

On Words and Meaning: The Attitude Toward Discourse in the Lañkāvatāra Sūtra

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Most of the scholarly work which has been produced addressing the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra has issued from D. T. Suzuki, notably in the introduction to his translation, <sup>1)</sup> in his *Studies in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, and in *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism*. In these works, Suzuki presents a systematic ontology which he takes to be the teaching of the sutra. <sup>2)</sup> But in reading the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra one comes across many apparent contradictions in the teaching. A positive statement which is presented for acceptance in one context may be explicitly denied in

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1) Published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1932. All references to the text are taken from this translation. Subsequently, all such references will be followed by the page numbers from this translation in parentheses. The introduction to this translation, though this paper contends it to be overly concerned with consistent ontology, is a valuable preliminary overview of the sutra, including historical and chronological notes. The *Studies*, published by George Routledge and Sons, London, 1930, is an exhaustive presentation of the same viewpoint. The article in *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism* (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1968), titled "The Breadth of Mahayana Buddhism and the Teaching of the Lankavatara," attempts to relate the teachings of the Laṅkāvatāra to other Mahayana texts.

2) The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra is often associated with the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism, which taught the doctrine of "mind-only." While Suzuki's interpretation should be seen in the light of his Zen outlook, he finds a similar monistic ontology. Various terms in the text are taken as signals of the highest reality: *cittamātra* (mind-only), *tathatā* (suchness), *pūrvadharmasthititā* (existing since the very first), *viviktadharmā* (a thing of solitude), *bhūtakōṭi* (limit of reality), etc. The bulk of the sutra's apparent teaching deals with the evolution and sustenance of the perception of the objective world, a perception which the sutra takes to be false. The sutra speaks of the *ālayavijñāna* (store-consciousness) which is aroused by the action of the *vijñānas* (organs of discernment) under the influence of habit-energy and false imagination. This system is much too complex to be treated here, but one should refer to the introduction to Suzuki's translation for a full explication.

another context, or both assertion and denial may be negated by a passage denying the specific statements or the applicability of all statements in general. An attempt to describe the teachings of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra on any topic is complicated by this ambivalent nature of the teaching.

It would seem, then, that any attempt to systematize the ontological stance of the text is impossible on the practical level. But it may be contended that such an attempt is also a misunderstanding of the point of the text. This paper contends that a more fruitful approach to the sutra is an analysis of its attitude toward and use of words and discourse in general rather than an understanding of specific ontological teachings. This study is not free of the problems of contradiction that have been mentioned but since the contradiction is expressed in the use of words, the attitude toward the use of words as indicated in the text should help to clarify the purposes of the contradictory approach and perhaps simplify any study of particular teachings of the sutra.

The thesis of this paper is that the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra sees the use of words in the form of discourse as a practical tool to direct the reader toward an experience to which the application of words is impossible, the internal realization of the truth. The sutra seeks to use words as a lever to detach individuals from attachment to the world by meeting certain problems in the minds of its ignorant readers and to destroy erroneous views which block realization. It seeks to drive the reader to the level on which he may become conversant with meaning rather than words.

The paper shall establish the nature of words according to the sutra, the problems and evils which arise from the use of words in discourse, the assertions of the sutra about the usefulness and even the necessity of discourse on the part of the Enlightened Ones, and finally a discussion of the level of meaning and its applicability to the teachings of the sutra.

### *The Nature of Words*

The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra makes several specific assertions about the nature of words. Basically, words are evolved and used only on the level of discrimination, and have discrimination for a cause (76-77). Discrimination of words is said to be of four kinds: 1) words denoting individual marks; 2) dream-words; 3) words growing out of attach-

ments to erroneous speculations and discriminations; and 4) words growing out of the discrimination that knows no beginning. In each case, the use of words is an expression of, illustration of, and attachment to, discrimination (75-110).

Although ignorant individuals imagine that the origin of words depends upon the subjects which they express, the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* denies this. The objects so named by the ignorant are mere appearances which only have existence in that they are discriminated (195). The sutra declares the discrimination of words to be false imagination along with the discrimination of all dualistic concepts and notions. The attachment to this false imagination on the part of the ignorant gives rise to the discrimination of an external world of objects which appear to be real. Since this external world only has existence in the discrimination, it is said to be unreal. Hence, words as a result and illustration of discrimination are unreal, along with the objects which they are supposed to indicate (77).

Words seem to have an important part to play in the process of discrimination, as is indicated in this statement: "In all things there is no self-nature, they are mere words of people" (77). Somehow, the process of naming the apparent objects is bound up with the whole scheme of discrimination. At one point discrimination is defined as that by which names are declared (195). Thus, words are not only an accompanying feature of discrimination, they are essential to it.

As an integral part of the discriminatory process, words are not only unreal, they are a cause of bondage. Discrimination is a self-renewing process in that it moves in circular relationship with habit-energy, the impetus for discrimination.<sup>3)</sup> In a process which is described as continuing from beginningless time, discrimination yields habit-energy, which yields more discrimination under the influence of false imagination. This process blocks the ignorant from the realization of the unreal nature of the external world, and the truth of Mind-only. It insures instead the continued appearance of the external world (34). In the unreal world of thought-construction and name the ignorant beings suffer because of their grasping of dualism. Hence, the process

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3) The nature of habit-energy is not clear in the text, except that it knows no beginning and that it is the motivating force for the continuation of the discriminatory process.

of discrimination produces a bondage to suffering (36). In relation to our particular subject this is expressed clearly in the statement that “discoursing is a source of suffering in the triple world” (161).

Because of this assertion, the discourses and views of philosophers <sup>4)</sup> are a prime target of the criticism of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, since they are seen as barriers to self-realization and productive of attachment to the unreal world of objects with its accompanying suffering. These attacks even go to the extreme of the assertion that “those who following words, discriminate and assert various notions, are bound to hell for their assertions” (135). Liberation is set in terms of the ending of discrimination, the disappearance of the objective world, the ending of erroneous views, the elimination of habit-energy, and so forth (34, 238, etc.).

Thus far it would seem clear that words and discourses are, by their nature, liabilities to be avoided since they produce unreality, bondage, and suffering. And yet the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, which makes all of these claims about the nature of words, is itself a discourse. Having denied the merits of assertion and refutation, it pursues them. How then is it any different than the *Lokāyatika* <sup>5)</sup> who puts the minds of the ignorant into utter confusion by means of words and phrases? Its use of words seems, in accompaniment with its denial of any corresponding reality, similar to the nonsensical statement, “I am lying.” In what sense are we to take such words as *Nirvana*, transcendental knowledge, *Ālayavijñāna*, and *Cittamātra* if words are unreal?

The text explicitly states that, while the teaching of the sutra aims at the highest reality, “words are not the highest reality, nor is what is expressed in words the highest reality” (77), and “that which is beyond all measure is not expressible in words” (163). Words, being dualistic thought-constructions arising from discrimination, are subject to birth and death, but,

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4) It is not clear in the text who these philosophers are, but the refutations of their positions suggest that most of them were realists. In each case they are teachers who present a particular view of the nature of reality which they propose as a reflection of truth.

5) The *Lokāyatika* may refer to members of a materialist sect known as the *Cārvākas*. The text states that they were experts in the art of eloquence and who, through their arguments, caused confusion in the minds of their listeners.

of neither existence nor non-existence do I speak, but of the Mind-only, which has nothing to do with existence and non-existence, and which is thus free from intellection, . . . (133).

The Lankāvatāra Sūtra claims to use words to indicate something that cannot be indicated with words, while openly admitting that words, being of the realm of language, can only misrepresent the truth (240). And if these statements were not enough to establish the futility of words in any attempt to indicate the highest reality, the sutra goes on to say that there are available to language no analogies which convey the truth (199).

### *The Usefulness of Words*

In the midst of these clear denials of the applicability of words, one may read assertions of the usefulness, even the necessity of words. The use of words serves several purposes.

First, such teachings meet the reader on the level of his mentality: "I discourse with the ignorant" (44, 149). For those who are addicted to discrimination, no other approach is possible.

Second, discourses speak to specific problems arising from attachment to discrimination. As an example, the truth of solitude and the existence of the Tathāgata-garbha<sup>6</sup>) are presented because the ignorant are frightened by the idea of the egolessness of things (143). Analogies, such as the comparison of the Ālayavijñāna to an ocean, are given in order to be in accord with the experience of the listeners (43).

Third, by entering the realm of assertion and refutation the discourses and erroneous views of the philosophers may be destroyed. The statement that "philosophical statements are definite, but the Mahayana is not definite" (239) expresses the nature of this practical approach. This approach may be illustrated throughout the sutra, and takes basically two forms. The first is the assertion of the position opposite of that of the philosophers. In following this plan, the sutra may be seen as consistent, even while asserting conflicting views at various points. If the philosophers assert a nihilistic position, the Lankāvatāra will assert that all things exist, and to counter realism it will assert that all things are unreal (35). If people have the idea

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6) These are pedagogical devices which appear to give positive content to egolessness by the portrayal of egolessness as a state or condition.

of the self-nature of things, the sutra asserts that all things have the self-nature of *Māyā* 7) (97). If the philosopher points then to *Māyā* as a cause, the self-nature of *Māyā* may be denied. The second form is simply to deny the applicability of all assertions, which not only defeats the philosophers, but also avoids the dangers of attachment to any of the views which are apparently asserted by the sutra elsewhere. Here the truth is declared to be beyond the grasp of any dualism. When erroneous views are defeated, including the rejection of assertion and refutation, then the objective world, which depends on these faulty speculations, no longer rises, and suchness 8) is established.

Fourth, discourse is a necessity in that it insures the continuation of the teaching of truth and the availability of liberation. If the truth is not declared, the scriptures will disappear, and there will be no more Buddhas, Śrāvakas, Pratyekabuddhas, and Bodhisattvas to teach the message to others, making liberation impossible (167). 9) (The text asks, "Who will teach, and to whom?", which seems to be a valid question of general applicability, given the rejection of dualism.)

In addition to establishing the usefulness of discourse, it is also possible to minimize the liabilities. This is accomplished by several methods.

First, the reader is reminded several times that the teachings of the Buddhas are wholly discrimination and are given for the purpose of removing bondage to *Citta*, *Manas*, and *Manovijñāna*, 10) not for

7) *Māyā* is often translated "illusion," but may also be seen as the power through which the world appears to exist.

8) Suchness (*tathatā*) is a term which attempts to avoid positing any substance to ultimate reality or provide any description. It asserts that reality simply is such as it is.

9) Śrāvakas are generally accepted to be the so-called "Hinayanists" or "disciples," the early Buddhists now represented by the Theravada school of South Asia. The Pratyekabuddhas have not been identified as any particular school although the name suggests that they were a hermit order. A Bodhisattva is one who postpones his own enlightenment for the purpose of saving all beings from bondage. The *Laṅkā* is critical of the Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas because they are concerned only with individual salvation, not the universal compassion of the Bodhisattva. Since the *Laṅkā* denies the reality of individuality, salvation conceived as an individual achievement must be viewed as an inferior attainment. Still, their teachings are seen as legitimate to a certain degree and their attainments are positive though not complete.

10) These three terms refer to the various mental faculties.

the attainment and establishment of self-realization, which can come only from inner attainment (168).

Second, discourse is shown to be a limited activity of the Enlightened Ones. Words are not used in the various Buddha lands<sup>11</sup>) due to the fact that they are an artificial creation (91). Also it is stated that discriminative discourse is an activity of the Buddhas of Transformation (those who have taken on various forms for the purpose of teaching others) but not the Buddhas of Maturity (237). Hence, discourse is taken on by the Buddhas for the specific purpose of leading others to salvation, not because it is part of the nature of Buddhahood.

Third, the nature of the Bodhisattvas as performers of non-effect producing works means that their discourses need not be productive of habit-energy and more discrimination.<sup>12</sup>)

Fourth, one encounters the statement that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not utter or answer a letter, which again forcefully asserts that words do not apply to their experience of non-duality (167).

Fifth, there is a distinction made between the truth and the teaching about the truth. The sutra states that there are two forms of teaching, discourse and the establishment of self-realization (149 and 128).

This process, in which discrimination is used to defeat discrimination and in which the use of words and discourse is not productive of attachment is called *upāya*, "skillful means."<sup>13</sup>) The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, to be properly understood, must be appreciated in the light of this concept. Its purpose is not to establish a new and truthful ontology, but rather to free the ignorantly attached people of the world from all discrimination and ontological speculation.

11) The Buddha-lands are dwelling places of Buddhas, created through their might. The Dharma (true teaching) is correctly expounded there, and beings may be reborn there into an atmosphere where the truth may be pursued without the impediments of earthly life.

12) Since the process of discrimination maintains the apparent dualistic world, the fact that the Bodhisattvas do not themselves discriminate, even while discoursing, means that they do not contribute to falsehood.

13) *Upāya*, literally translated, means "well-going," indicating in its usage here the quality of action which leads to emancipation. The accomplishment of emancipation is achieved by the Bodhisattva who uses dualism to defeat the attachment to dualism. The Bodhisattva can appear to discriminate for the purpose of instructing deluded individuals, but actually they are unattached to and unaffected by that apparent discrimination.

*The Category of Meaning*

What is it which is accomplished when discourse is presented to counter discrimination and the erroneous views of the philosophers? As we have seen, discourse with words is both dangerous and necessary.

(The Truth) is told differently discriminated in the different sutras because of names and notions; (yet) apart from words no meaning is obtainable. (161).

It is the nature of words that they cannot indicate the highest reality and yet discovery of the truth is not possible without them. The crucial element in the quotation seems to be the category of meaning. The word "meaning" is used in the phrase much as one would use the name of an objective referent. But in this case it is a conventional term to designate the objectlessness which is the goal of self-realization while not itself constituting that self-realization. This is in harmony with the distinction between truth and the teaching about truth. The same term is used in the paradoxical phrase which accompanies the assertion that the Buddhas utter not a letter. This accompanying statement asserts that the Enlightened Ones teach what is in conformity with meaning (167). In *upāya*, the teachings of the Tathāgatas point to something beyond the things to which words can point. Hence it can be stated that there are "authoritative teachings in which there are no discriminations" (115).

The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra gives us some indications about the nature of meaning. We are told that words and meaning are neither different nor non-different in that meaning is revealed by words as an object is illuminated by a lamp. In another sense, meaning is spoken of as freed from existence and non-existence while words are subject to birth and death. Meaning can only be indicated by words but words are not identical to it (166-167). This seems to be closer to what is called the deeper sense or hidden meaning (124 and 208). This is the meaning which is alone with itself and is the cause of Nirvana (189).

It is this sense of meaning which distinguishes the purpose of the discourse of the Buddhas from the error of the ignorant who follow the mere words as expressed in the texts (166). The Buddhas advise the reader to "be in conformity with the sense and be not engrossed

in the word-teaching” (68). Hence, the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva is described as:

...endowed with subtle, fine, and penetrating thought power and whose understanding is in accordance with the meaning. (193).

There are, corresponding with words, various thought constructions that are of the nature of discrimination and therefore unreal. These thought constructions must be avoided so that the meaning can be apprehended. So it is expressed that “there is the highest Ālayavijñāna and again there is the Ālayavijñāna as thought construction” (231). Texts deviate from the truth due to the nature of words, but the usefulness of a text is not that it establishes an accurate or consistent doctrine of the truth, but that it ends the bondage to discrimination so that the inner truth of self-realization may be pursued. Discourse can deal only with the problems of its own level, such as the attachments which result from discrimination and the erroneous views of the philosophers (68, 167, etc.). But this practical leverage can point to meaning.

To make this point, the text develops the analogy of the pointing finger-tip, advising all against becoming attached to the finger. Similarly the analogy of a painting is used in which it is pointed out that the picture cannot be said to be present in the colors, canvas, or plate (169, 43-44).

While it is stated that meaning is alone with itself and is the cause of Nirvana, the text clearly denies that simple understanding of the text can bring liberation. Recalling the distinction between the truth and the teaching about it, meaning indicated by the finger-tip of the text itself implies the necessity of the accomplishment of an inner self-realization to transcend duality. All that discourse can achieve is the denial of the applicability of dualism.

The *upāya* of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra is illustrated by the following discourse-toward-meaning. In the sutra one may read the statement:

...all things are here essentially because of our attachment to the habit-energy of discrimination which has been maturing since beginningless time on account of false imagination and erroneous speculation. (72).

Here we encounter a statement which makes positive assertions concerning the evolution of the external world, the agencies of this evolution, and the conditions of its maintenance. But each of these assertions are negated in the text:

- ... **discrimination does not evolve nor is it put away.** (131).
- ... well pondered with intelligence there is neither relativity nor false imagination. (114).
- ... there is neither objectivity nor its appearance. (193).
- ... there is neither seizing nor seized, neither bound nor binding. (228).

Further, when everything is denied, there can follow a monistic assertion:

Mind is all, it is found everywhere and in every body. (236).

And if this is not enough both can be asserted:

... things are not as they are seen nor are they otherwise. (135).

The result of this conglomeration of contradictory assertions is that no positive content can be attributed to the teaching, but all dualistic conceptions are denied as having applicability. Words prove themselves incapable of the task, so the reader is directed beyond words and their dualistic nature. In the final analysis the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra does not make ontological claims by use of discourse, it only disclaims, finally disclaiming itself as capable of delivering the individual to the state of self-realization. The best it can do is to remove some of the road-blocks.

### *Conclusions*

The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra defies systematization by its approach to the promotion of liberation. All of its statements must be understood in terms of *upāya*, its practical approach to the nature of truth in which it realizes the impossibility of indicating that nature. Its point is not to establish a correct and consistent doctrine, but to direct the reader away from all duality toward a goal which can be realized only internally, consistent with the realization of meaning.