

Perspectives on Parables of the *Lotus* and the Gospel

Dennis Gira

LET me first thank the Soka Cultural Association of France, the Tokyo Institute of Oriental Philosophy, and their partners for what they have done to enable this exhibition on the *Lotus Sūtra* to take place here in France. I would also like to thank the organisers for inviting me, in a spirit of dialogue, to reflect with you on the place of parables in the *Lotus Sūtra* and in the Gospels.

In this brief paper we will pay special attention to two parables on which much has been written in the Buddhist and Christian traditions, the ‘poor son’ in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the ‘prodigal son’ in the gospel of Luke.¹ Our intention is not to establish any direct relationship between the two, as this would be extremely dangerous. Rather our aim is to point out some similarities and differences between these parables that can help us all to discover what inspires others and so revisit and come to a deeper understanding of our own tradition.

The Purpose of Parables

To understand the importance of parables in these source texts, let’s discover more about what each of them says about this literary genre. We’ll start with an excerpt from Chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra* where the Buddha explains how the Enlightened Ones (buddhas) teach:

The Buddha said to Shariputra, “A wonderful Law such as this is preached by the buddhas, the thus come ones, at certain times. But like the blooming of the udumbara, such times come very seldom. Shariputra, you and the others must believe me. The words that the buddhas preach are not empty or false. Shariputra, the buddhas preach the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, but the meaning is difficult to understand. Why is this? Because we employ countless expedient means, discussing causes and conditions and using words of simile and parable to expound the teachings. This Law is not something that can be understood through pondering or analysis. Only those who are buddhas

can understand it. Why is this? Because the buddhas, the world-honored ones, appear in the world for one great reason alone. Shariputra, what does it mean to say that the buddhas, the world-honored ones, appear in the world for one great reason alone? The buddhas, the world-honored ones, wish to open the door of buddha wisdom to all living beings, to allow them to attain purity. That is why they appear in the world.”²

The phrase ‘We employ countless expedient means, discussing causes and conditions and using words of simile and parable to expound the teachings’ is repeated over and over again in the *Lotus Sūtra*, mostly to show how the Buddha adapts his teaching in line with the people’s character and capacity. He does this to help them move towards ‘supreme perfect enlightenment’.³ And in Chapter 16, where the Buddha reveals the full truth, we read that it is ‘because living beings have different natures, different desires, different actions, and different ways of thinking and making distinctions’ that he wants to ‘enable them to put down good roots’ by using parables and other expedient means.⁴

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke explain the reasons why Christ uses parables but here we will only share three excerpts from Matthew and Mark.⁵ In Matthew, Christ, answering a question on the subject, says:

The reason I talk to them in parables is that they look without seeing, and listen without hearing or understanding. So, in their case, this prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled: ‘You will listen and listen again, but not understand, see and see again, and not perceive. For the heart of this nation has grown coarse, their ears are dull of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, for fear they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and be converted, and be healed by me’.⁶

A little further, Matthew adds:

In all this, Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables; indeed, he would never speak to them except in parables. This was to fulfill the prophecy: “I will speak to you in parables and expound things hidden since the foundation of the world.”⁷

Finally, Mark addresses the issue at the end of a series of Christ’s parables on God’s Kingdom,⁸ as told to ‘the great crowd that had gathered around him’:

Using many parables like these, he spoke the word to them so far as they were capable of understanding it. He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone.⁹

To grasp better the meaning of these extracts, we must consider the dilemma facing the Buddha and Christ when they wanted to teach ineffable truths to others. In his teachings, the Buddha uses terms like nirvana, emptiness, Buddha-nature, and non-duality to express the unsayable, but ultimately, none are adequate. Only a silence like that of Vimalakirti, known as ‘the thundering silence’ rings true. Manjushri, the very symbol of Buddhist wisdom, recognises the correctness of this silence when he declares, “This is the entrance for Bodhisattvas into non-duality. In this matter, phonemes, sounds and ideas are useless.”¹⁰

Much has been written about the silence of the Buddha.¹¹ What is important to us is that when he decides to teach, he never lets people think that there may be an equivalence between the words he uses to help people approach the ultimate reality and that reality itself.

This is why the parables were precious to him and to his audience. Instead of directly describing the indescribable, parables, through comparisons drawn with nature or everyday life,¹² allow those who are willing to hear them, to better open up to this reality and finally to enter it. From what we know, parables, perhaps because of the excesses in their language, can gradually help people to familiarise themselves with what is beyond them, what is unknown or hidden from them. This is clearly demonstrated in each of the seven parables in the *Lotus Sūtra*.¹³

As for Christ, he teaches that everyone is invited to enter the life of God himself. But what can be said about this God and his life? Silence is obviously not unknown to Christ. Think of all the situations in which he imposes it on others, the clearest example being his injunction to his disciples just after the transfiguration when God ‘gives a glimpse of the glory of his Son’:¹⁴ “Tell no one about this vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.”¹⁵

The parables in the Gospels helped people ‘so far as they were capable of understanding’ to move forward at their own pace toward a better understanding of unknown truths, even ‘things hidden since the foundation of the world.’ By really listening to these parables, people could even hope to become ‘his disciples’, which would allow them to receive explanations from Christ ‘away from’ other people. But when this openness was missing, the same parables were used to obscure the truth from people who, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, have ‘ears that are dull

of hearing and have shut their eyes, for fear they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and be converted, and be healed by me.’ So we see how the same parable may be heard and understood by some, while remaining an enigma to others,¹⁶ and especially to outsiders, that is to say, those who are not open to Christ.

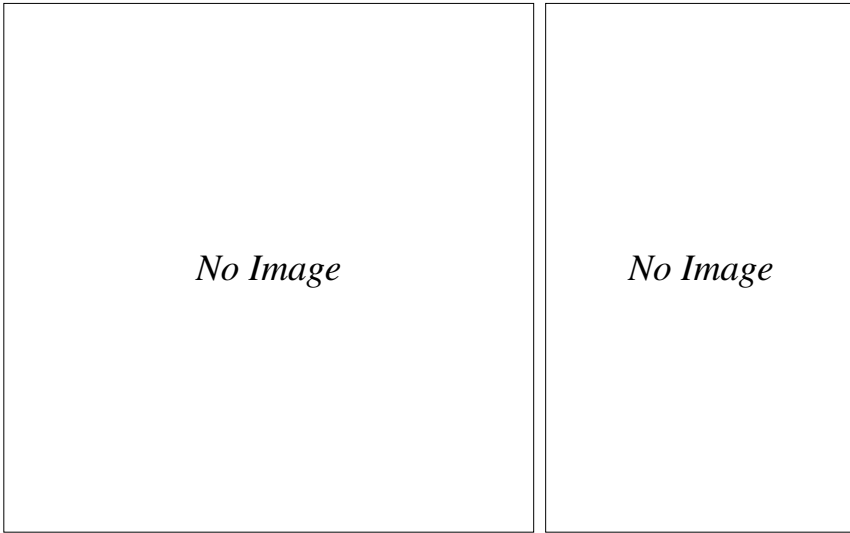
To summarise, we can say that the use of parables by the Buddha and Christ first of all reflects the gap between the depth of truth which each of them, in their own framework, experienced, and the difficulty (of which they were aware) of talking about it. It also reflects the efforts made, despite everything, by Buddha and Christ to communicate something of their truth to everyone, according to each person’s inner character and degree of faith. Finally, the parables, through their ‘excess’, upset the status quo and call everyone to an inner conversion, to an opening to deeper truths than they could imagine before such a conversion.

Without this change, nobody can advance along the way of the Buddha, nor on the path of Christ. The refusal of some to follow these masters shows that all of this was difficult to accept. Consider, for example, the five thousand ‘arhats, monks, pious lay nuns and pious laymen’ who withdrew from the meeting because they did not want to hear the truth about the opportunity for everyone to attain ‘supreme perfect enlightenment’. As for Christ, many of those with whom he shared the parables simply turned their back on him.

Parables of the Poor Son and the Prodigal Son

Let’s begin Part Two with a summary of the parables of the poor son from the *Lotus Sūtra* and the prodigal son from the Gospel of Luke. In Chapter 4 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, four arhats,¹⁷ having understood that they could achieve supreme perfect enlightenment,¹⁸ used a parable to explain their experience to the Buddha. They recount the tale of a very young man who leaves his father and flees to another land where, over time, his circumstances become extremely difficult.

One day, looking for work, he arrives in the place where his now extremely wealthy father has settled. He sees him without recognising him and certain that such a rich man would not give him work, he flees. The father, however, recognises his son and sends servants to bring him back. But the son faints from fright. Knowing that the splendour of his lifestyle had anguished his son, the father orders that he be set free. His servants obey, and the son goes joyfully to a poor village where he hopes to find enough to feed himself.



Left: Wall painting of 'The Parable of the Wealthy Man and His Poor Son'. Cave 98, Dunhuang Magao Caves; Five Dynasties period, 10th century (*Dunhuang shiku quanji*, Vol. 7, Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), Right: 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' (detail), Rembrandt van Rijn, c.1668. 262×206 cm. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

To attract the attention of his son, the father sends other well disguised servants to him who invite him to come and work with them. As the work is humble, the son agrees. The father, filled with compassion at seeing his son, dresses himself in rags and, shovel in hand, joins the workers. In this way he can approach his son without frightening him. As time passes, he entrusts him with increasingly important responsibilities and says that he would like to consider him as a son. Over time, trust is established between them.

When the father falls ill, he asks the son to manage his affairs. The son agrees, but he remains convinced of his inferiority. The relationship between father and son becomes closer and closer until the father, at death's door, tells him the whole truth, in the presence of everyone. At this moment the son is ready and accepts this unexpected truth with huge joy, amazed that priceless treasures belong to him even though he had never sought them out.

The parable of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke is told by Jesus in the context of his teaching about how God regards people who are despised (tax collectors and sinners) by established religious society (the Pharisees and scribes).¹⁹ The parable begins with the story of a father who yields his worldly goods to his two sons, because the younger of

the two demands his share of the inheritance. The latter leaves for a far-away land and scandalously squanders all of it. Due to famine, his situation deteriorates and he is obliged to look after pigs that eat better than he does.

Coming to his senses, he decides to return home, where the workers eat well, to ask for forgiveness, because he is conscious of having sinned against his father and against heaven. He knows how unworthy he is. When his father sees him from afar, he is moved with pity and runs to meet him. Ignoring the statement his son had prepared, he tells the servants to dress him in the most beautiful clothes, to put a ring on his finger and even to prepare a feast.

When the eldest son, returning from the fields, learns all this, he becomes angry. He complains because despite his obedience, his father had never even offered him a goat to feast on with his friends. The parable ends with the father trying to persuade his eldest son to enter the house: “My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it is only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.” We do not know how the eldest son replied.

Similarities and Differences

The obvious similarities in these parables concern the two sons (the younger son in the case of the Gospel)—each of whom leaves his home, wanders for a long time and lives in poverty—and the compassionate fathers who want to find their sons. But the differences are numerous, and even more significant, because they help us see how Buddhism and Christianity are radically different. And that is why, in dialogue, it is essential to recognise and reflect on these differences. They also allow us to grasp better both the true greatness of the compassion of Buddhas as well as God’s love for all, whatever flaws and failures people are burdened with.

Among these differences, let us note first of all the ‘framework’ in which these parables are recounted. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the parable is told to the Buddha by a group of arhats, but in the presence of a multitude of bodhisattvas, arhats, deities and all kinds of other beings who had gathered on Eagle Peak. Since, according to tradition, the Buddha gave many very important sermons there, this location lends weight to the *Lotus Sūtra*. In Luke’s Gospel, Christ tells his parable to just a few people at a meal where the despised of society could come to eat and listen to him, which troubled the Pharisees and scribes, who never

ceased castigating.

The manner in which each son is reunited with his father is also very different. The rich man's son arrives in his father's city without realising it, whereas the son in the Gospel of Luke, decides, in his misery, to return to his father seeking forgiveness, a request that was certainly triggered by his survival instinct but whose sincerity becomes apparent fairly quickly.

Then there is the way that the two fathers express their compassion when they recognise their sons. In the *Lotus Sūtra* parable, the father would love to approach his son, but he holds back because he sees that his son is not ready. In the parable of the Gospel, the father, when he sees his son in the distance, runs to him, embraces him, covers him with symbols of his lineage and organises an exceptional feast to celebrate his return. Everything happens very quickly.

This rapidity is at the heart of another key difference. In the Gospel, the relationship between father and son is immediately restored because the power of love overcomes everything. It quickly becomes clear that even if the change of heart and the request for forgiveness were necessary for the son, they were not so for the father who welcomes him home as if nothing had happened.

As eloquent as this parable is regarding the father's love for his son, some questions remain. How did the younger son feel inside about this reconciliation? Was he ready to absorb, in such a short time, this overwhelming welcome? The parable gives no answer to such questions, nor does it speak about the father and son's future relationship. The essential point is that the love of God the Father seems to be totally free.

The parable in the *Lotus Sūtra* describes the capacity of the father (i.e., the Buddha) to lead his son from an extremely limited awareness of who he really is to a full awareness of his fundamental nature. All this takes lots of time and patience. Here the truly admirable teaching of the Buddha unfolds. Everything speaks of his compassion, a compassion which, like the supreme wisdom of Buddhas, lies at the heart of the *Lotus Sūtra* and of the experience of those who trust in it. It is therefore normal that this compassion is also found at the heart of the parables.

Finally they explain in various ways how the vehicles (or 'means of progress') of the listeners, self-enlightened Buddhas, and bodhisattvas,²⁰ as well as the teachings that correspond to them, were only provisional. But in terms of being salvific expedient means they can, when they are skillfully employed, lead living beings beyond the 'limited' awakening that they propose, to the one and only vehicle that allows them to attain the so precious 'supreme perfect enlightenment.'

The true and great compassion of the Buddha is that he helps beings to reach this supreme enlightenment. This is truly the ‘one great reason’ mentioned at the beginning of my paper, the one for which the Buddhas appear in the world, the one through which they open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings and to a vision of Awakening and cause them to attain purity.²¹

A final important difference is the presence of the elder son in the parable of the prodigal son. Some biblical scholars consider him to be the main character of the parable.²² In fact, his lack of response to his father’s invitation calls upon readers or listeners to give their own answer! They have the choice to respond—or not—to the love of God (the father in the parable). Saying no would correspond to the refusal of the Pharisees and scribes, for whom the parable was intended, to believe that God could love sinners (the younger son in the parable). And that is where this parable remains relevant today, never ceasing to invite those who read or hear it to welcome God’s intense love for humanity.

Conclusion

Since a spirit of dialogue gave rise to all these thoughts, I would like, in conclusion, to indicate some areas for dialogue that open up when Buddhists and Christians read these texts intelligently.

The first area relates to the human condition. Both parables show the dissatisfaction and fragility that run through mankind, a dissatisfaction which nevertheless cannot define who we really are. Like the two sons, we have the unfortunate ability to cut ourselves off from our true roots, and then to reap intolerable fruits. Those who meditate on these texts have much to say about this condition, which is common to both of them.

A second area concerns the chance that everyone has to discover who they really are. Neither parable suggests that man is by nature a prisoner of his unsatisfactory condition. In fact, in their own way, they both show us how to escape from it. This hope should allow those inspired by the *Lotus Sūtra* and those inspired by the Gospel to work together for peace in a world that sometimes shows signs of a disturbing spiritual fatigue.

A third and very important area for dialogue concerns the way out of humanity’s unsatisfactory condition. This area may seem very narrow when we compare the parable of the prodigal son which speaks of God’s intense love coming from grace, as a gift, with the *Lotus Sūtra* parable which seems to highlight a slow evolution towards the full awareness that we can have of our true nature. But this area definitely grows wider

in the light of a word that recurs several times in the sūtra: spontaneously.

In this regard, the son's reflection at the end of the parable, after learning from his father who he really is and receiving immense treasures, is extremely interesting: "I originally had no mind to covet or seek such things. Yet now these stores of treasures have come spontaneously of their own accord."²³ The interpretation by arhats sharing this parable uses the same word: "Today we have gained what we never had before; what we previously never hoped for has now come to us of itself [spontaneously]. We are like the impoverished son who gained immeasurable treasures."²⁴ This is not about imagining that 'spontaneity' and 'grace' are identical, but about reflecting on the importance of not calculating what has to be done to gain enlightenment or salvation which is at the heart of both 'spontaneity' and 'grace'.

Unfortunately, we must stop here, even though there are many other interesting areas of dialogue to discover. Before stopping, we must nevertheless respond to another question; how do we move about within these areas of dialogue? The answer is simple! It's a bit like swimming: you learn to move about in dialogue... by doing it! And when things get difficult you just have to remember that in a dialogue, you are never alone. Thank you for your attention.

Notes

¹ These parables are, respectively, in Chapter 4 (Belief and Understanding) of the *Lotus Sūtra* and Chapter 15 of the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 15: 11–32).

² *The Lotus Sutra* translated by Burton Watson, Soka Gakkai, 2009, p. 64. This translation will be used throughout the English version of this paper.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 107, p. 265.

⁴ See *Ibid.*, p. 267.

Robert, *op. cit.*, Chapter 16 (The Life Span of the Thus Come One), p. 283.

⁵ In the English version of this paper, quotations from the Gospels are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City New York, 1966. The original text in French used quotations from *Traduction œcuménique de la Bible* (TOB) (*Oecumenical translation of the Bible*), Société biblique française/Éditions du Cerf, 1984.

⁶ Matthew 13, 13–15.

⁷ Matthew 13, 34–35.

⁸ The parables of the sower, the lamp, the measure and the mustard seed.

⁹ Mark 4, 33–34.

¹⁰ In this regard, it is difficult not to think of the 'thundering silence' of Vimalakirti. *The Teaching of Vimalakirti* recounts what happened during a 'spiritual joust' famous in the Buddhist world, around the theme of non-duality. After opinions on non-duality from many bodhisattvas ('beings vowing to be enlightened'), Manjushri, the very symbol of Buddhist wisdom, gives his view: "Gentlemen, you have all spoken well; however, in

my opinion, everything you have said still implies duality. To exclude all words and say nothing, express nothing, pronounce nothing, teach nothing, name nothing, is to enter into non-duality.” Then, Manjushri asked Vimalakirti to speak on the issue... and Vimalakirti stayed silent. Manjushri’s reaction was immediate as the text says: “Crown Prince Manjushri gave his assent to Vimalakirti and said: Well, well, son of the family: this is how bodhisattvas enter non-duality. In this matter, phonemes, sounds and ideas are useless.” For the French text of this whole discussion, see *L’Enseignement de Vimalakirti (Vimalakirtinirdesa)*, translated by Etienne Lamotte, Louvain/Leuven: Publications Universitaires, Institut Orientaliste, Bibliothèque du Muséon, vol. 51, 1962, pp. 316–317.

¹¹ See, for example, *Le silence du Bouddha et autres questions indiennes (The Silence of the Buddha and other Indian issues)*, Roger-Pol Droit, Hermann, 2010.

¹² See the analysis of the function of the parables in *Les paraboles du Royaume: Jésus et le rôle des paraboles dans la tradition synoptique (Parables of the Kingdom: Jesus and the Use of Parables in the Synoptic Tradition)*, M.A. Getty-Sullivan, dans la collection « Lire la Bible », Éditions du Cerf, 2010, pp. 9–32.

¹³ The seven parables are called: the three carts and the burning house, the wealthy man and his poor son, the three kinds of medicinal herbs and two kinds of trees, the phantom city and the treasure land, the jewel in the robe, the bright jewel in the topknot, the skilled physician and his sick children.

¹⁴ See note ‘s’ in the TOB translation, p. 90.

¹⁵ Matthew, 17, 9.

¹⁶ On the enigmatic nature of parables, see Getty-Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁷ The arhats are those who are ‘worthy of’ respect because they have done everything within the framework of ‘ancient’ Buddhism to obtain the enlightenment promised by this tradition. This word is also translated as ‘deserving’.

¹⁸ These four arhats—Subhuti, Mahakatyayana, Mahakashyapa, and Maudgalyayana—have understood the Buddha’s teaching on the possibility for them to also achieve supreme, perfect enlightenment thanks to the parable of the three carts and the burning house recounted in Chapter 3 of the *Sūtra*.

¹⁹ Claude Tassin, Jacques Hervieux, Hugues Cousin and Alain Marchadour, *Les évangiles: textes et commentaires (The Gospels: texts and commentaries)*, Bayard Compact, 2001, p. 733.

²⁰ Not to be confused with the Small Vehicle, the Great Vehicle and the Diamond Vehicle.

²¹ Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 64

²² Les évangiles: textes et commentaires (The Gospels: texts and commentaries), p. 734.

²³ Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Author Biography

Dennis Gira was born in Chicago in 1943 and spent eight years in Japan (1960–1977), studying the language, the culture and the religions of Japan, especially Buddhism. In 1977, he moved with his family to France where he continued his research, obtaining a doctorate in East Asian studies at the University of Paris VII (1981) and the diploma of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (1982). He was an assistant director of the Institute of Science and Theology of Religions at the Catholic University of Paris between 1988 and 2007. Now retired, he continues to give courses on Buddhism and Interreligious Dialogue in several Catholic Universities in France (Lyon, Paris and Angers) and in several seminaries throughout France. He has published more than a dozen books on these subjects.