (*bsam gtan* \approx *dhyāna*) are inclined toward and lead to the realization of reality (*chos nyid* \approx *dharmatā*). [As it is said,] “the latter arises dependent upon the former,” and also for the three things that create merit (i.e., generosity, discipline, and meditation), the former are inclined toward the latter. Likewise for the three trainings [of morality, concentration, and wisdom]. The accumulation of merit is inclined toward the accumulation of wisdom. The [understanding of] the selflessness of the person is inclined [toward understanding] the essencelessness of things.²¹

In this excerpt from the commentary, the Tibetan Kadampa commentator interprets the major categories of Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings in terms of one set of practices leading, or inclining, a practitioner toward higher levels of practice culminating in the realization of emptiness (*sūnyatā*). Prajñāmukti, an Indian Buddhist disciple of Atiśa’s who was among his entourage in Tibet, employs the rivers flowing into ocean metaphor in his *Commentary on [Atiśa’s] Special Instructions on the Middle Way (Madhyamakopadeśavṛtti)*. Prajñāmukti states:

[A]lthough there are distinctions of wisdom, the Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*) is naturally one. Although the Ganges, Sindhu, Vakṣu, and so forth are different rivers, they are naturally one with the great ocean. As it is said, “Separate lineages are not proper, because the Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*) does not have distinctions. The divisions are declared by distinguishing the supported dharmas.”²²

Prajñāmukti cites a verse from the first chapter of the Maitreya’s *Ornament for Clear Realization*²³ in conjunction with the use of metaphor to illustrate that the state of awakening is comparable to the oceanic Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*) that does not have distinctions. The distinctions in wisdom among different individuals are comparable to rivers that are different but ultimately have the same nature as the ocean.

An early extant Kadampa commentary on the *Satyadvayāvātāra*, *Sherab Dorjé’s Explanation of Atiśa’s ‘Entry to the Two Realities’*, attributed to Naljorpa Sherap Dorjé (ca. 1125), who was a direct disciple of Sharawa Yönten Drak (1070–141), provides a brief exegesis on

Atiśa's verse. Naljorpa Sherap Dorjé states:

“Inclining toward [ultimate] reality” means that all of whatever virtue within the Middle Way view is conventional, like an illusion, yet ultimately is consumed in lacking any intrinsic essence, as the real nature of things moves to the body of the continuum of the Truth body (*dharmakāya*). “Leading” means that the direct primary cause up until the level of the vajra-like concentration is the present moment meditation on [ultimate] reality by non-conceptual [cultivation]. [Ultimate] reality is the cause of directly realizing emptiness. “Leading” means when merely attaining the Truth body, one proceeds or dissolves into the essence of the nature of reality (*dharmatā*).²⁴

In this commentary the 12th century Tibetan Kadam master explicitly states that the cognitions which lead, or are inclined, to realizing emptiness are non-conceptual in nature (i.e., *nirvikalpa-jñāna*). Naljorpa Sherap Dorjé interprets non-conceptual realizations as leading and inclining one toward the oceanic Truth body (*dharmakāya*) following the metaphor of rivers flowing into the ocean.

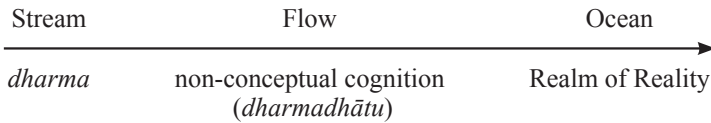
A cumulative example of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition exegesis of the rivers into ocean metaphor is found in the work of the great Tibetan polymath historian and exegete Butön Rinchen Drup (*bu ston rin chen grub*, 1290–364). Butön brings a number of elements concerning the tilting stream of dharma into his exemplary discussion of Dharma-as-Scripture (*āgamadharmā*).²⁵ On this point his *Chronicle of Buddhism in India and Tibet* (*chos 'byung*) states:

Dharma-as-Scripture consists of discussions that engage with qualities of realization. In this regard there are verbal expressions which are concordant with latencies that arise from conceptual elaboration (*prapañca*) and those concordant with the Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*). The first, since they are concordant with a variety of things such as horses, oxen, etc., and correspond with cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*), are worldly expressions. The second are expressions within the 12 divisions of the Buddha's teaching, and occur as concordant with realizing suchness (*dharmatā*) or occur as concordant with realizing the Realm of Reality. *The Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes* (*Madhyāntavibhāga*) states, “It is the foremost aim which flows from that” and the *Clear Meaning Commentary* states, “It is concordant as a cause of [realizing] the realm of reality.” The Pandit Sunayaśrī states, “All teachings have

as their basis the realization of emptiness. Similar to three birds — small, medium, or large — flying through the sky, the three types of awakening are attained by realizing the selflessness of the person, the essencelessness of perceived objects, and both kinds of essencelessness.” Since it is concordant with *nirvāṇa* it is called a “supermundane expression.” The *Mahāparinirvāṇa* [*sūtra*] states, “Just as the four great rivers descend, flow, and are inclined toward the ocean, likewise all teachings descend, flow, and are inclined toward *nirvāṇa*.”²⁶

In brief, the late Indian Buddhist and early Tibetan Kadampa interpretation of the rivers flowing into the ocean metaphor is interpreted mainly in terms of cognitions leading to the realization of ultimate reality as emptiness, or its synonym, the Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*). Figure 2 depicts the ‘Stream of Dharma’ metaphor found within Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

Figure 2. The ‘Stream of Dharma’ Metaphor in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Discourses



For the East Asian Buddhist perspective I briefly examine the use of the river and ocean metaphor in the thought of Nichiren (日蓮) and Zhiyi (智顓). Nichiren and Zhiyi are influenced by the *Lotus Sūtra* in their understanding and use of the metaphor. The twenty-second chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Sanskrit, or the 23rd in Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation, employs the metaphor of rivers and oceans to indicate the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The *sūtra* states in that chapter:

Just as the great ocean, Nakṣatrarājasamkusumitābhijña, surpasses all springs, streams, and tanks, so, Nakṣatrarājasamkusumitābhijña, this Dharmaparyāya of the Lotus of the True Law surpasses all Sūtras spoken by the Tathāgata.²⁷

Nichiren appropriates the metaphor of rivers flowing into the ocean in a number of his writings.²⁸ He comments on the above passage of the *Lotus Sūtra* in his writing *The Essence of the “Medicine King” Chapter* (*Yakuo-bon tokui sho* [藥王品得意抄]) where he states:

This chapter, the “Medicine King,” contains ten analogies, the first of which is the analogy of the great ocean.... Among all the sutras, such as the Flower Garland Sutra, the Agama sutras, the Correct and Equal sutras, the Wisdom, Profound Secrets, Amida, Nirvana, Mahavairochana, Diamond Crown, Susiddhikara, and Secret Solemnity sutras, all the sutras preached by the Thus Come One Shakyamuni, all the sutras preached by the Thus Come One Mahavairochana, all the sutras preached by the Thus Come One Amida, all the sutras preached by the Thus Come One Medicine Master, and all the sutras preached by the various Buddhas of the three existences of past, present, and future — among all these sutras, the Lotus Sutra stands foremost. Thus these other sutras are analogous to the large rivers, middle-sized rivers, and small rivers, while the Lotus Sutra is likened to the great ocean.²⁹

Nichiren further elaborates on this metaphor as found in the ‘Medicine King’ chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* in his extensive writing *The Unanimous Declaration*. In this work, written at Minobu in 1279, Nichiren explains:

In the “Medicine King” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, ten similes are employed to indicate how superior is the power and function of the teachings pertaining to the Buddha’s enlightenment in comparison to the teachings intended for the instruction and conversion of others. The first of these likens the other sutras to the various rivers and streams, and the Lotus Sutra to the great ocean. (This summarizes the meaning of the passage.) For in truth, although the various waters that are the sutras concerned with instruction and conversion of others flow unceasingly day and night into the great ocean that is the Lotus Sutra, the teaching pertaining to the Buddha’s enlightenment, the ocean never grows in size or diminishes. In this it displays the wondrous nature of its function. But the various waters that are the other sutras cannot even for an instant encompass the great ocean of the Lotus Sutra. The relative superiority of the teachings pertaining to the Buddha’s enlightenment as compared to the teachings for instruction and conversion of others is thus as indicated in this simile. This one simile may be taken as representative of the others in the series.³⁰

In this writing, Nichiren outlines how the simile of the rivers flowing into the ocean indicates both the encompassment of other *sūtras*, which

are likened to rivers, as well as the superiority of the oceanic *Lotus Sūtra* based on the power and function of the teachings pertaining to the Buddha's enlightenment. As Nichiren indicates, the great ocean that is the *Lotus Sūtra*, the teaching pertaining to the Buddha's enlightenment, is like the ocean in that it never grows in size or diminishes. This quality of neither increasing nor decreasing is also listed among the eight mysterious qualities that Nichiren discusses in his writing *The Universal Salty Taste* which also compares the ocean to the *Lotus Sūtra*. As Nichiren states in this writing:

The ocean has eight mysterious qualities. First, it gradually becomes deeper. Second, being deep, its bottom is hard to fathom. Third, its salty taste is the same everywhere. Fourth, its ebb and flow follows certain rules. Fifth, it contains various treasure storehouses. Sixth, creatures of great size exist and dwell in it. Seventh, it refuses to house corpses. Eighth, it takes in all rivers and heavy rainfall without either increasing or decreasing.³¹

Of course, it is important to recognize that when Nichiren mentions the words '*Lotus Sūtra*' he often understands this as a synonym for *daimoku* or the title 'Nam-Myoho Renge Kyo'. For Nichiren, the *daimoku* is the means for all sentient beings to directly instantiate the wisdom of all buddhas during the *Mappo* era, or Final Dharma age.³² Nichiren's understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s title includes the principle that the *Lotus Sūtra* encompasses all other Buddhist teachings. Among the three meanings of *myo* found in the *daimoku* is the connotation of 'perfectly encompassing'.³³ Nichiren states in *The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra*:

Myo in India is rendered as *sad*, and in China, as *miao*. *Myo* means to be fully endowed, which in turn has the meaning of "perfect and full." Each word and each character of the Lotus Sutra contains within it all the 69,384 characters that compose the sutra. To illustrate, one drop of the great ocean contains within it the waters of all the various rivers that flow into the ocean³⁴

In this regard Nichiren explains in the same discourse how the *daimoku* is like the ocean in its encompassment of blessings. Nichiren writes:

Question: How great are the blessings contained within the five characters of Myoho-reenge-kyo?

Answer: The great ocean contains all the numerous rivers that flow into it, the great earth contains all sentient and insentient beings, the wish-granting jewel is capable of showering down innumerable treasures, and the heavenly king Brahma rules over all the threefold world. The five characters of Myoho-rence-kyo are comparable to these. All beings of the nine worlds, as well as those in the world of Buddhahood, are contained within them. And since all beings of the Ten Worlds are contained within them, so are their environments.³⁵

Along these lines, Nichiren does not appear to directly relate the metaphor of the ocean to the Realm of Reality, or Dharma-realm (*dharmadhātu*), in his writings. However, he does discuss the relation between the *daimoku* and the Realm of Reality. He states in *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* while describing the five main characters of the *daimoku*:

In the mirror of *myō* are reflected the wonders of the Dharma-realm; in the mirror of *hō* is reflected the entity or essence of the Dharma-realm; in the mirror of *ren* are reflected the effects of the Dharma-realm; in the mirror of *ge* are reflected the causes of the Dharma-realm; and in the mirror of *kyō* are reflected the words and sounds of the ten thousand phenomena.³⁶

The Tiantai master Zhiyi (智顛) appears to only briefly allude to the rivers into the ocean metaphor in his works.³⁷ Nevertheless, Zhiyi's understanding is conveyed by Nichiren as stated in *The Selection of the Time*, (*Senji sho* [撰時抄]):

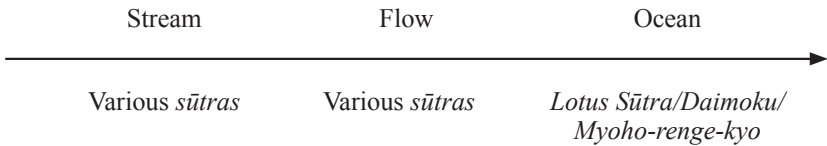
In the twenty volumes composing these two works, *Profound Meaning* and *Words and Phrases*, he [i.e., Zhiyi] likened the teachings of all the other sutras to streams and rivers, and the Lotus Sutra to the great ocean. He demonstrated that the waters that make up the Buddhist teachings of all the worlds of the ten directions flow, without the loss of a single drop, into that great ocean of the Lotus Sutra.³⁸

In brief, Zhiyi also utilizes the metaphor to indicate that all other Buddhist teachings lead to the oceanic *Lotus Sūtra*. While Zhiyi's *Profound Meaning* and *Words and Phrases* only briefly mentions the metaphor in passing, Nichiren references the rivers flowing into ocean metaphor numerous times in his writing. Nichiren's attraction to the

metaphor of the ocean in explaining the *Lotus Sūtra* may reflect his life experience of being born on the Boso Peninsula (房総半島, *Bosohanto*) in Japan among a family of fisherman. The ocean’s profundity and vastness would be immediately visible to him on a daily basis while he came of age and during the time of his initial education at Seichoji temple in the region.

The metaphor of rivers and oceans would come to shape Nichiren’s articulation of his understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Gohonzon* of *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo* in the form of a *maṇḍala*, as all-encompassing and leading to direct and immediate attainment of Buddhahood (*jikitatsu shokan*). In Nichiren’s understanding, when the ocean of the *Lotus Sūtra* is embraced, the practitioner instantaneously attains enlightenment. This is also known as *juji soku kanjin*, which literally means ‘embracing the Gohonzon is in itself enlightenment’. In this way, for Nichiren, the *Lotus Sūtra* in the *Mappo* era is an all-encompassing oceanic presence that leads the practitioner to direct and immediate enlightenment. Figure 3 depicts the ‘Stream of Dharma’ metaphor found in Nichiren’s thought.

Figure 3. The ‘Stream of Dharma’ Metaphor in Nichiren’s Thought



In sum, in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the rivers flowing into ocean metaphor, Atiśa and his Tibetan followers utilize the metaphor to indicate progressive practices that lead one to the non-conceptual realization of emptiness that is equated with the Realm of Reality (*dharmadhātu*). The East Asian Buddhist understanding of the metaphor, represented by Nichiren, and to a lesser extent Zhiyi, employs the metaphor to illustrate the superiority of the oceanic *Lotus Sūtra* that never increases nor decreases in its stature, and instantiates the wisdom of all buddhas through the recitation of *daimoku*. As shown here through selected sources, there are key differences between the utilization of the same metaphor in the Indo-Tibetan and East Asian forms of Buddhism. The trends of interpretation may be based not only on received tradition, geographical location, and historical timeframe, but also one’s environmental conditions to shape how the ‘rivers into the ocean’ metaphor is utilized and which aspects of the metaphor are emphasized. Nichiren places emphasis on the ocean while Indian Buddhist sources

recognize numerous well-known rivers such the Ganges. Another notable difference between the traditions in interpreting the metaphor is that the time-honored Indian Buddhist interpretative tradition privileges gradual realization through progressive practice and realization, while East Asian Buddhist traditions may focus on sudden realization as exemplified in the understanding of Nichiren.

Abbreviations and References

- Abhisamayālaṃkāra* by Maitreya. [*Abhisamayālaṃkāraprajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrakār ikā*] *Ornament for Clear Realization. Shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa*. Toh 3786, vol. ka, 1b1–13a7. Edited by Stcherbatsky and Obermiller, 1929.
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- _____. *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 (*Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra*; T1716.33.681–815), also known as *Miaofa lianhuajing xuanyi* 妙法蓮華經玄義.

Notes

- ¹ *The Simile of the Great Log (Dārukkhandhopamasutta, S 35:241, IV 179–81; Cf. Bodhi 2020, 264–68, 270–71)*. See Salomon (2018) for an English translation of the Gāndhārī version of this discourse. For a list of parallels in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan see Glass and Allon (2008, 14). I do not have access to Lee’s (2009) study of the Gāndhārī version. Notably, based on Salomon’s translation, the ancient reciters of the Gāndhārī version of the discourse, presumably in present-day north-west Pakistan and parts of north-east Afghanistan, did not place emphasis on the ‘sloping, inclining, and bending to the ocean’ aspects of the metaphor.
- ² Rhys Davids and Stede (1966), part V, 97, s.v. *poṇa*.
- ³ *Ibid.*, part V, 37, s.v. *pabbhāra*.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, s.v. *ninna*.
- ⁵ Jurewicz (2008), 194.
- ⁶ See, for instance, the *Upaniṣads* (Olivelle 1996) s.v. ocean, sea. On rivers and oceans in South Asian religious thought see Falk (1943), 26, 61, 87.
- ⁷ Jones (2016), 110.
- ⁸ Bodhi (2000), 524.
- ⁹ *Samyutta nikāya* (PTS, S II.12.27–28, p. 32): *Seyyathāpi bhikkhave uparipabbate*

phullaphusitake deve vassante taṃ udakaṃ yathā ninnam pavattamānaṃ pabbatakandarapadarasākhā paripūreti // pabbatakandara- padarasākhā paripūrā kusubbhe paripūrenti // kusubbhā paripūrā mahāsobbhe paripūrenti // mahāsobbhā paripūrā kunnadiyo paripūrenti // kunnadiyo paripūrāyo mahānadiyo paripūrenti // mahānadiyo paripūrāyo mahāsamuddaṃ paripūrenti // evam eva kho bhikkhave, ... dukkhūpanisā saddhā // saddhūpanisaṃ pāmujjam // pāmujjūpanisā pīti // pītūpanisā passaddhi // passaddhūpanisaṃ sukhaṃ // sukhūpaniso samādhi // samādhūpanisaṃ yathābhūtañānadassanaṃ // yathābhūtañānadassanūpanisā nibbidā // nibbidūpaniso virāgo. virāgūpanisā vimutti // vimuttūpanisaṃ khaye nāṇanti //. English translation Bodhi (2000, 555–56) with slight modification. See Jones (2019) on the Upanisā sutta and Jones (2020) for ‘transcendental dependent arising’.

¹⁰ Pāli, *sotāpanna*; cf. *soto* ≈ *maggo*, S (V, p. 347). See also Falk (1943, 104), Apple (2008), Buswell and Lopez (2014, 854–55) on Stream-enterers.

¹¹ Figure adapted from Jones (2016, 116) with modification.

¹² *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Mitra 1888, 302–03): *subhūtir āha / kathaṃ bhagavan sarvajñātāninnā saṃtatir vyavacāritā bhavati // [303] bhagavān āha / ākāśaninnayā subhūte saṃtatyā ākāśapravaṇayā ākāśaprāgbhārayā subhūte saṃtatyā sarvajñātāninnā saṃtatir vyavacāritā bhavati /*. English also in Conze (1973), corresp. ed. Mitra (1888), 302–03. Cf. Sander (2000) Kuṣāṇa manuscript ca. 200 CE, 2374.1.9 recto 2, ... (2) *ninnāyaṃ subhūti saṃtatiyaṃ ākāśapr[o] ...*; Cf. Karashima (2011), 290. On *vyavacārayati* see Edgerton (1953), 515, column 2.

¹³ Karashima (2011), 310, note 81: “AS.164.7 = R.329.9 = AAA.675.19. *niyato bhavati sarvajñātāyā samyaksambodhiṃ parāyaṇaḥ* (“He is fixed on all-knowledge and ends up in perfect enlightenment.” [AsP.tr.II 202 = AsP.tr. 123]); ZQ.495a18.向佛; Zfn.527b14.正向薩芸若; Kj.564c5.必至 薩婆若; not found at Xz(I).827a4.; not found at Xz(II).901b26.; Sh.642a16.決定趣求阿耨 多羅三藐三菩提, 成就一切智; Tib.Pk.195b5 = D.182a2. *thams cad mkhyen pa nyid du nges shing rdzogs pa ’i byang chub la gzhol bar ’gyur ro*; Mvy 808: *sarvajñātā-nimnaḥ = thams cad mkhyen pa nyid la gzhol ba*, Mvy 809: *sarvajñātāpravaṇaḥ = thams cad mkhyen pa nyid la ’bab pa*, Mvy 810: *sarvajñātāprāgbhāraḥ = thams cad mkhyen pa nyid du ’gyur ba.*”

¹⁴ *Śūraṃgamasamādhisūtra* (Lamotte and Boin-Webb 1998, 127). Kumārajīva, T no.642, 15. 632a1: 譬如陂泉江河諸流皆入大海, 如是菩薩所有禪定, 皆在首楞嚴三昧. The Tibetan translation expands the attainments, Derge Tibetan, fol. 265a2-4: / *blo gros brtan pa ’di lta ste / dper na chu mig dang / mtsho ’u dang / rdzing dang / lteng ka dang / chu bran dang / ’bab chu dang / ’bab chu chen po gang ji snyed pa de dag ni rgya mtsho chen por ’dus par blta’o // blo gros brtan pa de bzhin du byang chub sems dpa’i ting nge ’dzin dang / snyoms par ’jug pa dang / rnam par thar pa gang ji snyed pa dag dang / rdzu ’phrul thams cad dang / mngon par shes pa dang / so so yang dag par rig pa’i shes pa de dag thams cad ni dpa’bar ’gro ba’i ting nge ’dzin gyi nang du ’dus par blta’o /*.

¹⁵ Translation from the Tibetan *’phags pa rin po che’i mtha’ zhes bya ba theg pa chen po’i mdo*, D 118, 292b: / *’jam dpal ’di lta ste / dper na chu klung ming tha dad pa dang / kha dog tha dad pa dang / ro tha dad pa rgya mtsho’i nang du bab pa rnam la ni ’di lta ste / ’di ni gang ga’o zhe’am si ta’o zhe’am / ya mu na’o zhes bye brag tu dbye ba’am tha dad du byar mi nus so // ’jam dpal de bzhin du ming tha dad pa’i chos rnam kyang chos kyi dbyings la ’di ni so’i skye bo’i*

- chos rnam so zhe'am / nyan thos dang / rang sangs rgyas dang / byang chub sems dpa'dang / sangs rgyas kyi chos rnam so zhes tha dad par gdags par mi nus so /*. English translation Dharmachakra Translation Committee (2022) with slight modification. Cf. *Baoji sanmei wenshu shi li pusa wen fashen jing* 寶積三昧文殊師利菩薩問法身經, T12, no. 356, p. 237, b20: 何以故。不言是凡人是非凡人。法身等無差特無所散。身是為法身。譬如四流悉歸於海合為一味。若干名法為一法身。諸所有種各各有名。合會聚之名曰穀。 On the antiquity of this discourse see Karashima (2015), 119.
- ¹⁶ See Han (2021). Chinese translation by Amoghavajra 不空 (CE 720–74), 大集大虛空藏菩薩所問經; Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (CE 414–26), 虛空藏菩薩品, in T 397(8).
- ¹⁷ *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* (Chinese, Yamamoto 1973, 38, Chap. 4: On Long Life; Tibetan, Habata (2013), 102–03, MPM §131, Chap. 1: *'tshé ba med pa'i phung po*): *bcom ldan 'das kyi bka' stsal pa / 'od srung chen po dang rus gcig pa dper na chu klung gang gā dang / ya mu na dang / sa ra yu dang / hing gu la la sogs pa chu klung chen po* [p.103] *rnams dang / chu bran gzhan rnams rgya mtsho chen po kho na'i nang du 'bab pa de bzhin du / 'od srung chen po dang rus gcig pa lha yul dang sa'i steng gi tshé'i chu klung yod do cog thams cad ni de bzhin gshegs pa'i rgyal mtsho kho nar 'bab ste / de ltar na de bzhin gshegs pa mchog tu sku tshé ring ngo //*.
- ¹⁸ *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, 大般涅槃經、卷 8 (鳥喻品 14) T12, no. 375, p. 655, c25–26: 譬如流皆歸于海。一切契經諸定三昧皆歸大乘涅槃經。何以故。究竟善有佛性故善男子。是故我言異法是常異法無常。乃至無我亦復如是。 Tibetan, Habata (2013), 320, MPM §443, Chap. 5: *rigs kyi bu gzhang yang dper na klung thams cad ni rgya mtsho'i khongs su 'dus so // rigs kyi bu de bzhin du mdo sde thams cad dang / ting nge 'dzin thams cad dang / theg pa chen po ni yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po'i mdo chen po 'di'i khongs su 'dus so // ci'i phyir zhe na / 'di las de bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po shin tu yongs su mthar thug pa gsal bas bstan pa'i phyir te / mchog tu mthar phyin pa gang yin pa de ni rgyu zhes bya'o / de bas na chos kha cig ni mi rtag la chos kha cig ni rtag ces bya'o //*.
- ¹⁹ See Apple (2019) on the life and teachings of Atiśa.
- ²⁰ Apple (2018), 159; *Satyadvayāvātāra*, v. 16c–e: *chos nyid phung po brgyad khri dang // bzhi stong gsung pa thams cad ni // chos nyid 'di la gzhol zhing 'bab //*.
- ²¹ Tibetan commentary *Collection on the Two Realities* (fol. 11a-b), for Tibetan edition see Apple (2013), 520–21; for annotated English translation see Apple (2018), 159.
- ²² Prajñāmukti, *Madhyamakopadeśavṛtti*, English translation Apple (2018), 288.
- ²³ Apple (2018), 416, note 772: *Abhisamayālamkāra* I.39 (Stcherbatsky and Obermiller 1929, 6): *dharmadhātor asaṃbhedāt gotrabhedo na yujyata / ādheyadharmabhedāt tu tadbhedah pārāgīyate //*. English translation Sparham (2006), 1, 84–85. Cited also in Atiśa's *Bodhipathapradīpapañjikā* (Sherburne 2000, 116).
- ²⁴ Rnal 'byor pa shes rab rdo rje, 49a7:// **de la chos nyid la gzhol ba** [SDA 16e] *zhes bya ba ni / dge ba ci byed pa thams cad dbu ma'i lta bas kun rdzob sgyu ma lta bu don dam par rang bzhin med par zin pas chos nyid chos kyi sku'i brgyud pa'i* [49a8] *skur 'gro ba'o // 'ba' ba* [SDA 16e] *zhes byas ni / dngos kyi rgyu de rdo rje lta bu'i ting nge 'dzin man chad nas / da lta mi rtog pas chos nyid sgom pa yan chad de / chos nyid stong pa nyid dngos sa rtags pa'i rgyu'o // 'bab pa zhes*

- bya [49b1] chos sku thob tsam na / chos nyid kyi ngo bor song ba 'am thim pa'o // .
- ²⁵ Buswell and Lopez (2014) s.v. āgamadharmā (T. *lung gi chos*, C. *jiaofa*, J. *kyoho*, 教法), *adhigamadharmā* (T. *rtogs pa'i chos*; C. *zhengfa*; J. *shoho*, 證法).
- ²⁶ Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290–1364), 1988, 12.4–15: *lung gi chos mtshan nyid ni / rtogs pa'i chos la 'jug pa'i rjod byed do // de la spros pa las byung ba'i bag chags dang / chos kyi dbyings kyi rgyu mthun pa las byung ba'i mngon brjod do / dang po ni / rta dang glang po chen la sogs pa'i gtam sna tshogs pa ste / 'khor ba dang chos mthun pas 'jig rten pa'i mngon brjod ces kyang bya'o // gnyis pa ni / gsung rab yan lag bcu gnyis te // de yang chos nyid rtogs par byed pa'i rgyu mthun nam / chos dbyings rtogs pa'i rgyu mthun las byung bas der brjod de / rgyu mthun don gyi mchog nyid dang // zhes dbus mthar byung zhing / don gsal 'grel par chos kyi dbyings kyi rgyu mthun par gyur pa zhes so // pañdi ta su nya śrī'i zhal snga nas chos thams cad stong nyid rtogs pa'i rtsa ba can yin te / bya chung 'bring che gsum nam mkha' la 'phur ba ltar byang chub gsum gang zag gi bdag med dang gzung ba bdag med pa dang bdag med gnyis ka rtogs pas 'thob bo // zhes gsungs so // de myang 'das dang chos mthun pas 'jig rten las 'das pa'i mngon brjod ces bya ste / myang 'das las chu bo chen po bzhi rgya mtshor bab 'bab gzhol ba de bzhin du chos thams cad mya ngan 'das par bab 'bab gzhol zhes gsungs so // .*
- ²⁷ *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* (Chap. 22, Vaidya, p. 240, *tadyathāpi nāma nakṣatrarājasamkusumitābhijña sarveśāmutsasarastadāgānām mahāsamudro mūrdhaprāptaḥ, evameva nakṣatrarājasamkusumitābhijña sarveśām tathāgatabhāṣītānām sūtrāntānāmayaṃ saddharmapuṇḍarīko dharmaparyāyo mūrdhaprāptaḥ*); Cf. *The Lotus Sutra* (Kubo and Yuyama 1993, 299); *Miaofalianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (T. no.262, 9, 54a19: 宿王華。譬如一切川流江河諸水之中。海為第一。此法華經亦復如是。於諸如來所說經中。最為深大。
- ²⁸ Cf. Lopez and Stone (2019), 48, 73, 229, 233, 236, 255.
- ²⁹ *The Essence of the "Medicine King" Chapter (Yakuo-bon tokui sho* [薬王品得意抄], 1499; WND-I, 91–93); 日蓮大聖人御書全集 *Nichiren Daishonin gosho zenshu*, 1499: 此の品に十の譬有り、第一大海の譬、(略)法華已前の華嚴經・阿含經・方等經・般若經・深密經・阿弥陀經・涅槃經・大日經・金剛頂經・蘇悉地經・密嚴經等の釈迦如來の所說の一切經・大日如來の所說の一切經・阿弥陀如來の所說の一切經・藥師如來の所說の一切經・過去・現在・未來三世の諸仏所說の一切經の中に法華經第一なり、譬えば諸經は大河・中河・小河等の如し法華經は大海の如し等と説くなり。
- ³⁰ *The Unanimous Declaration by the Buddhas of the Three Existences regarding the Classification of the Teachings and Which Are to Be Abandoned and Which Upheld (Sansei shobutsu sokanmon kyoso hairyu* [三世諸仏総勘文教相廢立], 571; WND-II, 856); 日蓮大聖人御書全集 *Nichiren Daishonin gosho zenshu*, 571: 薬王品には十喩を以て自行と化他との力用の勝劣を判ぜり 第一の譬に云く諸經は諸水の如く法華は大海の如し云云取意、實に自行の法華經の大海には化他の諸經の衆水を入れること昼夜に絶えず入ると雖も増えず減えず不可思議の徳用を顕す、諸經の衆水は片時の程も法華經の大海を納るること無し 自行と化他との勝劣はくの如し 一を以て諸を例せよ。The attribution of this writing to Nichiren is not accepted by all modern scholars, see Yamagami 2013.
- ³¹ *The Universal Salty Taste (Doitsu kammi gosho* [同一鹹味御書], 1447; WND-I, 39); 日蓮大聖人御書全集 *Nichiren Daishonin gosho zenshu*, 1447: 大海に八の不思議あり、一には漸漸に転深し・二には深くして底を得難し三には同じ鹹

の味なり・四には潮限りを過ぎず・五には種種の宝蔵有り・六には大身の衆生中に在つて居住す・七には死屍を宿めず・八には万流大雨之を収めて不増不減なり。

- ³² On *mappo* (*mofa*, 末法) in Buddhist eschatology see Apple (2010). For an overview of the role of *mappo* in Nichiren's teachings see Lopez and Stone (2019, 21–22, 47, 88, 119, 231). On the historical development and East Asian formalization of this cosmological notion see Nattier (1991).
- ³³ Lopez and Stone (2019), 48.
- ³⁴ *The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra* (*Hokekyo daimoku sho* [法華経題目抄]; WND-I, 146); 日蓮大聖人御書全集 *Nichiren Daishonin gosho zenshu*, 944: 妙とは天竺には薩と云い漢土には妙と云う妙と云う妙とは具の義なり具とは円満の義なり、法華経の一一の文字・一字一字に余の六万九千三百八十四字を納めたり、譬えば大海の一滴の水に一切の河の水を納め。
- ³⁵ *The Daimoku of the Lotus Sutra* (*Hokekyo daimoku sho* [法華経題目抄]; WND-I, 143); 日蓮大聖人御書全集 *Nichiren Daishonin gosho zenshu*, 942: 問うて云く妙法蓮華経の五字にはいくばくの功德をおさめたるや、答えて云く大海は衆流を納めたり大地は有情非情を持てり如意宝珠は万財を雨し梵王は三界を領す妙法蓮華経の五字また是くの如し一切の九界の衆生並に仏界を納む、十界を納むれば亦十界の依報の国土を取む。
- ³⁶ Nichiren (日蓮), *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* (2004, 51); 御義口伝巻上 *Ongikuden makiage*, 724: 妙の鏡には法界の不思議を浮べ・法の鏡には法界の体を浮べ・蓮の鏡には法界の果を浮べ・華の鏡には法界の因を浮べ・経の鏡には万法の言語を浮べたり。
- ³⁷ *Words and Phrases* 法華文句; T1718.34.0094c27–c29: 法如來能知。七方便住於七位。故言種種之地。此即差別。如來用如實佛眼見之。如衆流入海失於本味。則無差別。 *Profound Meaning* 法華玄義 T1716.33.0811c04-5: 名耳。此三種云何通。有人會云。衆聖以無心契無相。如衆流納海。
- ³⁸ *The Selection of the Time* (*Senji sho* [撰時抄], 256; WND-I, 556); 日蓮大聖人御書全集 *Nichiren Daishonin gosho zenshu* 269: 玄義・文句の二十巻には一切経の心を江河として法華経を大海にたとえ十方界の仏法の露一滴も漏さず妙法蓮華経の大海に入れさせ給いぬ。

About the Author

James B. Apple is full Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Calgary. He received his doctorate in Buddhist Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His current research focuses upon the critical analysis of Mahāyāna sūtras and topics within Indian and Tibetan Buddhist scholasticism. He has published over 50 peer-reviewed articles in international academic journals. His books include *Stairway to Nirvāṇa* (State University of New York Press, 2008), *A Stairway taken by the Lucid: Tsong kha pa's Study of Noble Beings* (Aditya Prakashan, 2013), *Jewels of the Middle Way, The Madhyamaka Legacy of Atiśa and His Early Tibetan Followers* (Wisdom Publications, 2018), *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Illuminator of the Awakened Mind* (Shambala, 2019), and *An Old Tibetan Dunhuang Manuscript of the Avaiartikacakrasūtra* (Revue d'Études Tibétaines, 2021).