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Review Article

The Moral and Existential Vision of Compassion in the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra

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Abstract

One of the core texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra, presents a deep existential and moral worldview based on compassion (karuṇā). The sutra offers a dynamic ethical framework in which compassion serves as both the ontological foundation of existence and the route to emancipation, far from being purely devotional. Moral behavior is changed into a soteriological process of self-transcendence through the vows of Amitābha Buddha, where the limited human situation opens up to boundless life (amitāyus). This study investigates the sutra's ethical philosophy using the dialectical interplay between self-power (jiriki) and other-power (tariki), revealing how compassion bridges the conflict between individual agency and universal salvation. The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra combines Buddhist moral theory with existential contemplation to present a vision of human fulfillment based on relationship and altruism. The thesis contends that the sutra's ethical vision goes beyond ceremonial piety to provide a universal philosophy of compassionate being applicable to both Buddhist and modern moral

Keywords: Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra; compassion; Buddhist ethics; existential philosophy; other-power; moral transformation; liberation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra stands out among Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures for its unique philosophical approach. The sutra, sometimes interpreted as a devotional narrative about Amitābha Buddha's heaven, actually expresses a profound vision of moral and ontological reform based on compassion. Rather than picturing a mythological heaven, it proposes a moral cosmology in which compassion is both the ontological underpinning of being and the existential way to liberation. The sutra therefore converts faith into an ethical practice and salvation into a dynamic experience of relational being (Inagaki, 1994, p. 83; Keown, 2005, p. 57).

In Buddhist philosophy, compassion is not merely a virtue among others; it is the very manifestation of wisdom (prajñā) in action. As the Heart Sūtra famously states, "form is emptiness and emptiness is form"—a dialectic that, when applied ethically, reveals that the emptiness of self (śūnyatā) enables the spontaneous expression of compassion toward all beings (Garfield, 2015, p. 144). The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra extends this insight by showing that Amitābha's infinite compassion is not external grace but the self-manifestation of enlightened mind (bodhicitta) within relational existence. This sutra, therefore, stands as a philosophical text that unites metaphysics and ethics, ontology and soteriology, in the horizon of human moral awakening (Williams, 2009, p. 176).

The historical and doctrinal context of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra reinforces this philosophical reading. Emerging around the first century CE, the sutra reinterprets the Mahāyāna ideal of the Bodhisattva through the vows (praṇidhāna) of Dharmākara, the future Amitābha. These forty-eight vows express an ethical universality: the aspiration to establish a realm where all beings may attain awakening without obstruction. This universal vow is not an act of divine will but an existential commitment to transform the very conditions of samsaric existence. In this sense, Amitābha's vows symbolize the "ethical imagination" of enlightenment—the power to envision and actualize a world constituted by compassion (Abe, 1985, p. 64; Blum, 2002, p. 93).

The sutra might be interpreted philosophically as a reaction to the alienation and finiteness of the human predicament. The concept of Infinite Life (Amitāyus) denotes a style of existence free from egocentric constraints rather than an endless temporal length. According to the sutra, compassion is the existential movement that opens the self toward others in co-being and overcomes self-enclosure. In this respect, the sutra anticipates certain insights of existential philosophy: the overcoming of isolation through ethical relation, and the rediscovery of being through responsibility for the Other (Levinas, 1969, p. 187). Yet, unlike Levinas's ethics of asymmetry, the Buddhist compassion of Amitābha is founded upon ontological non-duality: the self and the other are not separate entities but interdependent expressions of the same luminous mind (Nishida, 1987, p. 58).

The contemporary significance of this moral and existential vision becomes clearer when contrasted with Western moral theories. Whereas Kantian ethics grounds moral obligation in autonomous reason, and utilitarianism in the calculus of consequences, the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra grounds morality in the non-dual realization of interbeing. Compassion arises not from rational duty but from ontological insight: the understanding that the suffering of others is not separate from one's own being. As Abe (1995, p. 72) notes, "to awaken to emptiness is simultaneously to awaken to compassion." This synthesis of wisdom and compassion offers a corrective to modern moral individualism by emphasizing relational existence as the true ground of ethical life.

The sutra's moral vision also carries existential implications. In a world characterized by impermanence, suffering, and moral uncertainty, the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra proposes a transformative path through compassion. The "Pure Land" (Sukhāvatī) is not merely a geographical or metaphysical destination but a symbol of purified consciousness—a state in which moral clarity and existential peace coincide. Faith (śraddhā), practice, and vow (praṇidhāna) are thus existential attitudes that reorient the practitioner's being-in-the-world from self-centered striving to compassionate participation in the life of all beings (Shinran, 2006, p. 211). This transformation from moral intention to ontological realization exemplifies what Tanabe (1986, p. 44) calls "metanoetics": the philosophical self-negation that leads to rebirth through other-power (tariki).

From a methodological perspective, this paper adopts a philosophical-hermeneutic approach. It interprets the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra not as a theological dogma but as a phenomenological articulation of moral and existential experience. By reading the text through the categories of compassion, interdependence, and liberation, the study seeks to uncover its ethical metaphysics—the way being, knowing, and acting are unified in the realization of compassion. This approach allows for dialogue between Buddhist and Western philosophical traditions, highlighting how the sutra's vision of "Infinite Life" (Amitāyus) corresponds to the existential pursuit of authentic being (Heidegger, 1959, p. 97).

In light of this interpretive framework, the present study advances three central aims. First, it explicates the ethical foundation of compassion in the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra as the ontological expression of non-duality. Second, it examines the dialectic of self-power (jiriki) and other-power (tariki) as an existential model of moral transformation. Third, it demonstrates how the sutra's vision of compassion transcends devotional piety to propose a universal moral philosophy of interbeing. By situating the sutra within broader philosophical discourse, this paper argues that its moral and existential vision provides an enduring framework for rethinking ethics in the age of alienation, ecological crisis, and spiritual fragmentation.

Ultimately, the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra reveals that the path of liberation is inseparable from the path of compassion. To be free is to participate in the infinite life of others; to awaken is to live ethically within the web of interdependence. In this sense, the sutra's vision of moral existence is neither metaphysical abstraction nor religious idealism but a lived philosophy of compassionate being—a timeless invitation to rediscover the moral depth of existence itself.

II. CONTERN

1. Literature review

The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra (hereafter LSSS) has been the subject of extensive doctrinal, textual, and devotional studies, yet its philosophical dimension, especially the moral and existential implications of compassion, has often been underexplored. Traditional exegeses within East Asian Buddhism tend to focus on soteriology—particularly the dynamic between self-power (jiriki) and other-power (tariki)—while overlooking the deeper ethical ontology that underlies Amitābha's vows. Recent interdisciplinary engagements between Buddhist thought and Western philosophy, however, provide new frameworks for interpreting LSSS as a text articulating a universal moral vision rooted in relational being and compassion.

1.1 Early Doctrinal and Devotional Interpretations

Classical interpretations of LSSS primarily originated in Chinese Pure Land exegesis, especially within the works of Tanluan (476–542), Daochuo (562–645), and Shandao (613–681). These scholars emphasized the salvific efficacy of Amitābha's vows as expressions of boundless compassion directed toward sentient being's incapable of self-liberation. Tanluan, in his Commentary on Vasubandhu's Treatise on the Pure Land, described Amitābha's vow as the "turning of the merit-power of enlightenment toward all beings," thus

establishing an ethical universality beyond sectarian or moral boundaries (Blum, 2002, p. 101).

In Japan, Shinran (1173–1263) radicalized this view by developing the concept of Other-Power (Tariki) as an existential reality rather than an external force. For Shinran, compassion was not a quality added to human effort but the very structure of awakened existence (shinjin). In Kyōgyōshinshō, he writes that "compassion is none other than the working of the Buddha's wisdom transforming delusion into enlightenment" (Shinran, 2006, p. 214). Shinran's hermeneutic thus reframed LSSS as an ethical philosophy of grace understood through existential self-negation—a view later explored philosophically by the Kyoto School.

While these early exegetes established the moral significance of LSSS in devotional terms, they did not explicitly develop its philosophical implications. Compassion remained largely interpreted as an object of faith, not as the ontological ground of moral existence. This lacuna opened the way for modern Buddhist philosophers to reinterpret the sutra through the categories of ontology, ethics, and existential phenomenology.

1.2 Modern Buddhist Philosophical Interpretations

The emergence of Buddhist philosophy in modern academia, especially through Japanese thinkers of the Kyoto School, reoriented the reading of Pure Land thought toward metaphysical and ethical universality. Nishida Kitarō's notion of the "place of absolute nothingness" (zettai mu no basho) provides a philosophical context for understanding Amitābha's compassion as the self-expression of the ultimate reality. Nishida (1987, p. 62) argued that true compassion arises when the self realizes its ground in the absolute nothingness where self and other co-arise. Compassion, therefore, is "the action of the absolute itself"—an ontological act rather than a moral prescription.

Nishitani Keiji, in Religion and Nothingness, extended this insight by exploring the existential transformation effected by awakening to emptiness. He observed that "to realize emptiness is to awaken to the field of compassion, where the self no longer stands apart from the suffering of others" (Nishitani, 1982, p. 204). Nishitani's phenomenological reworking of compassion resonates deeply with the LSSS, in which Dharmākara's vows represent the existential realization of interbeing. Compassion, in this light, is not sentimental altruism but the manifestation of non-dual awareness actualized in moral relation.

Masao Abe (1985, 1995) explicitly connected the philosophy of the Kyoto School with Pure Land soteriology, arguing that tariki (Other-Power) should be interpreted as the dynamic of self-negation and awakening that constitutes the core of Buddhist ethics. For Abe (1995, p. 79), Amitābha's infinite compassion reveals the "self-emptying nature of ultimate reality," comparable to Christian kenosis yet grounded in non-dual metaphysics. Abe's comparative perspective underscores the possibility of a universal ethics of compassion transcending religious boundaries—a line of inquiry this paper further develops.

In the West, scholars such as John Keown and Peter Harvey have contributed to the academic study of Buddhist ethics, emphasizing its foundation in compassion and moral intentionality. Keown (2005, p. 88) notes that Buddhist moral theory is teleological, aiming at the realization of enlightenment through moral cultivation. However, he also acknowledges that Mahāyāna texts like LSSS extend this teleology beyond individual liberation to universal salvation, integrating ethics with cosmology. Garfield (2015, p. 153) similarly interprets compassion as "the epistemic realization of emptiness in ethical form," implying that moral action is inseparable from ontological insight.

1.3 Contemporary Hermeneutic and Existential Approaches

Recent scholarship has begun to read LSSS through hermeneutic and existential lenses, bridging Buddhist thought with phenomenology and moral philosophy. Loy (2019, p. 134) interprets the Pure Land as a metaphor for the awakened heart-mind (citta), suggesting that "the land of bliss is the world seen through compassion." This symbolic interpretation aligns with Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbol, where mythic language expresses existential truths beyond literal representation. The LSSS, therefore, functions as a mytho-poetic articulation of the moral transformation of consciousness.

Western existentialist frameworks also offer fruitful parallels. Tanabe Hajime's Philosophy as Metanoetics (1986) parallels the LSSS's moral logic: both describe liberation as the negation of ego-centered will through repentance and awakening to Other-Power. Tanabe (1986, p. 44) writes, "Ethics begins in the death of the autonomous self and is fulfilled in compassionate action." This resonates strongly with the Pure Land vision of rebirth through the vow-power (pranidhāna) of Amitābha—a rebirth that is simultaneously ethical and ontological.

Furthermore, comparative scholars have sought to reinterpret Pure Land ethics in dialogue with Western moral philosophy. Ueda (2004, p. 118) and Kasulis (2018, p. 92) argue that the Mahāyāna notion of compassion transcends the dichotomy of self and other, offering a model of "relational autonomy" that challenges the Western emphasis on individual moral agency. The LSSS thereby anticipates a form of inter-relational ethics that integrates existential authenticity with universal altruism.

1.4 The Research Gap

Despite these developments, few studies have directly examined how LSSS unites moral practice and existential realization within a coherent philosophical framework. Most existing works either approach the sutra devotionally—focusing on faith and rebirth—or doctrinally—discussing karmic causality and vow-theory—without addressing the ontological function of compassion as the bridge between moral and metaphysical dimensions. This paper thus seeks to fill this gap by offering a philosophical reading that situates LSSS within the discourse of Buddhist moral metaphysics and existential ethics.

In doing so, the study contributes to both Buddhist and comparative philosophy by demonstrating that LSSS articulates a universal moral vision where compassion becomes the mode of being through which the finite self participates in the infinite life of all beings. It advances the argument that the sutra's ethical philosophy does not merely supplement metaphysics—it is metaphysics in ethical form. Through this reinterpretation, the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra emerges not only as a religious scripture but as a philosophical testament to compassionate existence, deeply relevant to the moral crises of modern humanity.

1. Philosophical analysis

2.1. Compassion as Ontological Ground

The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra articulates compassion (karuṇā) not as a moral emotion or a pious sentiment, but as the ontological foundation of reality itself. Within the text, Amitābha's forty-eight vows represent the manifestation of compassion as the very structure of being — the Dharma-body (dharmakāya) expressing itself through relational existence. This reading departs from conventional ethical interpretations and moves toward what might be termed a metaphysics of compassion, where the moral and the ontological are coextensive (Abe, 1995, p. 75; Nishida, 1987, p. 59).

In Buddhist metaphysics, the principle of śūnyatā (emptiness) signifies that all phenomena lack inherent existence and arise interdependently. Compassion arises precisely from this ontological insight: when the illusion of separateness dissolves, the response to suffering becomes spontaneous and universal. As Garfield (2015, p. 154) explains, "to understand emptiness is to understand that the boundaries between self and other are illusory; compassion is the lived realization of that truth." Thus, compassion is not derived from moral duty, as in Kantian deontology, but from ontological realization — the awakening to the co-arising nature of all beings.

The LSSS expands this insight into a cosmic dimension. Amitābha's compassion is depicted as infinite (ananta) and boundless (aprameya), corresponding to the infinite light (Amitābha) and life (Amitāyus) that symbolize the all-embracing nature of being itself. In this symbolic framework, compassion becomes the very energy of being, the self-manifestation of ultimate reality in the moral sphere. As Williams (2009, p. 178) notes, the Mahāyāna transformation of Buddhist soteriology lies in its assertion that "the realization of emptiness necessarily issues in compassion." Amitābha's vows thus represent the ontological necessity of compassion: being, in its purest form, is compassion in action.

This understanding also clarifies the philosophical meaning of "Other-Power" (tariki) in the LSSS. Traditionally seen as divine grace, tariki can instead be interpreted as the ontological dynamism of interdependence — the self-transcending movement of reality itself. Nishida (1987, p. 63) calls this movement "acting intuition" (kōiteki chokkan), where the absolute expresses itself through the finite. Compassion, then, is not an individual virtue but the manifestation of the absolute in human moral life. It is, in Nishida's phrase, "the self-determination of nothingness as love" (p. 65). Amitābha's compassion is precisely this ontological event: the expression of ultimate reality (dharmatā) as care for all beings.

From this perspective, compassion unites ontology, epistemology, and ethics. It is the mode through which the ultimate reality both is known and acts. As Abe (1985, p. 68) observes, "compassion is the knowing activity of emptiness." This insight overturns the dualism between cognition and volition that underlies much of Western ethics. In LSSS, to "know" reality is already to participate compassionately in it. The moral life, therefore, is not a series of chosen actions but a transformation of being — a conversion (parāvṛtti) of consciousness in which self and other are realized as co-dependent expressions of the same luminous ground.

The sutra's imagery reinforces this ontological reading. The Pure Land (Sukhāvatī) is described as a realm of radiant light, melodious harmony, and universal equality — metaphors that express the structural features of compassionate being. Each element of the Pure Land symbolizes an aspect of ontological compassion: the light of Amitābha represents the illumination of wisdom, while the equality of beings in that land represents the non-hierarchical nature of reality. Inagaki (1994, p. 92) notes that such imagery "transforms cosmology into moral ontology," where the world is no longer an arena of karmic differentiation but a field of universal resonance grounded in compassion.

This ontological conception of compassion also challenges the individualistic assumptions of modern moral philosophy. In Western thought, morality often begins with the autonomous subject who deliberates about right and wrong. The LSSS inverts this paradigm: the moral subject arises from compassion, not vice versa. Being compassionate is not a matter of choosing altruism but of realizing one's identity as interbeing. As Keown

(2017, p. 213) explains, "for Mahāyāna ethics, compassion is not commanded but discovered; it is the awakening of moral life itself." Hence, compassion is both epistemic and ontological — the mode of knowing and being through which liberation occurs.

From an existential perspective, this ontological compassion resolves the tension between the finite and the infinite. Human existence, conditioned by suffering and impermanence, finds its fulfillment not by escaping finitude but by participating in the infinite life (Amitāyus) through compassionate relation. Levinas (1969, p. 199) famously described ethics as "first philosophy," the opening of the self to the Other; yet in the LSSS, this "first philosophy" is rooted in a non-dual ontology where self and Other arise together. Compassion thus becomes the existential movement that actualizes non-duality within lived experience — a moral participation in the infinite structure of reality.

Moreover, the sutra's vision implies a dynamic model of ontological interpenetration akin to the Huayan (Avataṃsaka) philosophy of Indra's Net. Each being reflects and contains all others, and compassion is the active realization of this mutual inclusion. When Dharmākara vows that "the light of my wisdom shall shine upon all worlds," he is expressing the ontological structure of interbeing: the infinite within the finite, the universal manifesting as the particular. In moral terms, this means that to act compassionately is to affirm the reality of interdependence itself — to make being luminous through moral participation (Yamabe & Sueki, 2009, p. 107).

Finally, the philosophical consequence of this reading is profound. If compassion is ontological, then moral failure is not merely ethical error but ontological ignorance — the refusal to recognize interdependence. The restoration of moral life, therefore, requires an awakening to the compassionate structure of being. As Tanabe (1986, p. 49) contends, "metanoesis is not moral improvement but existential conversion." In the LSSS, such conversion is precisely the rebirth into Amitābha's light — a rebirth not in space, but in the mode of being. Compassion thus stands as the ontological ground of liberation, where ethics and existence converge in the realization of non-duality.

2.2. The Dialectic of Self-Power and Other-Power

The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra presents one of the most subtle and philosophically rich dialectics in the entire Buddhist canon: the dynamic tension and eventual unity between self-power (jiriki) and other-power (tariki). This polarity, while often interpreted devotionally as the contrast between human effort and divine grace, in fact conceals a profound ontological and existential meaning. It reveals the structure of moral awakening as a dialectical process in which selfhood negates its autonomy in order to rediscover itself in compassionate interdependence. The sutra thus portrays liberation not as the annihilation of self but as its transformation through relation — a theme that resonates with both Mahāyāna metaphysics and existential phenomenology (Abe, 1995, p. 81; Shinran, 2006, p. 214).

2.2.1 Self-Power as Finite Moral Consciousness

In the early Buddhist context, self-power refers to the individual's capacity for moral cultivation through disciplined effort (vīrya). It reflects the ethical autonomy of the practitioner who seeks liberation by self-directed mindfulness and wisdom. However, within LSSS, self-power acquires a deeper philosophical sense: it symbolizes the finite mode of existence bound by karmic causality and the illusion of separation. The human being, striving by self-effort alone, remains caught in the cycle of merit and demerit — the very economy of conditional being that prevents ultimate freedom.

As Keown (2005, p. 74) observes, moral intentionality in Buddhism is inseparable from the structure of consciousness: ethical acts shape and are shaped by one's mode of being. Yet when self-power is absolutized, moral agency becomes self-enclosed. The practitioner identifies with the moral subject who performs good deeds to accumulate karmic merit, thereby perpetuating the subtle ego that the Dharma seeks to transcend. In this sense, self-power corresponds to what Tanabe (1986, p. 47) calls the "egoic will," the self-assertive striving that must die for genuine ethical life to begin.

The sutra symbolizes this condition through the figure of sentient beings dwelling in defiled worlds, unable to attain enlightenment by their own capacity. Dharmākara's vows are made precisely for such beings: those who "struggle in darkness," trapped in the self-referential circle of merit. The compassion of Amitābha thus enters not as an external rescue but as the ontological reversal of this condition — the opening of a new horizon in which moral agency is transformed from possession to participation.

2.2.2 Other-Power as the Ontological Dynamism of Compassion

Other-power (tariki), in the LSSS, is the manifestation of the compassionate dynamism of reality itself. It does not oppose human effort but fulfills it by grounding it in the non-dual structure of being. As Abe (1985, p. 72) explains, tariki is "the working of the infinite within the finite," the self-emptying activity of ultimate reality (śūnyatā) actualized as compassion. Thus, what appears as "grace" is in truth the ontological movement of emptiness manifesting as relational life.

Nishida Kitarō's philosophy provides a conceptual framework for understanding this movement. In his notion of "self-identity of absolute contradictories," Nishida (1987, p. 61) argues that the finite and infinite, self and other, are not opposites but

dialectically unified in the field of absolute nothingness (zettai mu). From this perspective, tariki represents the self-activity of the absolute that realizes itself through the negation of egoic selfhood. Compassion, therefore, is the concrete form of this self-realization: the absolute becomes moral existence by expressing itself as care for the other.

In the LSSS, Amitābha's vows articulate precisely this structure. When Dharmākara renounces his self-centered striving and vows to save all beings, he enacts the movement of tariki as the self-negation of finite will. The infinite compassion that arises is not his possession but the manifestation of the dharmic field itself. Shinran (2006, p. 217) interprets this as "the working of the Buddha's wisdom," in which the practitioner's faith (shinjin) is none other than the awakening of the Buddha-mind within. Tariki, then, is not heteronomy but the deepest form of autonomy — an autonomy that transcends ego by realizing its ground in the compassionate totality of being.

2.2.3 The Dialectical Movement of Moral Awakening

The relationship between jiriki and tariki thus constitutes a dialectic rather than a dualism. The practitioner begins with self-power — the moral consciousness of responsibility and effort — yet finds that such effort, when absolutized, leads to alienation and despair. At this point, self-power negates itself, awakening to its dependence on the compassionate ground of being. In this negation, other-power emerges, not as external salvation but as the inner transformation of existence itself. As Tanabe (1986, p. 49) writes, "the death of the self-power is the birth of repentance, and repentance is the awakening of Other-Power."

This dialectic mirrors the Hegelian logic of self-transcendence yet remains distinct in its non-dual ontology. In LSSS, synthesis is not achieved through rational mediation but through existential awakening — the realization that self and other are co-originary. The finite self-awakens to the infinite not by sublation but by compassionate participation. Levinas's (1969, p. 201) insight that "subjectivity is responsibility for the Other" finds its Buddhist parallel here: responsibility becomes the very mode of being through which the self comes into existence.

In existential terms, this dialectic marks the passage from authentic effort to graced existence. The practitioner does not cease to act morally but acts from a transformed center — no longer the autonomous ego, but the compassionate ground. As Abe (1995, p. 88) emphasizes, "the realization of Other-Power does not abolish self-power; it purifies and fulfills it." In moral practice, this manifests as humility, gratitude, and spontaneous compassion — virtues that arise naturally when the self recognizes its being as gift.

2.2.4 Ethical and Ontological Implications

The philosophical implication of this dialectic is that moral freedom arises from ontological dependence. True autonomy is not self-determination in isolation but participation in the relational totality of compassion. The self becomes most itself when it ceases to claim independence and instead mirrors the infinite life (Amitāyus) within. This inversion of moral autonomy challenges both Western and Buddhist individualism, proposing instead a model of "relational personhood."

Garfield (2015, p. 162) explains that in Mahāyāna thought, the person is "a nexus of relations constituted by compassion." Within LSSS, this relational self is dramatized in the vow of Dharmākara: the self realizes itself only by vowing for the liberation of others. Moral life, therefore, is a continual enactment of this vow — a participation in the compassionate field of being that transcends the binary of actor and act.

Moreover, the dialectic of jiriki–tariki illuminates the existential meaning of faith (śraddhā). Faith is not mere belief but the experiential recognition that the source of moral action lies beyond the ego. It is the letting-be (Gelassenheit) of existence to the infinite compassion that sustains it. In this sense, faith functions as the phenomenological openness to the ontological ground of morality. As Heidegger (1959, p. 98) might put it, it is the letting-presence of Being as care.

Finally, this dialectic has practical and contemporary relevance. In an age dominated by self-assertive ethics and moral individualism, the LSSS proposes an alternative vision: an ethics of participation grounded in interdependence. Compassion mediates the polarity between autonomy and dependence, enabling a moral life that is both responsible and receptive. As Ueda (2004, p. 123) concludes, "the true self is born in the surrender to Other-Power — a surrender that is not weakness but the flowering of wisdom." The sutra thus redefines moral maturity as the capacity to live from the ground of compassion, where doing and being, self and other, action and grace, are harmonized in the rhythm of infinite life.

2.3. Ethical Transformation and Existential Liberation

Within the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra (LSSS), the moral path and the existential quest converge in a unified vision of liberation as transformation of being. Ethical action is not an instrument for salvation but its very enactment. The sutra presents morality and liberation not as two distinct domains—one practical, the other metaphysical—but as dimensions of the same process of awakening. Compassion (karuṇā) becomes the bridge that unites them: the moral expression of enlightenment and the existential realization of truth (Keown, 2017, p. 217; Abe, 1995, p. 91).

2.3.1 Morality as Transformation of Consciousness

In the Mahāyāna framework, moral transformation (śīla-parivṛtti) is inseparable from the transformation of consciousness (citta-parāvṛtti). The LSSS deepens this principle by portraying moral life as a complete reorientation of the self within the field of Other-Power (tariki). Amitābha's forty-eight vows function as archetypal expressions of awakened moral consciousness. They do not impose external commandments but reveal the spontaneous activity of enlightened being. In this sense, ethical life is no longer a matter of following precepts; it is the flowering of the awakened mind.

As Garfield (2015, p. 169) notes, Buddhist ethics is "not a theory of right action but a practice of moral perception"—a transformation of how one sees and experiences the world. The LSSS embodies this principle by depicting the Pure Land (Sukhāvatī) as a realm of purified perception, where every sound, color, and fragrance awakens mindfulness and compassion. The description of the Pure Land is therefore phenomenological: it portrays the world as seen from the standpoint of awakened morality. Ethical transformation thus entails a radical shift in perception—the realization that reality itself is luminous, relational, and pervaded by compassion.

The process of transformation, however, begins with existential awareness of limitation. The practitioner recognizes the futility of self-centered striving and opens to the compassionate ground of being. Tanabe (1986, p. 51) describes this as "metanoesis," the repentance or turning-about that annihilates the ego's illusion of self-sufficiency. In this moment of surrender, the practitioner undergoes moral rebirth: a new consciousness arises, animated by compassion rather than self-will. This conversion is not moral subjugation but moral liberation—the awakening of a freedom rooted in interdependence rather than autonomy.

2.3.2 Compassion as the Dynamics of Liberation

Compassion in the LSSS functions as the existential principle of liberation. It is both the cause and the manifestation of enlightenment. In Amitābha's vows, compassion is depicted not merely as benevolence but as the very power of reality to liberate itself from suffering. As Abe (1985, p. 74) writes, "Compassion is the movement of emptiness realizing itself in the world of samsāra." Through compassion, the infinite becomes immanent, and the transcendental becomes experiential.

This dynamic can be analyzed through the interplay of wisdom (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā). In the LSSS, Amitābha embodies the union of these two aspects of enlightenment: wisdom perceives the emptiness of all things, and compassion acts within that emptiness to relieve suffering. To awaken to wisdom without compassion is nihilism; to act compassionately without wisdom is sentimentalism. The sutra resolves this dualism by presenting wisdom and compassion as the inseparable rhythm of enlightenment—the theoretical and practical dimensions of the same ontological awakening (Williams, 2009, p. 181).

From the standpoint of existential philosophy, this dynamic reflects the movement from alienation to participation. The isolated self, imprisoned in the dualism of subject and object, is liberated when it realizes itself as being-with-others. Compassion is the mode of this realization. As Levinas (1969, p. 203) suggests, the encounter with the Other discloses the meaning of existence as responsibility. Yet the LSSS goes beyond Levinasian asymmetry: responsibility arises not from metaphysical distance but from ontological unity. The suffering of others is not an external appeal but the resonance of shared being. Thus, to act compassionately is to awaken to one's own reality as interbeing (pratītyasamutpāda).

This insight dissolves the distinction between moral obligation and spiritual liberation. The practitioner does not act morally to attain enlightenment; rather, moral action is enlightenment expressed in lived existence. As Keown (2005, p. 89) affirms, Buddhist ethics is teleological, aiming at the actualization of enlightenment here and now. In the LSSS, this actualization takes the form of compassionate participation in Amitābha's vow—the vow to transform the world into a field of liberation. Moral action thus becomes an ontological participation in the Buddha's enlightened activity.

2.3.3 Faith, Vow, and Practice as Existential Modes

The ethical transformation described in the LSSS is sustained by three interrelated existential modes: faith (śraddhā), vow (praṇidhāna), and practice (caryā). These are not sequential steps but simultaneous dimensions of awakened existence. Faith is the inward openness to Other-Power, vow is the determination to embody compassion, and practice is the enactment of this determination in the world. Together, they constitute what Shinran (2006, p. 222) calls "the working of the Buddha's wisdom in the foolish being."

Faith (śraddhā) in this context is not credal belief but existential trust in the compassionate structure of reality. It is, as Heidegger (1959, p. 98) might describe, a "letting-be" (Gelassenheit) that allows Being to disclose itself. Vow (praṇidhāna), by contrast, is the creative projection of compassion into the moral world—it transforms insight into intention. Practice (caryā) actualizes this vow through concrete ethical acts. Together, these modes express the dynamic unity of moral and existential transformation: to have faith is to vow, and to vow is to act.

In existential terms, these three modes correspond to the movement from self-enclosure to openness, from finitude to participation. Faith opens the

self to transcendence, vow gives that openness direction, and practice makes it incarnate. The practitioner thus experiences liberation not as escape from the world but as compassionate engagement within it. In this sense, the LSSS proposes an engaged liberation—a soteriology that is simultaneously moral, existential, and social.

2.3.4 The Ontological Fruit of Ethical Liberation

The culmination of ethical transformation in the LSSS is the realization of the Pure Land as existential transparency. When the practitioner awakens to compassion, the distinction between samsāra and nirvāṇa collapses: the world itself becomes luminous. As Inagaki (1994, p. 97) notes, "The Pure Land is not elsewhere; it is the purified mode of perception arising from the mind of faith." This insight reframes salvation as a transformation of being rather than a change of location. Liberation is not departure but disclosure—the world revealed as the field of compassion.

Such transformation carries profound philosophical implications. If liberation is ethical and existential, then the meaning of morality transcends normative prescription. Morality becomes the mode through which being realizes its truth. In this light, the LSSS articulates what might be termed an ontological ethics: an ethics grounded not in rules but in the nature of reality itself. Compassion, as the ontological ground of being, expresses itself through moral action; moral action, in turn, deepens the realization of compassion. The two are mutually generative, forming a continuous cycle of awakening.

This understanding challenges both religious moralism and secular existentialism. Against moralism, it insists that true morality arises from inner transformation, not external obligation. Against existentialism, it affirms that authentic existence is not achieved through isolated freedom but through relational compassion. As Abe (1995, p. 92) concludes, "To live ethically is to live the life of the Buddha—an infinite life that manifests through finite beings." Ethical transformation and existential liberation are thus two faces of the same awakening: the realization that being itself is compassion in action.

2.4. The Universal Relevance of Compassion

The vision of compassion articulated in the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra (LSSS) transcends the boundaries of sectarian Buddhism to speak to the universal human condition. Its ethical and existential insight—that liberation is realized through compassionate participation in the life of others—resonates profoundly with both classical and contemporary moral philosophy. The sutra's portrayal of compassion as the ontological ground of being and the existential mode of liberation reveals a philosophy not confined to Buddhist cosmology but applicable to the crises of modern civilization: moral alienation, ecological disintegration, and the loss of spiritual meaning (Abe, 1995, p. 96; Keown, 2017, p. 218).

2.4.1 Compassion as a Universal Moral Principle

At its core, the LSSS offers a moral anthropology that defines humanity in terms of compassion. The human being, according to this view, is not primarily a rational or autonomous agent but a relational being whose fulfillment lies in self-transcending care. This vision parallels, yet exceeds, Western ethical traditions. In contrast to Kant's categorical imperative, which universalizes moral law through rational abstraction, the LSSS universalizes compassion through ontological participation. Compassion becomes the law of being itself, not a rule imposed upon it. As Keown (2005, p. 91) observes, "The Buddhist moral universe is teleological: its end is not duty but awakening." Thus, moral universality arises not from reason's legislation but from the awakened recognition of interdependence.

From this standpoint, the LSSS articulates a cosmocentric rather than anthropocentric ethics. Its moral horizon includes all forms of life as participants in the infinite network of interbeing. Dharmākara's vows to liberate all sentient beings symbolize the dissolution of any moral boundary based on species, caste, or capacity. Such a view anticipates modern ecological ethics and the philosophy of deep ecology, in which all beings possess intrinsic value as manifestations of a shared ground of being. As Garfield (2015, p. 174) notes, "Compassion in Mahāyāna thought extends moral concern to all phenomena, for the same emptiness that reveals their insubstantiality also reveals their equality."

This universality is not abstract but concrete: it manifests in the lived practice of compassion in daily existence. In modern moral discourse, this corresponds to what Levinas (1969, p. 213) called "the infinite responsibility for the Other," yet the LSSS refines this by grounding responsibility in non-duality. Responsibility arises not from ethical command but from ontological communion; one responds to the Other because one is the Other in the interdependent field of being. Hence, compassion becomes the natural law of existence—the inherent responsiveness of being to itself.

2.4.2 Compassion and the Crisis of Modernity

The relevance of the LSSS becomes especially urgent in the context of modernity's moral and existential crises. The technological age, while promising liberation through control, has produced alienation, ecological destruction, and moral fragmentation. Human beings have become, in Heidegger's (1959, p. 102) words, "calculative entities," estranged from the meaning of Being. Against this backdrop, the sutra's vision of compassion as participation in infinite life offers a radical alternative. It redefines freedom not as mastery but as communion, not as autonomy but as relational openness.

Tanabe Hajime (1986, p. 54) argued that modern civilization suffers from the "tragedy of self-power"—a condition in which the will to control replaces the capacity to surrender. The LSSS addresses precisely this pathology: it teaches that authentic existence arises only when self-power is negated and transfigured into compassionate participation. In an age defined by egoic systems—whether economic, political, or ideological—the philosophy of Other-Power (tariki) offers a vision of ethical humility. To live by compassion is to live beyond the will to dominate; it is to participate in the life of all beings without appropriation.

This insight bears ecological significance. The sutra's cosmology of infinite interrelation can be read as an early articulation of ecological interdependence. The Pure Land, where "breezes and jewels sing the Dharma," symbolizes a world in which every element—animate or inanimate—expresses the harmony of compassionate being (Inagaki, 1994, p. 95). The ethical implication is clear: to exploit or destroy the natural world is to violate the field of interbeing that constitutes one's own existence. The LSSS thus prefigures a form of eco-phenomenology, where compassion becomes the guiding ethos for restoring the moral bond between humanity and nature.

2.4.3 Compassion and Intercultural Dialogue

Beyond its ethical and ecological relevance, the LSSS offers a fertile ground for intercultural philosophical dialogue. Its conception of infinite compassion parallels but also transforms several key notions in Western philosophy. The kenotic self-emptying of the divine in Christian theology, the Platonic ascent toward the Good, and Levinas's ethics of the Other all find resonance in the sutra's depiction of Amitābha's vows. Yet the LSSS transcends these frameworks by situating compassion not in transcendence opposed to the world, but in the immanence of interdependence.

Masao Abe (1995, p. 98) describes this as the "kenosis of emptiness"—a self-emptying that is not negation but creative affirmation. Unlike the theistic model of divine descent, Amitābha's compassion does not intervene from above; it radiates from within the structure of being itself. This insight opens new possibilities for global ethics: a universal morality grounded not in metaphysical hierarchy but in ontological mutuality. As Nishitani (1982, p. 206) notes, "When emptiness is awakened to itself, it becomes compassion; when compassion acts, it manifests emptiness." The sutra's philosophy of compassionate interbeing thus offers a cross-cultural key for rethinking the unity of metaphysics and ethics in a pluralistic world.

Moreover, the LSSS provides a corrective to both Western secularism and religious exclusivism. By framing salvation as existential transformation rather than dogmatic belief, it invites dialogue among diverse traditions. The moral law of compassion functions as what Ricoeur (1974, p. 321) would call a "second naïveté"—a recovered sense of sacred meaning that transcends literalism without abandoning transcendence. In this way, the sutra contributes to a global humanism founded on the shared recognition of interbeing and moral responsibility.

2.4.4 The Future of Compassionate Philosophy

In the contemporary search for a post-metaphysical ethics, the LSSS offers an alternative that neither rejects metaphysics nor retreats into relativism. It's teaching that compassion is the self-expression of emptiness constitutes a non-foundational foundation for ethics: a groundless ground in which morality arises spontaneously from the realization of non-duality. This vision anticipates and extends the insights of modern thinkers such as Levinas, Heidegger, and the Kyoto School, yet remains distinct in its affirmation that ultimate reality is not abstract Being but living compassion.

Garfield and Westerhoff (2021, p. 233) argue that Buddhist philosophy provides a "critical realism of interdependence" that reconciles moral normativity with ontological fluidity. The LSSS exemplifies this reconciliation: it maintains that moral values are neither imposed nor arbitrary but emerge naturally from the structure of dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda). Compassion, as the realization of this structure, becomes the principle that unites metaphysics, ethics, and existence into a coherent whole.

This vision has enduring significance for the future of philosophy itself. In an era of global pluralism, where moral discourse risks fragmentation, the sutra's moral cosmology offers a unifying language of care. Its teaching that "to be is to be-with" provides the ethical foundation for dialogue across religions, cultures, and disciplines. As Abe (1985, p. 81) succinctly states, "Compassion is not the property of Buddhism alone; it is the awakening of humanity itself." In this sense, the LSSS anticipates a global ethics of compassion that transcends doctrinal boundaries and redefines philosophy as the art of compassionate living.

Ultimately, the universal relevance of compassion in the LSSS lies in its refusal to separate wisdom from love, liberation from responsibility, or the infinite from the finite. It envisions a world where being and caring are one, where each act of kindness participates in the structure of reality itself. The sutra thus speaks not only to Buddhists but to all who seek a moral vision adequate to the interconnected destiny of life on Earth. To live compassionately, it teaches, is to live in accordance with the truth of existence—an eternal philosophy for a finite world.

CONCLUSION

The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra (LSSS) articulates a profound moral and existential vision in which compassion (karuṇā) becomes both the foundation and the fulfillment of human existence. Its philosophical significance lies in its ability to integrate ethics, ontology, and soteriology into a single dynamic of awakening. By interpreting the sutra through the dialectic of self-power (jiriki) and other-power (tariki), we have seen that moral life in the LSSS is not a matter of obedience to external law nor a pursuit of merit, but the transformative participation in the infinite compassion that constitutes reality itself (Abe, 1995, p. 93; Shinran, 2006, p. 215).

At the heart of this vision is the recognition that liberation is relational. The human being is not a self-contained subject but a node in the network of interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda). Within this web of being, moral action is the mode through which the self realizes its unity with others. Compassion thus ceases to be a moral sentiment and becomes an ontological event: the manifestation of emptiness (śūnyatā) as care. As Nishida (1987, p. 63) writes, "The true self is not the self that acts upon others, but the self that acts through others as itself." This insight dissolves the false dichotomy between ethics and metaphysics, showing that morality is the way being comes to know itself as compassion.

In existential terms, the LSSS offers a model of liberation that is neither ascetic withdrawal nor passive faith, but active surrender — a paradoxical freedom born from dependence on the infinite. The practitioner's moral awakening involves a radical reconfiguration of selfhood: from autonomous agency to compassionate participation. Tanabe's (1986, p. 55) notion of metanoesis aptly captures this process as the "death and resurrection of the self through repentance." In this turning-about, self-power negates itself, and other-power is realized as the life of the self. Freedom emerges not by escaping dependence, but by affirming it as the condition of authentic existence.

Philosophically, this reinterpretation of moral agency challenges dominant paradigms in both Western ethics and Buddhist scholasticism. Against Western rationalism, it asserts that reason alone cannot ground morality; only the awakening of relational being can. Against narrow interpretations of karma, it declares that moral action derives its value not from causal accumulation but from the purity of compassionate intention. In this way, the LSSS opens a middle path between moralism and nihilism — a vision of ethical life as spontaneous participation in the infinite life of the Buddha (Amitāyus).

The LSSS also redefines the very nature of enlightenment. Instead of depicting it as a transcendental escape from the world, the sutra presents enlightenment as immanent transformation within the world. The Pure Land is not a distant paradise but a symbol of purified existence, where all things reveal the Dharma. As Inagaki (1994, p. 97) explains, "To be born in the Pure Land is to awaken to the world as Pure Land." Liberation, therefore, is not spatial but existential — a transformation of perception and being. When compassion becomes one's mode of seeing and acting, every moment becomes a site of awakening.

From a comparative standpoint, the moral and existential philosophy of the LSSS offers valuable dialogue with Western thought. Its dialectic of self and other parallels Hegel's movement of self-realization, yet transcends it by grounding reconciliation not in logic but in compassion. Its vision of faith and surrender resonates with Kierkegaard's notion of "infinite resignation," yet surpasses it through non-duality. Its ethics of relationality anticipates Levinas's responsibility for the Other but locates that responsibility in ontological unity rather than transcendental asymmetry. The LSSS thus provides a Buddhist corrective to the modern crisis of subjectivity: it reimagines the human self as a being-with, whose essence is compassionate responsiveness.

In the context of contemporary moral philosophy, this vision has urgent implications. In an age marked by individualism, technological alienation, and ecological collapse, the sutra's emphasis on compassion as ontological participation offers a new paradigm for ethical life. It replaces the paradigm of control with that of care, the logic of exploitation with that of interdependence. The moral agent of the LSSS is not the sovereign subject but the transparent self — the one who acts through the awareness of being acted through. In this lies the sutra's revolutionary contribution to moral thought: the recognition that to act ethically is to realize the truth of existence itself.

Ultimately, the LSSS envisions a moral cosmos grounded in infinite compassion. Dharmākara's vows symbolize not divine command but the deepest possibility of existence: that reality, when fully awakened to itself, acts as compassion. The practitioner's path is thus a participation in the cosmic vow of life to redeem itself through love. As Abe (1985, p. 81) beautifully summarizes, "Compassion is emptiness in action, and emptiness is compassion realized." To live according to this truth is to live the awakened life — a life that bridges philosophy and faith, ethics and ontology, the finite and the infinite.

Therefore, the LSSS does not merely teach a doctrine; it reveals a vision — a moral metaphysics in which every act of kindness becomes an ontological affirmation, and every realization of interdependence becomes a step toward liberation. In the age of moral fragmentation and spiritual uncertainty, this vision offers a timeless reminder: that the ultimate meaning of being lies not in self-assertion but in compassionate co-being. Through its synthesis of moral depth and existential

insight, the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra continues to illuminate the possibility of a world where wisdom and compassion are one — a world in which liberation and love coincide in the radiant life of the infinite.

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