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Utopia as Process in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*: A Narrative Analysis and Its Comparative Implications

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Abstract

Recent scholarship in both Buddhist and Christian contexts has increasingly explored connections among utopia, the Pure Land, and the Kingdom of God, reinterpreting them as dynamic, this-worldly processes. Yet the role of narrative form in articulating such processual understandings remains underexplored. This study examines how the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (Ru fajie pin 入法界品) constructs the bodhisattva path through narrative structure, with particular focus on the episode of the Night Goddess Vāsantī. Using a narratological framework, the analysis integrates Seymour Chatman's distinction between Story and Discourse with four analytical categories—Words, Dialogue, Actions, and Narration—adapted from Robert Alter's work on biblical narrative. Close reading demonstrates that doctrinal meaning emerges through patterned interactions among perception, speech, action, and retrospective narration. Within this configuration, *samsāra* is presented as a closed and hazardous realm, while encounters with spiritual friends function as transformative interventions that redirect the practitioner's trajectory. The *avadāna* structure further situates present attainment within an extended causal continuum, highlighting the reproducibility of the path. The study argues that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* presents a narrative model of practice in which utopia is not a fixed destination but an ongoing process enacted through a sequence of encounters. From a comparative perspective, this model offers a conceptual basis for Buddhist–Christian dialogue by highlighting relational and processual dimensions of transformation as they emerge in discussions of utopia, the Pure Land, and the Kingdom of God, without presupposing doctrinal equivalence.

Keywords: *Gaṇḍavyūha*; narrative analysis; *kalyāṇamitra* (spiritual friend); utopia; Buddhist–Christian dialogue



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1. Introduction

In cross-disciplinary discussions of religion and literature, the classical Western notion of “utopia,” the Christian idea of the “Kingdom of God,” and the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of the “Pure Land” (淨土; *sukhāvatī*) are often understood as static, idealized spatial formations. Western intellectual history has frequently criticized utopia as a fixed “blueprint” for a perfected yet ultimately closed society. A similar tendency appears in Christian thought, where the Kingdom of God has been conceived either as a transcendent reality beyond the world or as a deferred eschatological fulfilment, rather than as a present mode of existence (Bolt 2016, pp. 264–68). In a comparable manner, the Pure Land in East Asian Buddhism is frequently imagined as a paradise-like destination attained after death (Brons 2022, p. 45).

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged such static conceptions, reinterpreting utopia, the Pure Land, and the Kingdom of God not as fixed, transcendent realms but as processes enacted within the present world. This reorientation is particularly evident in utopian theory, where the shift toward a processual understanding of utopia is deeply indebted to Ernst Bloch's notion of "educated hope" and further elaborated through approaches that foreground desire, critique, and the disruption of closed ideological systems (see Levitas 2013, pp. 4–6, 113–15, 119–21). Building on these foundations, Ruth Levitas reconceptualizes utopia as a method—an ongoing process oriented toward the "imaginary reconstitution of society" and the "education of desire," rather than as a projection toward a predetermined future (Levitas 2013, pp. xi, xvii).

Modern Christian thought exhibits a comparable tendency. As discussed by John Bolt (2016, pp. 259, 269–71), H. Richard Niebuhr's historical analysis indicates, theological emphasis gradually shifted from a transcendent Kingdom of God toward a more immanent vision of a "kingdom on earth." This tendency was further developed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Christian social thought, which linked the Kingdom of God to ethical and social transformation and emphasized its realization within historical conditions.¹ In contemporary theology, Jürgen Moltmann provides a systematic articulation of this development. His framework of "transformative eschatology" reconceives the Kingdom of God as a dynamic and anticipatory process unfolding within history and advances an "ethics of hope" oriented toward transforming present conditions of suffering and injustice (Moltmann 1996, p. 229; Moltmann 2012, pp. 180–86).

Within Buddhist contexts, this reorientation takes shape in both modern reform movements and classical exegetical traditions. Humanistic and engaged Buddhism reinterpret the Pure Land in explicitly this-worldly terms (Brons 2022, p. 59). Thinkers such as Taixu (太虛, 1890–1947 CE) and Yinshun (印順, 1906–2005 CE) describe it not as a postmortem destination but as a project to be realized within the human world (Jones 1999; Ritzinger 2017; see also Brons 2022, pp. 80–85). Although such interpretations are often framed as a modern paradigm shift, scholarship suggests that their conceptual foundations are already embedded in classical Chinese Mahāyāna thought. Chinese patriarchs such as Zhiyi (智顗, 538–597 CE) and later exegetes draw extensively on texts including the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* to challenge the notion of a distant "other shore." Gene Reeves (2002) characterizes the *Lotus Sūtra* as "radically world-affirming," while Brons (2022, p. 61) argues that Zhiyi develops this orientation into the claim that the present world itself constitutes the Buddha's tranquil Pure Land. Similarly, Paul Williams (2009, p. 218) observes that Chinese exegetes interpret the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* as relocating the Pure Land from a transcendent postmortem realm to a condition of present realization, emphasizing that "the real way to attain a Pure Land is to purify one's own mind." In this sense, the modern project of realizing the Pure Land within the human world may be understood as a reformulation of doctrinal possibilities already inherent in Mahāyāna literature, particularly its nondual and this-worldly orientation.

This retrospective logic is likewise operative in contemporary Christian theology, particularly in the writings of Moltmann (1996, 2012). Drawing on foundational texts, Moltmann develops an explicitly this-worldly eschatology that moves beyond the medieval focus on the immortality of the soul. He foregrounds the "resurrection of the body" in the Apostles' Creed and invokes the prophetic vision of a "new heaven and a new earth" in the Book of Isaiah (Moltmann 1996, pp. 58–71, 260). Within this framework, the Kingdom of God emerges as a transformative process unfolding within historical existence. Moltmann further anchors this view in the Lord's Prayer, interpreting its central petition—"on earth as it is in heaven"—as a call to fidelity to the world rather than withdrawal from it (Moltmann 2012, pp. 289–90).

Taken together, these developments reveal a significant cross-traditional convergence. In both Buddhist and Christian contexts, seemingly transcendent ideals are reinterpreted through a return to foundational texts, thereby reframing them as processual modes of transformation within the present world. This convergence does not imply doctrinal equivalence; rather, it opens a space for Buddhist–Christian dialogue in which each tradition may be interpreted in light of the other through shared analytical concerns. From this perspective, the issue is not whether these traditions articulate identical notions of utopia, but how they differently configure the relationship between transcendence, practice, and transformation. This convergence is well established at the conceptual level, but its articulation at the level of narrative form remains insufficiently examined.

As Friedrich Grohmann (2002) observes, the Huayan tradition diverges significantly from traditional Pure Land models centred on rebirth in a distant realm. In addition to affirming transcendent Buddha lands, it emphasizes the bodhisattva’s active participation in realizing a pure land through ongoing practice within the world. For this reason, the present study focuses on the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (Ru fajie pin 入法界品), the concluding chapter of the *Avatamsaka-sūtra*, which recounts Sudhana’s pilgrimage through fifty-three encounters with spiritual friends (善知識; *kalyāṇamitras*). Unlike texts that primarily discuss the doctrinal foundations of a this-worldly Pure Land, its narrative structure provides a particularly suitable framework for examining how an ideal realm is realized through ongoing practice.

To analyze this process, the study adopts a two-tiered narratological framework. At the macro level, it draws on Seymour Chatman’s (1978, p. 19) distinction between Story (*histoire*) and Discourse (*discours*) to differentiate narrative events from their modes of presentation. At the micro level, it employs four analytical categories—Words, Dialogue, Actions, and Narration—adapted by Joel Tatelman (2013) from Robert Alter (1981), as heuristic tools for close reading. Originally developed within the context of biblical narrative analysis, this framework also provides a productive basis for examining Buddhist narrative structures from a comparative perspective.² As Alter (1981, p. x) suggests, narrative analysis offers a means of uncovering the underlying “moral vision” of a text by showing how doctrinal ideas are articulated through concrete interactions such as dialogue and action. Although the Bible and Buddhist scriptures emerge from very different religious and historical contexts, narratological approaches developed in biblical studies provide useful tools for examining how religious meaning is generated through narrative form. In particular, Alter’s emphasis on close reading highlights recurring narrative features such as repetition, characterization, and patterned encounters. Applying these analytical perspectives to the *Gaṇḍavyūha* not only brings greater attention to its narrative structure but also demonstrates how certain narrative patterns may operate across distinct religious traditions. Such an approach contributes both to Buddhist narrative studies and to broader comparative investigations of religious literature. The analysis thus focuses on how encounters are narratively organized and how doctrinal meaning emerges through that structure.

As Levitas (2013, pp. 153–55) argues, utopia operates not as a fixed architectural blueprint but as a set of partial representations requiring analytical reconstruction—what she terms the “archeological mode.” Similarly, the Huayan tradition understands the realization of the Pure Land not merely as the attainment of an ideal realm but as an ongoing process of transformation realized through practice within the world. Accordingly, the present study reconceptualizes the bodhisattva path in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* as “utopia as process”—a continuous and reproducible mode of practice. In this sense, Levitas’s archeological mode serves as a heuristic lens for reconstructing how such possibilities are configured within the narrative. More specifically, the episode of the Night Goddess Vāsantī (婆珊婆演底) serves as a focal case through which such reconstruction may be undertaken. This episode was selected because it exemplifies the recurring narrative structure found

throughout the *Gaṇḍavyūha* while remaining sufficiently self-contained for close narratological analysis. Since the *Gaṇḍavyūha* unfolds through a series of encounters rather than a systematic plan, this episode provides a site for analyzing how transformation is structured within specific relational contexts.

From this perspective, utopia is understood as a relational process articulated through two interdependent dimensions: “Realm” and “Encounter.” The former denotes the spatial, narrative, and epistemic field within which existence is configured, encompassing both the closed and perilous domain of the mundane world (*saṃsāra*)—conditioned by cognitive and perceptual distortions—and its orientation toward the “City of Omniscience” (一切智城; *sarvajñatāgocara*) as articulated in the bodhisattva’s salvific aspiration. The latter refers to transformative intervention enacted through encounters with spiritual friends. Through such encounters, the constraints of the Realm are reconfigured, allowing liberation to emerge as an ongoing process rather than a fixed destination. On this basis, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* may be read as presenting a reproducible narrative model of practice in which transformation unfolds through a continuing chain of encounters with spiritual friends.

The Chinese canon preserves multiple translations of the *Avatamsaka-sūtra*, most notably Buddhahadra’s (佛陀跋陀羅, 359–429 CE) sixty-fascicle version (T09, no. 278) and Śikṣānanda’s (實叉難陀, 652–710 CE) eighty-fascicle version (T10, no. 279). The latter became the standard text for later Huayan scholarship and exerted significant influence on East Asian Buddhist thought. Accordingly, the present study is based primarily on Śikṣānanda’s translation, while Buddhahadra’s version is consulted where textual differences are relevant. Unless otherwise specified, all citations and analyses draw on the Chinese text, with reference to the Sanskrit version (Vaidya 1967) where relevant. Thomas Cleary’s (1993) English translation, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, is consulted selectively as a secondary reference.

2. Words: The Lexical Landscape of the Realm

The utopian transformation articulated in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* presupposes a prior narrative construction of the mundane world as a bounded field of existence. This construction is established at the lexical level. Significantly, at the outset of his quest—immediately after receiving instruction from Mañjuśrī (文殊師利)—Sudhana (善財), whose journey structures the narrative, articulates his initial understanding of *saṃsāra* through a metaphor of enclosure and fortification: “Existence serves as the city wall, pride as the battlement; the various states of being are the gates, and the water of craving is the moat” (T10, no. 279, p. 332c17–18). Through this figurative language, the mundane world is configured as a closed and hostile Realm, structured by a vocabulary of confinement, obstruction, and entrapment.

As Douglas Osto (2008, pp. 44–47) has shown, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is structured by recurring narrative formulas that organize Sudhana’s encounters with spiritual friends.³ While these formulas provide overall narrative coherence, close reading shows that the approach formula is lexically adapted to the specific identity of each spiritual friend. In this episode, Sudhana’s movement from the Earth Goddess (安住地神; *Sthāvarā prthidevatā*) to the domain of a night goddess (*rātridevatā*) marks a shift in setting, registered in the vocabulary that frames the environment. In the two major Chinese translations of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, *rātridevatā* is rendered as “night-deva” (夜天) or “night-deity” (夜神), a designation that later received sustained exegetical attention within the Huayan tradition. From the Tang period onward, commentators associate “night” with darkness (闇/暗; *andhakāra*) and obstruction (障; *āvaraṇa*), the latter referring both to cognitive misperception and to the inability to penetrate Buddhist doctrine.⁴

This association is reinforced within the narrative through a dense lexical field of obstruction. Darkness is presented not merely as a temporal condition but as an environment intensified by additional layers of concealment, including “heavy clouds” (密雲; *megha*), “dense mist” (重霧; *dhūma*), and the obscuration of celestial bodies, such that “the sun, moon, and stars are all concealed” (日、月、星宿並皆昏蔽; *candrādityajyotirgaṇarahitāyām*) (see T10, no. 279, p. 369b27; Vaidya 1967, p. 172). These expressions indicate not only the absence of light but the obstruction of vision itself, within which vision—and, by extension, knowledge—is impeded.

Within this sequence of encounters, Vāsantī introduces a distinct shift at the level of naming. While the category of “night (*rātri*)” establishes an environment defined by darkness and obstruction, the name Vāsantī marks a change in lexical orientation. Etymologically related to *vasanta* (“spring”) and the root $\sqrt{vas}$ (“to dwell”), the name introduces associations of emergence and renewal that contrast with the preceding conditions of obscurity, suggesting a movement toward generative transformation.⁵ This lexical patterning may be understood in terms of the *Leitwort* (thematic key-word), a device used to “enunciate and develop” underlying meanings in narrative (Alter 1981, p. 180). The groundwork for this thematic network is established at the very beginning of the episode.

When Sudhana first arrives at the city of Kapilavastu (迦毘羅城), the text specifies that he stands at a crossroads (*nagaraśrṅgātaka*) and that it is “just after the sun has set” (日沒未久; *acirāstamite sūrye*). These details introduce the *Leitwörter* of fading light and visual deprivation, which together define the epistemic condition of the scene: darkness follows the setting sun, and Sudhana “longs to see” (渴仰欲見; *darśanaparitṛṣṭa*) the spiritual friend (see T10, no. 279, p. 369a20–26; Vaidya 1967, p. 172; Cleary 1993, pp. 1284–85).⁶ The approach formula thus situates the encounter under conditions of visual deprivation and expectation, anticipating the subsequent emergence of light. This emphasis on seeing is developed further in Sudhana’s reflection, which turns to the acquisition of specific forms of vision through the spiritual friend. The narrative shifts from not seeing to the cultivation of seeing itself. The emphasis falls not on what is seen, but on how seeing is enabled through the spiritual friend:

... He conceived of the spiritual friend as a tathāgata and reflected further: through spiritual friends one gains the eye of universal knowledge, clearly perceiving the realms of all directions; through spiritual friends one gains vast understanding, comprehending all objects of cognition; through spiritual friends one gains the eye of concentration, observing all gateways of the Dharma; and through spiritual friends one gains the eye of wisdom, illuminating the ocean of Buddha-lands in the ten directions. 於善知識生如來想，復作是念：由善知識得周遍眼，普能明見十方境界；由善知識得廣大解，普能了達一切所緣；由善知識得三昧眼，普能觀察一切法門；由善知識得智慧眼，普能明照十方剎海。 (Adapted from Cleary 1993, p. 1285, with reference to T10, no. 279, p. 369a21–26).

Lexically, this passage is densely populated with terms of seeing, yet these do not denote ordinary sensory perception. Instead, the text enumerates a series of visual faculties—from the “eye of universal knowledge” (周遍眼; *samantajñānacakṣus*), through the “eye of concentration” (三昧眼; *samādhicakṣus*)⁷, to the “eye of great wisdom” (智慧眼; *mahājñānacakṣus*)—through which seeing is directed away from physical sight toward knowing, a shift already encoded in the compounds *jñāna* (“knowledge”) and *cakṣus* (“eye”). The narrative answers Sudhana’s explicit “longing to see” with the luminous manifestation of Vāsantī, whose body is described as radiantly displaying “all stars and constellations” (一切星宿炳然在體; *sarvatārāgrahanakṣatrajyotirgaṇapratibhāsaṃdarśanaśarīra*) (see T10, no. 279, p. 369a20–b1; Vaidya 1967, p. 171).

The contrast between the setting sun and the goddess's radiance marks a transition from the absence of light to its presence in the figure of the spiritual friend. Vision here functions not as a passive sensory act but as a cultivated form of knowing, a tendency also noted when verbs of vision extend to meanings of understanding (Sweetser 1990, p. 33). In this passage, Sudhana's longing to see is followed by the emergence of forms of vision that make such seeing possible. Andy Rotman's analysis of Buddhist visuality highlights the close relation between seeing and knowing: "epistemology and visuality are intertwined: showing/proving necessitates understanding, and understanding necessitates seeing" (Rotman 2009, p. 55). In this context, seeing gives rise to *śraddhā*, understood as trust directed toward a reliable speaker (Rotman 2009, p. 42). In this episode, the goddess's luminous manifestation provides the conditions under which such seeing occurs. By witnessing this display, Sudhana is led to place trust in the spiritual friend.

As Alter observes, in biblical narrative, setting often prepares the scene, while meaning is carried forward through dialogue (Alter 1981, pp. 92–93). A comparable transition occurs in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, where the emphasis on seeing gives rise to verbal articulation, marking a movement from the capacity to see (Words) to the formulation of the quest in speech. This shift leads into the next stage of the narrative, articulated through Dialogue.

3. Dialogue: The Trigger of Encounter

Although Sudhana provides the narrative continuity of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, his role in the episode of Vāsantī is minimal. He does not elaborate on a distinctive perspective or display psychological development. Instead, his speech is limited to a set of recurring questions that structure the encounter. These questions function as points of transition, marking the shift from visual description to verbal exchange. The encounter is initiated by a standardized question that redirects the narrative from seeing to speaking, introducing the doctrinal content that follows:

"Noble One! I have set my mind on supreme perfect enlightenment. I hope to rely on spiritual friends to obtain all qualities of the Tathāgatas. Please show me the path of omniscience, that I may follow it and attain the stage of the Ten Powers."
聖者！我已先發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心。我心冀望依善知識，獲諸如來功德法藏。唯願示我一切智道，我行於中，至十力地！（Adapted from Cleary 1993, p. 1285, with reference to T10, no. 279, p. 369b11–14)

This question corresponds to the "question formula" identified by Osto (2008, p. 44). In particular, the request "please show me the path of omniscience" functions as a narrative gateway, through which Vāsantī's account of bodhisattva liberation is subsequently articulated. A similar function appears in the subsequent exchange, which redirects the narrative from the present to the past: "How long ago did you set your mind on supreme perfect enlightenment? How long ago did you attain this liberation, by the attainment of which you have come to perform all beneficial actions in this way?" 汝發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心，為幾時耶？得此解脫，其已久如，乃能如是饒益眾生？ (T10, no. 279, p. 370c25–27). This question initiates the *avadāna*, shifting the narrative from the account of present attainment to the recounting of past causes and prior encounters.

In both instances, Sudhana's questions organize the movement of the narrative, marking transitions from visual manifestation to doctrinal explanation and from present attainment to retrospective narration, without foregrounding his own subjectivity. This consistency reflects not a limitation but a feature of the narrative form. Tatelman (2013, p. 11) notes that *avadāna* literature often presents narrative as a vehicle for progressive instruction (*anupūrvikathā*). In this setting, dialogue functions less as an interpersonal exchange than as a means of presenting doctrine.

In ancient sacred narrative, as Alter's analysis demonstrates, stylized and repetitive speech serves to foreground what is "deemed essential" (Alter 1981, pp. 92–93). Sudhana's formulaic questions can thus be understood as a repeated request for Dharma. By minimizing psychological detail, his speech directs attention to the content of the response. The exchange follows a clear sequence: the question articulates the aspiration for omniscience, and the answer presents the corresponding teaching in the form of the night goddess's liberation.

4. Actions: Soteriological Intervention and the Opening of the Realm

In narratological accounts of biblical literature, actions are rarely included for "sheer mimetic pleasure" or merely to advance the plot. Such narratives are largely devoid of "free motifs," so that each reported action or gesture is "fraught with consequence" (Alter 1981, p. 79). This narratological principle can be observed in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, where Vāsantī's actions do not simply carry the narrative forward but function as concrete interventions within the closed Realm of darkness. In narrative form, they present the operation of skillful means (方便; *upāya*) that characterizes bodhisattva activity.

Before Vāsantī offers any doctrinal explanation, the narrative establishes her efficacy through a striking visual display. As shown in the analysis of Words, the episode opens with a scenography of darkness; yet this setting is immediately disrupted by the dynamic activity Sudhana perceives within the goddess's own body. The text describes how, within each of her pores (毛孔; *romavivara*), Sudhana sees "images" (像; *pratibhāsa*) of sentient beings being liberated from evil destinies and perilous circumstances, reborn among humans or gods, or advancing toward the path of omniscience. These visions further include manifestations of diverse expedient means—appearing in physical form, expounding the Dharma, demonstrating bodhisattva conduct, and freely displaying liberative activity—through which sentient beings are brought to maturity (於其身上，一一毛孔皆現化度無量無數惡道眾生，令其免離險難之像……如是種種成熟眾生) (T10, no. 279, p. 369b1–9). From Sudhana's perspective, these acts of rescue are presented as directly perceptible. The encounter thus foregrounds the enactment of liberation prior to its verbal articulation. When Vāsantī later describes her interventions in doctrinal terms, she does not introduce new content, but renders explicit what has already been established at the level of perception.

With the lexical construction of "night" or "darkness" established as a Realm of obstruction, the narrative focus shifts from setting and speech to action. In biblical narrative, character is often revealed through action rather than descriptive elaboration (Alter 1981, pp. 114–15). In the case of the Night Goddess Vāsantī, this principle is reflected in the way her role is defined through actions that actively dispel the darkness described in the previous section. This shift is marked by her declaration of a specific bodhisattva liberation, presented as a gateway through which sentient beings are guided by the illumination of the Dharma that dispels the darkness afflicting them (菩薩破一切眾生癡暗法光明解脫; *sarvasattvatamovikiraṇadharmābhāsajagadvinayamukha bodhisattvavimokṣa*) (T10, no. 279, p. 369b17–18; Vaidya 1967, p. 172).

Although this liberation is framed as the "dispelling of darkness" (破癡暗), the narrative does not treat darkness as merely a visual deficiency. Rather, it presents darkness as a composite condition encompassing environmental obscurity and multiple forms of danger—spatial, social, and cognitive—that structure vulnerability within *samsāra*. This is made explicit in a passage describing the conditions of nocturnal peril (T10, no. 279, p. 369b25–c1; Vaidya 1967, p. 172), where beings are depicted as "entering the sea or traveling on land" (若入於海，若行於陸; *sāgaragatā ... sthālagatā*), traversing "mountains, forests, and wildernesses" (山林曠野; *parvatagatā ... aṭavikāntāragatā*), and wandering through various perilous places. They face threats posed by "ghosts and spirits" (鬼神; *bhūtasamgha*)

and “bandits” (盜賊; *taskara*), material deprivation marked by the absence of provisions (乏資糧; *annapānavirahitā*), and cognitive disorientation, becoming “confused about direction” (迷惑方隅; *digantaragatā ... sammuhyaṇti*) or “losing the road” (忘失道路; *mārgāntaragatā*). Ultimately, they are depicted as “panicked and terrified” (惴惶憂怖), unable to extricate themselves (不能自出; *vilayam āpadyante*).

Within this narrative logic, “night” functions not as a static atmosphere but as a field of peril that calls for intervention. Vāsantī responds through “various skillful means” (種種方便; *nānopāya*), deploying forms of rescue calibrated to the specific situations in which sentient beings are endangered.⁸ The act of liberation constitutes the decisive turning point of the narrative, and the text elaborates this core event through a series of differentiated manifestations. For beings endangered at sea, illumination alone is insufficient; Vāsantī appears as a pilot or navigator (船師; *kaivarta*) or transforms into a fish king or a horse king capable of conveying them safely to shore. In terrestrial contexts, where beings are trapped in wilderness or perilous terrain, she does not merely indicate a path but materializes as the necessary infrastructure itself, appearing as bridges (橋梁; *tīrtha*)⁹ or dwellings (舍宅; *bhavana*). In cases of social and emotional distress, particularly separation from loved ones (愛別離; *priyaviprayoga*), she assumes relational forms—parents, siblings, or spouses (父母、兄弟、配偶; *mātā, pitṛ, bhrātr, dāra*)—thereby restoring bonds rather than merely offering protection (see T10, no. 279, p. 369b18–c27; Vaidya 1967, pp. 172–73).

Beyond these situational dangers, the narrative extends Vāsantī’s salvific activity to deeper structures of attachment and delusion. For beings bound by craving for status, wealth, relationships, or habitation, she teaches the Dharma to induce detachment and to align them with the teaching. Likewise, she addresses cognitive and moral disorientation—beings lost in inverted views, karmic confusion, or destructive conduct—by manifesting the “light of great wisdom” (大智光明; *mahāprajñāloka*), correcting false perceptions and redirecting them toward the bodhisattva path. For those lost in the “thicket of views” (見稠林; *dr̥ṣṭigahana*), rescue no longer takes the form of physical support but of epistemic correction, through which ignorance is dispelled and orientation restored (see T10, no. 279, p. 369c28–370b9; Vaidya 1967, p. 173).

Vāsantī’s actions do not end with immediate relief. The narrative repeatedly stresses that each intervention culminates in an act of redirection (迴向), through which a particular rescue is extended into a universal soteriological aspiration. This pattern accords with Osto’s (2008, p. 46) observation that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* links concrete acts of rescue to the realization of liberation (*vimokṣa*). For example, when the text describes beings attached to villages and dwellings, immersed in darkness and afflicted by suffering (若有眾生樂著聚落，貪愛宅舍，常處黑暗，受諸苦者), Vāsantī responds on two levels. She first teaches the Dharma to induce detachment; she then “forms this thought” (作是念言), redirecting the efficacy of her action through a vow that all beings may abandon attachment to the “six loci” (六處), escape birth and death, and ultimately abide in the “City of Omniscience” (一切智城; *sarvajñatāgocara*)¹⁰ (see T10, no. 279, p. 369c23–27; Vaidya 1967, p. 173). Through this redirection, a provisional rescue from a physical dwelling is reconfigured as liberation from the “village of the six sense bases” (六處聚落; *ṣaḍāyatanagrāma*)¹¹, illustrating how each action functions as a form of *upāya* oriented toward enlightenment.

By means of this process, the category of Actions is retrospectively reconfigured. The physical night of the episode is disclosed as the “long night of *saṃsāra*” (生死長夜; *dīrghasaṃsārārātri*), while the concrete rescues from sea, wilderness, or peril are reinterpreted as forms of *upāya*. From this perspective, the site of encounter marks the moment at which the spiritual friend actively approaches the sentient being, transforming sites of danger into occasions for salvific engagement. The Encounter is thus not a passive meeting but a directed intervention, through which the closed Realm of darkness is opened toward

orientation, and the path toward the City of Omniscience is set in motion. Viewed in light of Levitas's conception of utopia as an ongoing process of reconstruction, such soteriological interventions may be understood as reconfiguring the conditions of saṃsāric existence, thereby opening new possibilities for liberation.

5. Retrospective Narration: Avadāna as Exemplary Path

Following the analysis of Actions, the narrative shifts from immediate intervention to retrospective articulation. This transition is structurally marked by the emergence of *avadāna*, a narrative mode that situates present attainment within a temporally extended causal framework. The Vāsantī episode offers a particularly clear instance of this process, in which the encounter is reconfigured through the narration of past lives.

5.1. Avadāna in the Vāsantī Episode

As indicated by Sudhana's formulaic inquiry, the transition to retrospective narration is structurally triggered within the dialogue itself. After witnessing Vāsantī's acts of rescue, he asks when she first generated the aspiration for enlightenment and how long she has abided in her liberation. This question redirects the narrative from the immediacy of present action to a temporally extended account, marking the shift from the "story of the present" (*pratyutpannavastu*) to the "story of the past" (*atītavastu*), and thereby grounding Vāsantī's present role as a spiritual instructor in a causal history.¹²

Retrospective narration has been widely recognized as a defining feature of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Jan Fontein characterizes these narratives as fully developed Mahāyāna *avadāna*, particularly in the accounts of female spiritual friends—such as the night goddesses, Gopā (瞿波), and Māyā (摩耶)—who explain how their present states of liberation are grounded in sustained cultivation across past lives. He further notes that these embedded narratives consistently depict a world populated by innumerable Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, are driven by devotion (*bhakti*), and culminate in assurances of future Buddhahood for those who generate the aspiration for enlightenment (Fontein 1981, p. 106).

Building on this line of analysis, Osto classifies these narrative segments as *avadāna* within the twelvefold taxonomy of Buddhist teachings and observes that they follow a standard narrative formula: an initial specification of cosmic and historical coordinates, a gradual exposition of the protagonist's background and spiritual condition, and a concluding act of identification aligning past and present identities (Osto 2008, p. 99). The Vāsantī episode conforms to this general model while instantiating it in a more recursive form. Two past identities are narrated, and the *samavadhāna* (juncture/identification) is functionally differentiated: identification proper aligns the past agent with the present speaker, while a directive function connects the past spiritual friend to the future guide. Through this differentiation, the episode renders Encounter as a temporally extended pedagogical process rather than a single moment of revelatory closure. The structure unfolds as follows.

5.1.1. Past Identity 1: The Primordial Cause (Generation of the Vow)

In the Tranquil Light (寂靜光; *Praśāntaprabha*) eon, Vāsantī appears as Queen Moon of Understanding of Right (法慧月; *Dharmamaticandrā*). During the night, she is awakened by the Night Goddess Pure Moonlight (淨月; *Suviśuddhacandrābhā*), who leads her to pay homage and present offerings to the Buddha Supreme Thunder of All Dharmas (一切法雷音王; *Sarvadharmānigarjitarāja*) and his assembly. Through this encounter, she performs acts of offering and generates the aspiration for supreme perfect enlightenment (發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提意; *anuttarāṃ samyakṣambodhim abhisamprasthitā*).

Structurally, this episode establishes the primordial cause underlying Vāsantī's present attainment. The encounter functions as the condition for the generation of the vow, situating her liberation within a trajectory initiated through devotion and offering. At the conclusion of the narration, the text performs a partial act of identification (*samavadhāna*): the queen of the Tranquil Light eon is revealed to be the present Vāsantī. This identificatory move secures the continuity of the speaking subject across temporal distance and establishes the legitimacy of her present role as a spiritual instructor, while withholding the identity of the guiding night goddess, thereby leaving the causal chain structurally open (see T10, no. 279, p. 370c27–371a21; Vaidya 1967, pp. 178–79).

5.1.2. Past Identity 2: Maturation (Attainment of Liberation)

Following this initial identification, the narrative introduces a second past identity marking the stage of maturation. In the Free from Dust (離垢; *Asokaviraja*) eon, Vāsantī is reborn as the daughter of a distinguished householder, bearing the name Light of Wisdom (妙慧光明; *Prajñāvabhāsaśrī*). She is again approached by the same spiritual friend, now manifesting as the Night Goddess Light of Purified Eyes (清淨眼; *Viśuddhanetrābhā*). As a result of this renewed encounter, she gains access to the Buddha's teaching and attains the specific bodhisattva liberation that she exercises in the narrative present (see T10, no. 279, p. 371a21–b22; Vaidya 1967, p. 179).

Only after completing the narration of her past identities does Vāsantī shift from retrospective narration to formulaic self-limitation. Declaring that she knows only this particular bodhisattva liberation—a method of guiding the world by the light of truth that dispels the darkness of sentient beings—and that she cannot fully expound the practices, virtues, spheres, or freedoms of bodhisattvas perfected in infinite vows, she explicitly circumscribes the scope of her knowledge.

Within this conventional gesture, she then redirects Sudhana's quest through the standard "go and ask" formula, instructing him to approach a night goddess residing at the site of enlightenment in Magadha (摩竭提), the Night Goddess Pure Radiant Light of Universal Profundity (普德淨光; *Samantagambhīraśrīvimalaprabhā*). Crucially, this directive serves a dual function: it advances the narrative while also completing the structure established by the preceding *avadāna*. The next teacher is identified not only as a future guide but as the agent of Vāsantī's own initial awakening. As the text states: "It was through her that I was caused to generate the mind for supreme perfect enlightenment, and she has encouraged me time and again through the wondrous Dharma." (我本從其發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心，常以妙法開悟於我; *anuttarāyāṃ samyaksambodhau cit-tamutpādītā, punaḥ punaś ca saṃcoditā*) (see T10, no. 279, p. 371c5–8; Vaidya 1967, p. 180; Cleary 1993, p. 1293). In this way, the "go and ask" formula does not merely propel the narrative forward. It links the present encounter to its causal origin, directing Sudhana to the very source of Vāsantī's own spiritual formation and thereby extending the chain of encounter across temporal layers.

5.2. Retrospective Evidence: Patterned Encounters and Pedagogical Structure

Whereas the preceding section foregrounded Vāsantī's role as an active agent of rescue, the level of Narration reveals that her capacity to facilitate encounters is itself grounded in a prior encounter. Within the *avadāna* framework, the narrative perspective shifts: Vāsantī is no longer the night goddess who illuminates others, but a sentient being enveloped in darkness. As Queen Moon of Understanding of Right, she is portrayed not as a saviour but as one "asleep in the middle of the night" (夜久眠寐; *rātryāḥ ... prasuptā*), immobilized within a condition of unawareness (see T10, no. 279, p. 371a3; Vaidya 1967, p. 178).

This embedded narrative introduces a further layer of encounter through two past spiritual friends—the Night Goddesses Pure Moonlight and Light of Purified Eyes. Their actions echo, in notable ways, Vāsantī’s present interventions, allowing the narrative to juxtapose past and present modes of guidance. Just as Vāsantī now responds to beings lost in darkness, the Goddess Pure Moonlight enters the queen’s state of sleep to effect an awakening. This intervention is presented as a sensory disruption. Pure Moonlight “awakens [the queen] by the sound of her jewelry jingling” (動身璆珞以覺夫人; *ābharāṇasamghaṭṭanaśabdena prabodhya*). Buddhābhadrā’s rendering—“producing a subtle and marvellous sound” (出微妙音)—draws attention to the esthetic dimension of awakening (see T10, no. 279, p. 371a9; T09, no. 278, p. 722a2–3; Vaidya 1967, p. 178; Cleary 1993, p. 1292). This auditory interruption gives way to a visual encounter: once awakened, the queen is guided to behold the Buddha and to generate the aspiration for enlightenment.

A similar pattern appears in the second past-life narrative. Reborn as the daughter of a distinguished householder, the protagonist is approached by the Night Goddess Light of Purified Eyes, whose intervention disrupts the enclosure of domestic space. The night goddess “made our house tremble” (震動我宅; *tad grhaṃ kampayitvā*) and “showed her body with a great light” (放大光明, 出現其身; *udāreṇāvabhāsenā svarūpaṃ*), combining physical disturbance with visual illumination (see T10, no. 279, p. 371a28–b3; Vaidya 1967, p. 179; Cleary 1993, p. 1292). These actions anticipate key features of Vāsantī’s present activity, in which illumination and intervention similarly coincide. As Light of Purified Eyes reveals her form to the merchant’s daughter, Vāsantī appears before Sudhana in a body adorned with constellations. The narration thus suggests that patterns of encounter may be reiterated across narrative contexts.

These past encounters further direct the protagonist toward the Buddha. Both Pure Moonlight and Light of Purified Eyes function not as final saviours but as intermediaries who “encourage and guide” (勸諭; *samādāpya*) the protagonist to “go to the Buddha” (詣彼如來; *tathāgatasyāntikam upasaṃkrāntā*). In the Buddha’s presence, the protagonist performs “great offerings” (廣興供養; *udārāṃ pūjāṃ kṛtvā*) (see T10, no. 279, p. 371a28–b3; Vaidya 1967, p. 179). Following this sequence, the narrative situates awakening within a pattern of guidance and response. Even after encountering the Buddha, the protagonist continues to participate in the purification of Buddha-lands and the guidance of sentient beings: “The Buddha-lands purified by those Tathāgatas, I too undertake to purify. I also see the sentient beings in those oceans of worlds, and I transform my body to accord with the measures of the inclinations, faculties, and interests of those sentient beings, in order to develop and guide them” (彼諸如來嚴淨佛刹, 我亦嚴淨; 亦見彼世界一切眾生, 隨其所應而為現身, 教化調伏) (see T10, no. 279, p. 371b19–21; Cleary 1993, p. 1293). Encounter thus functions as a generative condition, leading onward rather than toward a final point of arrival.

6. Conclusions

This narrative analysis of the Vāsantī episode has shown that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* articulates the bodhisattva path through a dynamic interplay of Realm and Encounter. By integrating narratological analysis across the four rubrics of Words, Dialogue, Actions, and Narration, the study demonstrates that the text presents Buddhist doctrine not as a static body of propositions or a fixed blueprint for a distant “other shore,” but as a trajectory enacted through practice. As demonstrated throughout this analysis and noted by Grohmann (2002), the Huayan tradition does not limit access to a pure land to rebirth in a distant realm, but emphasizes the bodhisattva’s active participation in realizing it through ongoing practice. In this sense, the narrative aligns with what Levitas terms “utopia as

method,” in which utopia is understood not as a fixed end state but as a process of transformation (Levitas 2013, p. xi).

Close attention to the narrative configuration of this episode clarifies how doctrinal meaning is generated through patterned relations among perception, speech, action, and retrospective narration. The analysis of Words shows that *samsāra* is configured as a closed and hazardous realm, marked by darkness, obstruction, and epistemic distortion. Within this constricted setting, Dialogue functions not as psychological expression but as a structural pivot (cf. Alter 1981, pp. 92–93): Sudhana’s formulaic questions redirect the narrative from exposure to danger toward the conditions of liberative possibility. Through this dialogic trigger, the spiritual friend’s Actions acquire narrative force, transforming sites of peril into encountering contexts that reorient the seeker’s trajectory toward the City of Omniscience (*sarvajñatā-gocara*). At the level of Narration, the *avadāna* structure situates present attainment within an extended causal framework, linking past and present encounters and showing how Vāsantī’s capacity to guide others arises from prior encounters in which she herself was guided. Liberation thus appears not as an abstract ideal but as a path grounded in narrative precedent.

At the same time, this analysis underscores the value of close reading in making visible the narrative processes through which doctrinal meaning is produced rather than presupposed. Although structural similarities do not in themselves imply a direct correspondence between Buddhist and biblical narrative traditions, the patterned coordination of action, dialogue, and narration observed here—particularly in its emphasis on consequential action—suggests a shared pedagogical logic in religious narrative.

Finally, the “go and ask” formula reactivates the logic of Encounter by redirecting Sudhana toward another spiritual friend. Rather than closing the episode, it initiates a new site of encounter, extending the narrative process beyond any single moment. The Vāsantī episode thus presents the bodhisattva path as a sequence of encounters in which each meeting marks a turning point, transforming the conditions of the realm and opening the possibility of liberation. Viewed from a broader comparative perspective, this narrative configuration also invites reflection within the context of Buddhist–Christian dialogue: while differing in doctrinal orientation, both traditions articulate forms of transformation that unfold through relational and processual dynamics rather than through access to a fixed transcendent realm.

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Abbreviation

T *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (大正新脩大藏經)

Notes

- ¹ Although Bolt rigorously critiques this-worldly trajectory for substituting orthodox eschatology with a secularized progressive ethic, his historical analysis nonetheless corroborates a clear paradigm shift away from static, transcendent models (Bolt 2016, pp. 259, 264, 269–71).
- ² Tatelman (2013, p. 34) adopts Alter’s four-fold rubric of analysis to demonstrate that in Buddhist narrative, “single words or phrases can carry a great freight of meaning.” Regarding proper names (such as Bhava or Pūrṇa), Tatelman argues they possess “allegorical implications that provide a thematic framework for the entire action,” thereby anchoring the character to a specific karmic function or soteriological destiny.
- ³ Osto (2008, pp. 44–47) identifies five such formulas: the approach formula, the question formula, the statement of attainment and ignorance formula, the “go and ask” formula, and the departing formula.
- ⁴ In his explanation of the first Night Deity, Zhiyan 智儼 (602–668 CE) states: “She abides in the great night of radiant light, because it transforms profound darkness” (輝光大夜處，深闇化故也). See *Dafangguang Fo Huayan jing souxuan fenqi tongzhi fanggui* 大方廣佛華嚴經搜玄分齊通智方軌, T 35, no. 1732, 97c12.
- ⁵ Tatelman (2013, p. 34) illustrates this with names such as Bhava and Pūrṇa, whose meanings inform their narrative roles. For a comparable example, see Alter’s discussion of Jacob (*Ya’aqov*), “heel-grabber,” as a *Leitwort* shaping the character’s function (Alter 1981, pp. 42, 92–93).
- ⁶ The Chinese translations diverge slightly at this point. Śikṣānanda’s version reads “He had not stood there long before he saw the sun set” (佇立未久，便見日沒), omitting the spatial detail preserved in the Sanskrit, whereas Buddhābhadrā’s translation more closely follows the Sanskrit in situating the scene at a moment shortly after sunset, when the path remains visible. See Vaidya (1967, p. 172); T09, no. 278, p. 720b1; T10, no. 279, p. 369a20.
- ⁷ Vaidya (1967, p. 172) reads *samāṃdhi-cakṣuṣā*, likely a scribal error for *samādhī-cakṣuṣā*, as supported by the Chinese and Tibetan translations.
- ⁸ Śikṣānanda’s translation reads: “At that time, I immediately rescued them through various skillful means” (我時即以種種方便而救濟之) (T10, no. 279, p. 369c1–2); Buddhābhadrā’s translation reads: “For these sentient beings, I dispel their fears by various skillful means” (於此眾生，以種種方便滅其恐怖) (T09, no. 278, p. 720c7–8). The comparison highlights different interpretive emphases. Śikṣānanda renders the passage in terms of rescuing sentient beings, whereas Buddhābhadrā emphasizes the removal of fear. Both translations may be understood as interpretive renderings of the Sanskrit expression *layanabhūtā bhavāmi* (Vaidya 1967, p. 172), which conveys the sense of becoming a refuge or source of protection for sentient beings.
- ⁹ The Sanskrit term *tīrtha* denotes, among other meanings, a bathing place or pilgrimage site on the bank of a sacred river, as well as steps or a landing place for descent into water; by extension, it may also refer to a person worthy of receiving offerings (Monier-Williams 1899, p. 449). In Chinese translations, the term is rendered according to its primary spatial senses as *jinji* 津濟 (“ford, crossing”) or *qiaoliang* 橋梁 (“bridge”), both of which emphasize its functional role as a means by which beings pass safely across dangerous or obstructed terrain.
- ¹⁰ It is worth noting that whereas the Chinese translation renders the term as “city” (*cheng* 城), evoking a fortified and enclosed space, the Sanskrit *gocara* carries a broader semantic range, including “range,” “field,” or “sphere of activity.” As noted by Edgerton, *gocara* may denote the scope or domain of what is perceptible within a given cognitive field (Edgerton 1953, p. 215).
- ¹¹ Vaidya (1967, p. 173) reads *svāyatana*, likely a scribal error for *śaḍāyatana*, as supported by the Chinese and Tibetan translations.
- ¹² On the tripartite structure of *avadāna* narratives—*pratyuṭpannavastu*, *atītavastu*, and *samavadhāna*—and its role in representing karmic causality across lifetimes, see Tatelman (2013, pp. 4–7).

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