The Role of Dizang Bodhisattva in the Zhancha jing

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The Zhancha shan’e yebao jing (Sutra of divining the requital of good and bad karmas, hereafter Zhancha jing) in two fascicles is probably a Chinese apocryphon composed in the late sixth century, seen by the people of that age as a degenerate period. It is regarded today as a major Dizang (Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva) sutra (Dizang jing 地藏經) along with the Shilun jing 十輪經 (Ten Wheels Sutra) and the Dizang pusa benyuan jing (Dizang bodhisattva's original vows sutra). However, in what way is it a Dizang sutra? What role does Dizang play? This study will show that this sutra expounds a coherent theory of practice, the guiding principle of which is faith in Dizang as the giver of consolation and encouragement. It presents a soteriology based on Dizang worship for those wishing to become a Mahāyāna practitioner in a degenerate age.

1. Theory of Practice in the Zhancha jing

How does this sutra set forth a coherent theory of practice? Hitherto, the tendency of scholars has been to see the text as a how-to manual of divination, a “dubious apocryphon based on Dizang worship.” However, Ikehira Noriko sees this sutra as preaching a series of practices based on a theory of the mind, whereas Moro Shigeki concludes that the divination rites expounded are evidence of earnest efforts to receive clear messages from buddhas and bodhisattvas. These studies have opened new paths in the study of this sutra. This paper reexamines this work as a Dizang sutra.

1.1. Methods of Divination and Penance

The sutra opens with the Buddha calling on Dizang (whom the Buddha praises as having exceptionally deep capacities of salvation in the Degenerate World of Five Turbidities) to expound for those with meager wholesome faculties in the Latter Age of
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the Dharma, the way to attain non-retrogression in Mahāyāna. From the outset, there is a clear focus on practice in the degenerate world of the Latter Age of the Dharma. Then, Dizang sets out to elaborate a threefold process of divination, executed by throwing dice-like objects called “wooden wheels” (mulun 木輪). The wheels are shaped like short, stocky pencils sharpened at either end, the middle part having four flat faces on which words, signs, or numbers are written or carved:

The first results of the [throwing of the] wheels effectively show the different kinds of good and bad karmas of past lives. There are ten wheels [for this first divination process]. The second results of the [throwing of the] wheels effectively show the difference in whether the past karmas were accumulated in lives close to or far from [the present], whether they are strong or weak, major or minor. There are three wheels [used]. The third results of the [throwing of the] wheels effectively show the difference of the retribution in the three divisions of time [past, present, or future]. There are six wheels [used].

一者輪相，能示宿世所作善惡業種差別。其輪有十。二者輪相，能示宿世集業久近所作強弱大小差別。其輪有三。三者輪相，能示三世中受報差別。其輪有六。（T17. 902b–c）

An array of possible results revealed by the wooden wheels is listed in the sutra. These range from Buddhist rewards, such as rebirth in Pure Buddha Land, to mundane blessings, such as gaining wealth or official rank, along with negative retributions, such as being gripped by anger or meeting obstructions in one’s way (T17. 905b–906c).

Trying to ascertain one’s fortunes such as promotion in official rank or safety in one’s travels by throwing wooden wheels may appear nonsensical as a Buddhist practice. However, Whalen Lai notes that “more of the fortunes deal with the perennial human anxieties over interpersonal relationships” and that “the cult of penance” that follows is far more important. Lai says that the structure of the sutra is “soteriologically oriented.” We should take note of the sutra’s focus on human anxieties.

The process of penance is demanding. One repeats the routine of adorning a room for the rite, worshipping the Three Jewels, making vows, and repeatedly reciting Dizang’s name. This routine is performed every four hours, day and night. It continues for at least a week, up to a hundred or even a thousand days, until the wooden wheels reveal purely good results. Only then can one move on to the next stage of practice, which is meditation:

If they practice meditation and wisdom without repenting and purifying themselves, then there will be many impediments [such] that they will not be able to attain [meditation and wisdom].
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若不懺悔令其清浄而修禪定智慧者，則多有障礙不能剋獲。 (T17. 903c)

The final goal to be attained here is “wisdom of signlessness” (wuxiang zhihui 無相智 慧 [T17. 903c]), which is precisely the main subject of the second fascicle.

1.2. Meditation: Practicing Faith in the One True Realm

Fascicle two begins with the teaching of the One True Realm (yishi jingjie 一實境界):

Those wishing to enter the Mahāyāna first need to know the fundamental primary actions to be practiced . . . it is to base oneself on the one true realm and so practice resolute faith . . . that the body of the mind of sentient beings is basically not produced, not extinguished, pure in self-nature, without hindrance, without impediments . . . and of the characteristic of suchness.

若有衆生欲向大乘者，當先知最初所行根本之業……所謂依止一實境界，以修信解…… 謂衆生心体従本以来不生不滅自性清净無障無礙……真如相故。 (T17. 907a)

This focus on the mind of sentient beings reminds us of the Dasheng qixin lun, and it could be seen as but an effort by the author(s) to authenticate the dubious divination cult. 10 The aim of the sutra, however, is not to indulge in metaphysics, but to expound the practice for promptly joining the bodhisattvas’ lineage (速疾得入菩薩種性 [T17. 907a]). This is realized through two meditation methods: for those with unwholesome faculties, the Mind-Only Observation to see that all things are products of the mind; and for those with wholesome faculties, the True Observation of Suchness to see that the mind itself is not produced or extinguished. These culminate in the One Practice Meditation wherein the practitioner’s mind comes to rest in the stage of solid faith. 11

2. The Role of Dizang Bodhisattva as the Preacher of Skillful Consolation

2.1. Preacher of Skillful Consolation

The Zhancha jing preaches a theory of practice comprising three stages: divination, penance, and meditation. 12 In this process, what role does Dizang play apart from explaining it? Mochizuki Shinkō notes that Dizang personifies a subterranean store and was “seen as the ‘cache’ of merits and great compassion since the Shilun jing,” and so the Zhancha jing “brought the tathāgatagarbha [theory] and Dizang together.” 13 However, the word “cache” (fuzang 伏蔵) does not appear in this sutra, and Dizang is not necessarily depicted as such. 14 Instead, Dizang plays the crucial role of supporting practitioners when they are on the verge of frustration and backsliding.
First, Dizang is aware that even the well-off can be gripped with anxiety:

If there is one who has a good basis for renouncing the mundane, and who fiercely guards the mind, I will then appear before him accordingly, emanate light of compassion, and make him tranquil, free of various doubts and fears.

Dizang also promises to free from anguish the earnest practitioners who have yet to see the auspicious apperition of Dizang (T17. 904b). Then, what of the more sinful and weak?

Next, if future sentient beings do not pursue the way to liberation of meditation and wisdom, only to be met with various misfortunes, poverty, hardships, and anxiety, and are hard-pressed, they should revere, worship, and give offerings, repent of their bad deeds, always make vows, diligently recite my name at all times and in all places with sincerity, and then they will promptly be freed from various types of anguish and be born in a good place after this life ends.

Presumably, this sets the stage for future practices.

At the end of fascicle one, Dizang calls to those who cannot get good results from divination and are stressed with various worries and fears:

Always recite my name day and night. If [you are] truly sincere, divination will be auspicious, desires will be fulfilled and [you] will actually be freed from anguish.

Similar advice is given in the second fascicle to those who simply cannot make progress no matter how much they try. 15 Further, close to the end of the sutra, Dizang proclaims that he will use skillful means to clarify the truth, give consolation to practitioners who have yet to establish firm faith, and free them from doubts and fears.

For this reason, Dizang is called the Preacher of Skillful Consolation (shan’anwei shuozhe 善安慰説者). 16

Dizang extends his helping hand to remove anxiety regarding the practices at crucial moments throughout the sutra. The rite of divination and penance is complex, and it does not readily offer good results. Further, one has to move on to meditation. Practitioners living in the degenerate world of the Latter Age of the Dharma are bound
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to be frustrated. Therefore, faith in Dizang's consolation and encouragement becomes the guiding principle that penetrates the whole process.

2.2. Why Dizang?
Lastly, we may ask the question: why does it have to be Dizang? Naturally, we may speculate regarding the spread or budding of Dizang worship in late sixth century China as a backdrop to the authorship of this sutra. However, we may also theorize a logical reason.

As the aim of this sutra is to make anxious followers in a degenerate world and age practice divination, tedious penance rites, and "meditation and wisdom of signlessness," we need a preacher with multiple facets. If the wisdom of emptiness (śūnyatā) is the key, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva (Wenshu 文殊) would do just as well. If the endless path of the bodhisattva's practice is to be focused on, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (Puxian 普賢) can be a mentor. Or if unlimited compassion to save all sentient beings is called for, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Guanyin 觀音) easily comes to mind. So why call on Dizang Bodhisattva?

One aspect of Dizang's merits can be noticed here: his close affiliation with meditative powers. Nishi Yoshio has pointed out that "early Dizang Bodhisattva has considerably strong connection to meditative observation (changuan 禪觀)" as seen in the Daji jing xumizang fen 大集經須弥藏分 (Sumeru section of the Great assembly sutra) or the Shilun jing, and that Dizang "realizes various vows and practices of altruism by entering into samādhi." 17) It would seem, then, that with his extensive practice in meditation and in gaining wisdom as a result, and with his compassion as Preacher of Skillful Consolation in a degenerate world of the Latter Age of the Dharma, Dizang, a multi-faceted savior, is an ideal mentor for our sutra.

3. Conclusion

The Zhancha jing is not merely a book of divination with theoretical explanations in its second half. Exhibiting lofty metaphysics will do nothing for the masses who lack wholesome faculties. Promulgating meditation with a resolve to enter the Mahāyāna (though, admittedly, together with a rather odd use of wooden wheels), and with Dizang continually consoling and encouraging practitioners, this sutra tries to establish a soteriology for an age which people saw as the Latter Age of the Dharma, comprising
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a theory of practice with faith in Dizang as its guiding principle. This is aptly expressed in the words of Buddha at the end of the sutra:

If one hears the name of that bodhisattva, the great being, Dizang, and has faith in his teachings, let it be known that this person will well and quickly be distanced from all existing obstructions, and will rapidly reach the unsurpassed way.

若人得聞彼地藏菩薩摩訶薩名号及信其所說者，當知是人速能得離一切所有諸障礙事，疾至無上道（T17.910b–c）

Notes

1) For analyses of historical records of this sutra in the various sutra catalogs, see Manabe 1960, 97–100; Kashiwagi 1979, 7b–12b; Kuo 1994, 146–149; Ikehira 2000, 355–356, among others. Most scholars place the origin of this sutra in the late sixth century. See Manabe 1960, 104; Lai 1990, 177. Moro suggests the possibility of a Korean origin, and Wang-Toutain does not rule out the possibility that this is a translation rather than a Chinese apocryphon. See Moro 2011, 135, 154; Wang-Toutain 1998, 75. There has been much debate regarding the similarity between this sutra and the Dasheng qixin lun 大乗起信論 (Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith), but that topic is beyond the scope of this paper. See for example, Mochizuki 1920b, 181a; 1972, 228; Kashiwagi 1979, 2a; Ikehira 2000, 372–374; Moro 2011, 136, 143, 153.

2) Dizang is a translation of the Sanskrit term Kṣitigarbha, literally meaning “Earth Womb.”

3) Dafangguang shilun jing 大方広十輪経 in a Northern Liang translation, Dasheng daji dizang shilun jing 大乘大集地藏十輪経 in Xuanzang’s 玄奘 Tang translation.

4) 法界十輪経 in Xuanzang’s 玄奘 Tang translation.

5) Manabe 1960, 15. He does, however, give credit to the sutra for spreading Dizang worship (see Manabe 1960, 104).

6) See Ikehira 2000; Moro 2011. Another study worthy of note is Endō Jun’yū’s argument that this sutra’s divination method has Daoist backgrounds. See Endō 2000.

7) 於無垢世化益偏厚 (T17.902a), 末法中有微少善根者……随於何乘速獲不退 (T17.901c–902a).

8) For details of the processes, see Tanaka 2005, 309–320.

9) Lai 1990, 182.

10) Manabe 1960, 102. See also note 1.

11) 其利根者……如是等人，即応習學真如實觀，其鈍根者……応當先學唯心識觀 (T17.908c). 即復能入一行三昧。入是一行三味已，見仏無數發深広行，心住堅信位 (T17.908b).

12) Ikehira points out that this theory of practice is strongly influenced by Zhiyi’s 智顕 theory of repentance rituals. See Ikehira 2000, 369–374. For similar views, see Kuo 1994, 152; Endō 2000, 295.

13) Mochizuki 1920a, 144b–145a.

14) The sutra calls the mind tathāgatagarbha, but it is not connected with Dizang’s character (T17.907c).
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15) 若人難学如是信解。而……諸惡煩惱不得漸伏。其心疑怯畏墮三惡道生八難処……心於一切時一切處。常勤誦念我之名。若得一心善根增長其意猛利（T17. 908c).
16) 未得信心者……以方便宣諸真理。而安慰之令難怯弱……是故號我為善安慰說者（T17. 909c).
17) Nishi 1968, 139–140. See, for example, the Shilun jing (T13. 723b–724b).

Bibliography

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