

THREE VEHICLES OR FOUR VEHICLES?

A HERMENEUTICAL EXAMINATION OF EARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PARABLE OF THE THREE CARTS

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The Parable of the Three Carts in the *Lotus Sūtra*, also known as the Parable of the Burning House, has been interpreted differently in Chinese Buddhist exegesis, with a division between the Three-Vehicle School (*sanche jia* 三車家) and the Four-Vehicle School (*siche jia* 四車家). The distinction lies in whether the ox-cart among the three carts is identical to the final great white ox-cart, which essentially reflects different understandings of the relationship between the Three Vehicles (*triyāna*) and the One Vehicle (*ekayāna*). This division already existed before the emergence of sectarian Buddhism. Early proponents of the Three-Vehicle interpretation include Huiguan, Sengzhao, Sengrui, Daosheng, and Liu Qiu; those of the Four-Vehicle interpretation include Fayun and Huisi. Fayun represents a crucial turning point, pioneering the Fourth Vehicle interpretation. Huisi, building upon this foundation, used his own contemplative experience and *tathāgatagarbha* theory to develop a second path for the Four-Vehicle School. The fundamental cause for the emergence of the Four-Vehicle School lies in the further polarization of the relationship between expedient means (*upāya*) and reality (*tattva*), which consequently granted the One Vehicle an independent status with concrete content.

KEYWORDS: Parable of the Three Carts; Parable of the Burning House; expedient means and reality (quan-shi 權實); Three Vehicles and One Vehicle

The Parable of the Three Carts appears in the “Parable Chapter” (*Piyu pin* 譬喻品) of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*), also known as the Parable of the Burning House. It tells of an elder who sees his children playing in a burning house and lures them out by promising them goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts. After they escape, the elder bestows upon each of them a great white ox-cart. As a tool for explaining doctrine, parables capture only partial resemblances, thus allowing for multiple interpretive possibilities.

The Parable of the Three Carts has two main interpretations: Three Vehicles and Four Vehicles. The distinction lies in whether the ox-cart among the three carts is identical to the final great white ox-cart. Those who hold there are three carts are called the Three-Vehicle School; those who hold there are four are called the Four-Vehicle School. The three carts symbolize the Three Vehicles, while the great white ox-cart symbolizes the One Buddha Vehicle. The fundamental difference between the two schools concerns whether the One Buddha Vehicle is identical to the Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*) among the Three Vehicles.

The Parable of the Three Carts is closely connected to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s central themes of “revealing the real through expedient means” (*kaiquan xianshi* 開權顯實) and “uniting

the three into one" (*huisan guiyi* 會三歸一). Hence, it has always received special attention from commentators. As Jizang (549-623) noted: "The debate over the three carts has been contentious for a long time. Understanding this enables comprehension of the entire sūtra; confusion about it obstructs all seven scrolls."¹

Among extant *Lotus Sūtra* commentaries, the most influential are those by Jizang, Zhiyi (538-597), and Kuiji (632-682). Their interpretations had enormous influence in the era of sectarian Buddhism. The Tiantai and Huayan schools belong to the Four-Vehicle School, holding that the One Vehicle is a vehicle beyond the Three Vehicles—for Tiantai, this is the Perfect and Sudden Teaching; for Huayan, it is the Distinct Teaching of the One Vehicle. The Sanlun and Weishi schools belong to the Three-Vehicle School, holding that the One Vehicle is simply the Great Vehicle, with no independent One Vehicle existing separately.²

Zhiyi summarized: "People differ in their understanding of the number of carts and the nature of the carts. Some say there are initially three carts, with the later teaching uniting two into one; some say there are initially three, with the later teaching uniting three into one; some say there are initially four, with the later teaching uniting three into one."³ When the Japanese monk Saichō (767-822) came to Tang China to study, he specifically asked the abbot Daosui of Chanxiu Monastery on Mount Tiantai whether Tiantai belonged to the Three-Vehicle or Four-Vehicle School.⁴

However, the brilliant achievements of Sui-Tang sectarian Buddhism have obscured the fact that the divergence between Three-Vehicle and Four-Vehicle interpretations already existed during the Eastern Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties, significantly influencing later sectarian exegesis. Therefore, this article focuses on early commentators' interpretations of the Parable of the Three Carts—what might be called the "prehistory" of these interpretations.⁵ The different interpretations of this parable contain profound intellectual roots. A hermeneutical examination of early interpretations not only helps deepen our understanding of concepts like expedient means and reality, as well as Mahāyāna thought in Chinese Buddhist intellectual history, but also provides an important entry point for understanding ancient hermeneutics.

The Lotus Sūtra Text as the Interpretive Foundation

No matter how later interpretations develop, they must take the *Lotus Sūtra* text as their foundation. Therefore, we must examine what the sūtra itself says about the Three Vehicles, the three carts, the great white ox-cart, and the One Vehicle. The Three Vehicles and three carts are quite clear in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Kumārajīva's (343-413) translation of the "Parable Chapter" states:⁶

"Śāriputra! If there are sentient beings who possess inner wisdom, and upon hearing the Dharma from the Buddha World-Honored One, accept it with faith, diligently and earnestly striving to quickly escape the three realms and seeking nirvāṇa for themselves—these are called the Śrāvaka Vehicle, like those children who sought the goat-cart to escape the burning house. If there are sentient beings who, upon hearing the Dharma from the Buddha World-Honored One, accept it with faith, diligently and earnestly striving, seeking natural wisdom, delighting in solitary goodness and tranquility, deeply knowing the causes and

conditions of all dharmas—these are called the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle, like those children who sought the deer-cart to escape the burning house. If there are sentient beings who, upon hearing the Dharma from the Buddha World-Honored One, accept it with faith, cultivating with diligent effort, seeking all-knowledge, Buddha-knowledge, natural knowledge, teacherless knowledge, the Tathāgata's seeing and knowing, powers, and fearlessnesses, compassionately thinking of and bringing peace and joy to countless sentient beings, benefiting gods and humans, liberating all—these are called the Great Vehicle. Because bodhisattvas seek this vehicle, they are called mahāsattvas, like those children who sought the ox-cart to escape the burning house."

The Three Vehicles are the Śrāvaka Vehicle, the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle, and the Great Vehicle; the three carts are the goat, deer, and ox carts corresponding to the Three Vehicles. This passage is the foundation for all later interpretations.

In the "Parable Chapter," "the great white ox, fat and strong, of beautiful form, pulling the jeweled cart" corresponds to the One Vehicle. However, the Chinese text allows for a certain interpretive space, which is the origin of different later interpretations. The "Parable Chapter" states: "Just as that elder, seeing all his children safely escape the burning house to a place without fear, reflects on his immeasurable wealth and equally bestows great carts upon all his children... These sentient beings are all my children; I give them equally the Great Vehicle."⁷ Here, "equally bestowing great carts" corresponds to "giving them equally the Great Vehicle," meaning that the ox-cart among the three carts is the great white ox-cart, which represents the Great Vehicle.

But then it also says: "Initially using three carts to entice the children, afterward giving only the great cart." And: "Initially teaching the Three Vehicles to guide sentient beings, afterward using only the Great Vehicle to liberate them." And: "He can give all sentient beings the Dharma of the Great Vehicle, but not all can receive it. Śāriputra! For this reason, know that the Buddhas, through the power of expedient means, distinguish and teach three in what is actually the One Buddha Vehicle."⁸

This seems interpretable as meaning that the ox-cart or Great Vehicle among the three carts and Three Vehicles is not the Great Vehicle in the sense of the One Buddha Vehicle. Moreover, in Dharmarakṣa's (231-308) earlier translation, the *Zhengfa hua jing* 正法華經, "giving them equally the Great Vehicle" is rendered as "universally encouraging advancement toward the Buddha Vehicle."⁹ The implication that the One Buddha Vehicle is not equivalent to the Great Vehicle seems even clearer here.

Different interpretations of the Parable of the Three Carts focus on the great white ox-cart that symbolizes the One Vehicle; the essential question is how to understand the One Vehicle. The One Vehicle means the One Buddha Vehicle. The "Expedient Means Chapter" says: "The Tathāgata teaches the Dharma to sentient beings by means of only the One Buddha Vehicle; there is no other vehicle, whether second or third." In Sanskrit: *ekam evāhaṃ śāriputra yānamārabhya sattvānāṃ dharmāṃ deśayāmi yad idaṃ buddhayānaṃ | na kiṃci cchāriputra dvitīyaṃ vā tṛtīyaṃ vā yānaṃ samvidyate*.¹⁰

7 [Later Qin] Kumārajīva, trans., *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T09, p. 13b.

8 [Later Qin] Kumārajīva, trans., *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T09, p. 13c.

9 [Western Jin] Dharmarakṣa, trans., *Zhengfa hua jing* 正法華經, T09, p. 76b.

10 H. Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio, ed., *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtram* (St. Petersburg, 1908), p. 40.

1 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun* 法華玄論 [Treatise on the Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra], in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1988), vol. 34, p. 389a.

“Whether second or third”—the “whether...or” structure is *vā...vā*; “second” is *dvitīya* and “third” is *trītiya*, both ordinal adjectives modifying *yāna* (vehicle) in the neuter singular nominative. Thus, the meaning in Sanskrit is very clear: there is only the One Buddha Vehicle (*ekam buddhayāna*); there is no second or third vehicle. Both Jizang and Kuiji noted this point. However, based on the Chinese wording alone, “two” and “three” can also be interpreted as “two kinds of vehicles” and “three kinds of vehicles.”

Extant early Lotus-related literature can be divided into three categories. First, complete *Lotus Sūtra* commentaries—the earliest being the *Lotus Sūtra Commentary* (*Fahua jing shu* 法華經疏) by Zhu Daosheng (355-434), followed by the *Lotus Sūtra Record of Meaning* (*Fahua yiji* 法華義記) by Guangzhai Fayun (467-529). These are the most important documents for understanding early interpretations.¹¹

The Early Three-Vehicle School

Early proponents of the Three-Vehicle interpretation include Huiguan, Sengzhao, Sengrui, Daosheng, and Liu Qiu (438-495). Of course, except for Daosheng, the extant documents of these figures are too sparse, leaving some ambiguity; we can only say they are closer to the Three-Vehicle School, not as definitive as Daosheng.

(1) Huiguan and Sengzhao

Huiguan studied under Kumārajīva and was listed as one of the Four Sages of Kumārajīva’s school. “In precise debate, Huiguan and Sengzhao ranked first.”¹² Huiguan wrote “Preface to the Essential Points of the *Lotus*,” which reportedly received Kumārajīva’s approval upon completion.¹³

Based on this preface, Huiguan mainly discusses the Three Vehicles and One Vehicle from two levels: the expedient means of teaching and the ultimate reality. The Three Vehicles are “responses to beings that open pathways” and “provisional responses” that “cannot speak of the ultimate to beginners”—they are expedient means for teaching beginners. Hence the Three Vehicles are compared to “separate streams.” The separate streams are not reality; three different rivers ultimately merge together, converging into the real One Vehicle of the Wonderful Dharma.

Huiguan does not explicitly state whether there are three or four carts, but from his metaphor—“Ten thousand streams merge and flow together; the Three Vehicles proceed as one. The three that proceed together unite into one”—like three rivers merging into one, where this one river does not exist independently of the three, he is closer to the Three-Vehicle School. Sengzhao, “foremost in understanding emptiness among the Qin,” did not write specifically on the *Lotus*, but in his *Treatise on the Namelessness of Nirvāṇa*, he mentions the Parable of the Three Carts:^{14 15}

11 From extant documents, Kumārajīva focused on answering the possibility of arhats becoming Buddha; he did not address the Three Vehicles-One Vehicle relationship or the Parable of the Three Carts.

12 [Liang] Huijiao, *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, T50, p. 368b.

13 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun*, T34, p. 380a.

14 [Liang] Sengyou, ed., *Chu sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集, T55, p. 57a.

15 [Eastern Jin] Sengzhao, *Zhao lun* 肇論, T45, p. 159c. There is debate about the authorship of the *Niepan wuming lun*; this article follows the traditional attribution to Sengzhao.

“The *Lotus Sūtra* says: The first great path has no two destinations. I, through expedient means, for the indolent, distinguish and teach three within the One Vehicle path. The three carts escaping the burning house is precisely this matter. Because all escape birth and death, they are equally called unconditioned; because what they ride differs, there are three names. Unifying their destination, there is only one.”

The One Vehicle and Three Vehicles are essentially no different; all can achieve liberation from birth and death. It is only because of different pedagogical arrangements that there are distinctions of Three Vehicles. Therefore, Sengzhao should also be classified with the Three-Vehicle School.

(2) Sengrui

Sengrui was Kumārajīva’s most important translation assistant, highly valued by Kumārajīva, and listed among the “Four Sages” and “Eight Outstanding Ones,” holding a “leading” position.^{16 17} Sengrui wrote the “Postface to the *Lotus Sūtra*.” His distinctive approach was to compare the *Lotus Sūtra* with the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*. He held that although the *Prajñāpāramitā* “reaches the utmost in profundity” and “encompasses everything in its greatness,” nevertheless “all take responsive transformation as fundamental... As for transformation through skillful means, although it broadly awakens beings, it is insufficient regarding the true substance—all belong to the *Lotus*.”

This shows Sengrui is closer to “other-emptiness” rather than “self-emptiness,” not deeply aligned with Mādhyamika thought. However, Sengrui does not elevate the *Lotus* while denigrating the *Prajñāpāramitā*; he harmonizes the two, using the *Prajñāpāramitā*’s thought of emptiness to explain the *Lotus*. Another distinctive feature is that he does not consider the unification of the Three Vehicles into One the most important doctrine. He regards the ideas of the Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment in the distant past, the Buddha’s immeasurable lifespan, and emanation bodies as most important—already containing the embryonic form of the later “origin teaching” and “trace teaching” division.

(3) Zhu Daosheng

Among extant Chinese *Lotus Sūtra* commentaries, the *Lotus Sūtra Commentary* by Zhu Daosheng, “the Sage of Nirvāṇa,” is the earliest. This commentary was completed two years before Daosheng’s death, in the ninth year of Yuanjia (432), representing his mature thought.¹⁸

1. He interprets the Three Vehicles and One Vehicle through expedient means and reality. In explaining the three carts parable, Daosheng says: “The Buddha’s transformation operates among humans; the Small Vehicle follows a teacher—these two are compared to ox and goat, which are things of the human realm. Pratyekabuddhas neither transform others nor follow teachers, so they are compared to deer.”¹⁹ The Three Vehicles are merely expedient means, provisional rather than real: “Suddenly hearing of the beauty of the three carts, their hearts surely delight in receiving them—this is not real teaching; it is called expedient means.”²⁰

16 [Sui] Jizang, *Zhongguan lun shu* 中觀論疏, T42, p. 1a.

17 [Liang] Sengyou, ed., *Chu sanzang jiji*, T55, p. 57b.

18 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu* 法華經疏, X27, p. 6c.

19 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 6c.

20 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 4a.

Daosheng calls the Three Vehicles “concealing traces,” while the *Lotus* is “true correctness,” the “real one”: “In the past, concealing traces in the Three Vehicles, the multitude thought this was it. Now wishing to reveal the real one, showing them the true correctness.”²¹ From the perspective of expedient means and reality, Daosheng strongly disparages the “expedient,” even calling it directly “false,” while only the real is “beautiful”: “What is called breaking the falseness of the three to accomplish the beauty of the one is called true reality.”

2. The relationship between expedient means and reality is closely connected to his concept of “principle” (*li* 理). Daosheng’s concept of “principle” is his core concept, a distinctive development of his thought system. Daosheng’s “principle” has three characteristics: permanent truth, omnipresence, and uniqueness. Although these three characteristics may not entirely accord with Buddhist scriptures, they align very well with Chinese cultural tradition and the thinking patterns of his contemporaries.²²

Daosheng similarly interprets the *Lotus* through the concept of principle: “Having said the Three Vehicles are expedient means, now clarify that it is one. The Buddha is the ultimate one; ‘one’ expresses emergence. If principle could have three, the sage could also emerge as three. But there is no three in principle—only the wonderful one.”²³ The One Buddha Vehicle corresponds to principle; both represent uniqueness and the absence of opposition.²⁴

3. The Great Vehicle is the Buddha Vehicle. Although Daosheng emphasizes that the Three Vehicles are expedient and false while the One Vehicle is real and beautiful, he does not consider the One Buddha Vehicle and the Great Vehicle among the Three Vehicles to be two different things. Based on the scriptural text, Daosheng clearly states that the Three Vehicles are Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha, and Bodhisattva.^{25 26} The so-called Great Vehicle or Bodhisattva Vehicle is “the practice toward buddhahood.” The Great Vehicle’s theory is broad and deep, capable of liberating from the suffering of *samsāra*; only bodhisattvas can study it.²⁷

Why then distinguish between the Bodhisattva Vehicle and the Buddha Vehicle? This comes from the different degrees of realization of “principle” by bodhisattvas and buddhas: “bodhisattvas have not exhausted principle” while “buddhas have completely exhausted principle.” Therefore, the unification of the Three into One actually means abandoning the Small Vehicles to enter the Great Vehicle.^{28 29} In sum, Daosheng belongs to the “Three-Vehicle School” rather than the “Four-Vehicle School”—there is no independent Buddha Vehicle apart from the Great Vehicle.

21 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 1b.

22 Fu Xinyi, ‘Zhu Daosheng chanti chengfo shuo xinlun,’ *Zhexue yanjiu* 2014, no. 6, p. 111.

23 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, pp. 4c-5a.

24 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 1c. Sometimes Daosheng expresses negation of uniqueness, such as ‘Having neither two nor three, the one also departs’ (X27, p. 5a). But this expresses the non-oppositional nature of the One Vehicle principle from the negative side.

25 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 5b.

26 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 3c.

27 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 2c.

28 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 5b; p. 4b.

29 [Eastern Jin] Zhu Daosheng, *Fahua jing shu*, X27, p. 1c.

(4) Liu Qiu

Liu Qiu of the Southern Qi, together with more than ten renowned monks, combined the strengths of eight schools to compile the *Annotated Lotus Sūtra*. This book was lost long ago; now we can only see fragmentary passages in Jizang’s citations.^{30 31}

Liu Qiu also particularly elaborates on the One Vehicle from the perspective of non-opposition. The One Vehicle is “the ultimate one”; the true Wonderful Dharma does not fall into either extreme: “emptiness and existence are equally exhausted,” “emptiness and existence are equally obscured,” “neither three nor one.”³² Liu Qiu’s approach is similar to Sengrui and Huiguan in interpreting the *Lotus* through emptiness: “nameless and formless—this is the sūtra’s ultimate meaning.” This has considerable similarity with Jizang.³³

Overall, these *Lotus* commentators who had close interactions with Kumārajīva, except for Sengrui whose views are relatively ambiguous, can all be classified as the Three-Vehicle School, according relatively well with the original meaning of the scriptural text. “Under the outstanding translator Kumārajīva, most could probably correctly grasp the original meaning of the Sanskrit.”³⁴

The Early Four-Vehicle School

The emergence of the Four-Vehicle School represents a major turning point in the interpretation of the Parable of the Three Carts. Within the Four-Vehicle interpretation, the distinctively Chinese system of the Perfect Teaching gradually developed. Early proponents of the Four-Vehicle interpretation include Guangzhai Fayun and Nanyue Huisi.

(1) Guangzhai Fayun

Fayun, together with Zhizang (458-522) and Sengmin (467-527), was listed among the Three Great Dharma Masters of the Liang period. Jizang called him “unsurpassed in his time regarding the *Lotus*,” “the doctrine of the *Lotus*.” He can be regarded as the pinnacle of *Lotus* scholarship during the Northern and Southern Dynasties.^{35 36}

The importance of Fayun lies in his many pioneering views; later commentators, whether agreeing or disagreeing with him, could not bypass him. Both Zhiyi and Jizang critically inherited from Fayun. Moreover, the *Lotus Sūtra Record of Meaning* was written before the translation of the *Lotus Sūtra Treatise*, whereas later commentators were all influenced to varying degrees by that treatise.³⁷

30 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun*, T34, p. 363c.

31 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun*, T34, pp. 397a-b.

32 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun*, T34, p. 411b; *Fahua youyi*, T34, p. 638b.

33 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun*, T34, p. 381a.

34 [Japan] Hiraakawa Akira et al., *Hokke shisō* (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 2019), p. 195.

35 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun*, T34, pp. 363c, 377b.

36 [Sui] Jizang, *Fahua xuanlun*: ‘Guangzhai received the sūtra from Dharma Master Yin of Zhongxing Monastery.

Yin was originally from Shouchun, surnamed Zhu. In his youth, he traveled to Pengcheng and received treatise studies from Tandu. Next, he received Lotus studies from Huilong of Kuangshan.’ T34, p. 363c.

37 Although Vasubandhu’s *Fahua lun* speaks of the dharma-body, it is closer to the originally pure nirvāṇa

First, the Three Vehicles are “expedient means,” the One Vehicle is “true reality,” and they correspond to the Tathāgata’s two kinds of wisdom. “Having taught today’s One Vehicle principle of true reality, this then reveals by contrast that the former Three Vehicles were expedient means.”³⁸ Fayun tends to oppose “expedient means” and “true reality,” with a gap between expedient and real concerning whether or not they are ultimate.^{39 40}

As Fazang stated: “Dharma Master Yun of Guangzhai Monastery in the Liang period established the teaching of Four Vehicles, as in the *Lotus*—the three carts at the gate are the Three Vehicles; the great white ox-cart bestowed on the crossroads is the Fourth Vehicle. This is because the ox-cart at the gate, like the goat and deer carts, is also not obtained...”⁴¹

Second, he uses cause and effect to explain the *Lotus* doctrine. The character “wonderful” in the title means the One Vehicle is “wonderful cause and wonderful fruit,” while the Three Vehicles represent “former coarse cause and coarse fruit.”^{42 43} In this way, the One Vehicle has specific content different from the Three Vehicles and a preliminary independent status.

Third, the One Buddha Vehicle stands independently outside the Three Vehicles. This makes Fayun the first “Four-Vehicle” proponent in extant literature and indeed in history.^{44 45 46 47}

However, Fayun’s Four-Vehicle position is still in an immature form, or can be said to be in a transitional stage between Three Vehicles and Four Vehicles. In sum, under Fayun’s conception of expedient means and reality—the Three Vehicles are expedient while the One Vehicle is real—the real One Vehicle cannot be equated with the expedient Great Vehicle among the Three Vehicles. It has independent status and concrete content.⁴⁸

(2) Nanyue Huisi

Nanyue Huisi had deep faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, as seen in his “Text of Establishing Vows.” His specialized work on the *Lotus* is the *Meaning of the Practice of Ease and Joy in the Lotus Sūtra*, developing his understanding of the “Chapter on the Practice of Ease and Joy.”

First, he explicitly interprets the One Vehicle through *tathāgatagarbha*. Huisi says: “What

of self-nature in Yogācāra thought, not *tathāgatagarbha* thought. However, in Northern teachers’ interpretations, it was often explained through *tathāgatagarbha* theory. See Hu Yao, ‘Guangzhai Fayun yanjiu,’ doctoral dissertation, Sichuan University, 2010; Feng Zixiang, ‘Dunhuang yijuan Nanbeichao Lidu fashi Fahua yiji jiejing sixiang yanjiu,’ Fayun 2022, no. 2.

38 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji* 法華經義記, T33, p. 592a.

39 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*: ‘The former explains expedient wisdom, which is opening the gate of expedient means; the latter explains real wisdom, which is revealing the characteristic of true reality.’ T33, p. 593b.

40 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, p. 593a.

41 [Tang] Fazang, *Huayan jing tanxuan ji* 華嚴經探玄記, T35, p. 111b.

42 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, pp. 573b-574a.

43 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, pp. 572c-573a.

44 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, p. 604b.

45 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, p. 619a.

46 The scriptures have two theories of seventh or eighth stage; see Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra, T25, p. 571a; Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, T16, pp. 489c-490a; Śrīmālā Sūtra, T12, p. 221c. Fayun takes the eighth-stage theory; see *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, p. 580b.

47 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, p. 621c.

48 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, p. 572c.

is called One Vehicle? All sentient beings, through the *tathāgatagarbha*, are ultimately eternally at ease and joyful.” “All sentient beings are fully endowed with the dharma-body treasury, identical with Buddha, without difference.”^{49 50}

The interpretation of the *Lotus* through *tathāgatagarbha* thought arose early in China but was not accepted by early commentators. Huirui once mentioned a view that treats the *Lotus* as scriptural evidence that all sentient beings can become Buddha, against which Huirui gently argued.⁵¹ None of Kumārajīva’s disciples gave a clearly *tathāgatagarbha* interpretation of the *Lotus*; they were closer to the Emptiness School.⁵²

But the most important reason for Huisi’s interpretation is his own contemplative experience. When Zhiyi had doubts about the *Sutra of Golden Light*’s teaching that “one mind contains ten thousand practices,” Huisi said: “Your earlier doubt—this is merely the meaning of the *Prajñāpāramitā*’s sequential approach, not yet the *Lotus*’s perfect and sudden purport. In a past summer, through bitter discipline contemplating this, in a single thought in the later night suddenly all dharmas arose. I have personally realized this; do not trouble yourself with doubt.”⁵³

Second, based on this foundation, Huisi distinguishes between dull-faculty bodhisattvas and sharp-faculty bodhisattvas. Sharp-faculty bodhisattvas are “not practicing sequentially, nor eliminating afflictions”; “one mind, one study, all fruits are complete together—accomplished simultaneously, not entering sequentially.” From the perspective of not relying on sequence, this is called “One Vehicle.”^{54 55}

Huisi should be considered the true founder of the Four-Vehicle School. Combining his own contemplative experience, he further polarized the relationship between expedient means and reality, distinguishing sharp-faculty bodhisattvas from dull-faculty bodhisattvas. Through Zhiyi’s propagation, later Four-Vehicle proponents abandoned Fayun’s path and continued forward on the path Huisi had opened.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the earliest *Lotus* commentators were all Three-Vehicle proponents, very likely because they mostly studied under Kumārajīva and had a relatively accurate understanding of the *Lotus*’s original meaning. The Four-Vehicle School emerged because of temporal distance; through discovering the interpretive space in the Chinese text, they elaborated their own Buddhist thought. The interpretive modes of the Three-Vehicle and Four-Vehicle Schools might be compared to “I annotate the classics” versus “the classics annotate me.”

Fayun represents the crucial turning point from Three Vehicles to Four Vehicles. He strengthened the opposition between expedient means and reality and endowed them with concrete and detailed content, thereby preliminarily establishing the One Vehicle’s

49 [Chen] Huisi, *Fahua jing anlexing yi* 法華經安樂行義, T46, pp. 698a-b.

50 [Chen] Huisi, *Zhufa wuzheng sanmei famen* 諸法無諍三昧法門, T46, p. 632b.

51 [Liang] Sengyou, ed., *Chu sanzang ji ji*, T55, pp. 42a-b.

52 [Liang] Fayun, *Fahua jing yiji*, T33, pp. 603b-c, 621b-c.

53 [Tang] Daoxuan, *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳, T50, pp. 563a-b.

54 [Chen] Huisi, *Fahua jing anlexing yi*, T46, p. 698a.

55 [Chen] Huisi, *Fahua jing anlexing yi*, T46, p. 698c.

independent status. Building on this foundation, Huisi used his own contemplative experience and his clearly articulated tathāgatagarbha theory to open the second path of the Four-Vehicle School.

Why did the transformation from Three Vehicles to Four Vehicles occur? First, parables themselves have multiple interpretive possibilities. Second, endowing the One Vehicle with independent status and concrete content different from the Three Vehicles. If we trace back to Indian Mahāyāna thought, the “greatness” of Mahāyāna has two interpretive directions: inclusive greatness and excellence greatness. As the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* says: “Mahāyāna is vast; all vehicles and paths enter Mahāyāna... The great ocean can receive all streams because of its vastness.”⁵⁶

Third, the continual polarization of the relationship between expedient means and reality. Fayun’s interpretive consciousness was deeply influenced by the phrase “opening the gate of expedient means to reveal the characteristic of true reality,” and “clearly, consciously or unconsciously, strengthened the opposition between ‘opening the gate of expedient means’ and ‘revealing the characteristic of true reality.’”^{57 58}

From a broader perspective, the *Lotus Sūtra* phrases “opening the gate of expedient means to reveal the characteristic of true reality” and “straightforwardly abandoning expedient means” have not only Buddhist doctrinal significance but also hermeneutical significance. “In the era of Wei-Jin and Northern-Southern Dynasties Chinese Buddhist scriptural hermeneutics, especially in *Lotus Sūtra* hermeneutics, this translated phrase exerted unimaginably important influential effects.”⁵⁹

The continual polarization of the relationship between expedient means and reality influenced religious practice: naturally, one would choose the good and beautiful real rather than the artificial and false expedient, choose quick attainment of buddhahood rather than kalpas of cultivation, choose the perfect and sudden rather than the separated and sequential. Thus, in the dogmatized sectarian Buddhism that followed, there gradually formed the tendency to disdain the Three Vehicles and exclusively venerate the One Vehicle that is “purely perfect and uniquely wonderful”—leading Chinese Buddhism to increasingly lose the six pāramitās and ten thousand practices of the bodhisattva path along with the stages of cultivation.

But reality and expedient means were not originally opposed. In Kumārajīva’s translation, “reality” refers to “the bodhi realized by the Buddha,” belonging to realized dharma, while skillful means “is precisely what leads to ‘reality,’” belonging to taught dharma—no opposition exists between them.

Perhaps we should return to the reminder of the *Lotus* translator Kumārajīva: “The *Lotus Sūtra* is the secret treasury of all Buddhas; one cannot use this meaning to challenge other sūtras. If one fixedly adheres to the *Lotus* as definitive, the Śrāvaka Tripiṭaka and other Mahāyāna sūtras would be set aside unused... If so, only the *Lotus* alone would be trustworthy; all other sūtras would be false. Therefore, one should not be attached to one sūtra and

disbelieve all other sūtras and dharmas.”⁶⁰

If one is attached to one scripture as supreme, considering the teachings of other scriptures non-ultimate, even setting aside other scriptures, this ultimately leads to the predicament of self-enclosure and self-exaltation without self-awareness. Nearly 1,600 years later, Kumārajīva’s voice remains powerfully resonant. This is also the insight that the evolution of the Parable of the Three Carts interpretations brings us.

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56 [Later Qin] Kumārajīva, trans., *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* 大智度論, T25, p. 86a.

57 Cheng Gongrang, Fodian Hanyi, *lijie yu quanshi yanjiu* 佛典漢譯、理解與詮釋研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2017), p. 347.

58 Cheng Gongrang, Fodian Hanyi, *lijie yu quanshi yanjiu*, pp. 346-347.

59 Cheng Gongrang, Fodian Hanyi, *lijie yu quanshi yanjiu*, p. 331.

60 [Later Qin] Kumārajīva, *Jiumoluoshi fashi dayi* 鳩摩羅什法師大義, T45, p. 133b.