

Union Theological Seminary

DISABILITY IN BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY:  
CURSORY IMPRESSIONS AND LIBERATORY ANALYSIS

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	2
Beginnings .....	2
Project Limits and Notes by the Author.....	3
Outline of Paper .....	4
MOVING FROM RETIRBTUION TO UNIVERSALIZATION: DISABILITY, SIN, AND KARMA.....	5
The Conflation of Sin and Disability .....	6
Disability as Retribution Through Karma.....	8
The Human Experience is Characterized by Limits: Sin as Universal and Re-Complicating Karma.....	12
ENCOUNTERING DISABILITY IN BUDDHISM: UPAYA-KAYSALYA AS ACCOMMODATION.....	20
The Lotus Sutra, Chapter Five: Medicinal Herbs .....	25
DISABILITY AS A LENS TO UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING IN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM .....	28
Interlude .....	28
Buddhism, (Negative) Forms of Suffering, and Disability.....	30
Christianity and (Positive) Forms of Suffering: Disability, Virtuous Suffering, and Models of Care.....	35
RETURNING TO AND IMAGINING THE SCRIPTURE: NANCY EIESLAND AND DELORES S. WILLIAMS .....	39
CONCLUSIONS, COUNTERARGUMENTS, REFLECTIONS, AND FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP .....	44
Endings: Joy, Proof of Existence, and Hopes for Further Scholarship.....	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	51

## INTRODUCTION

### **Beginnings**

Upon beginning this paper, I knew for certain that I wished to write about disability and religion, particularly Buddhism. Yet when I began researching, I found myself facing an asymmetry in resources. For example, a cursory search into my school's library system, CLIO, for anything related to "Christianity" and "disability" produces 305 results.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a similar search for "Buddhism" and "disability" yields only 39 entries.<sup>2</sup>

While neither number is exceptionally large in the long history of academia,<sup>3</sup> the stark contrast between what was available for the field in Buddhism versus the field in Christianity affirmed the need to add to the academic literature. However, in staring into this dearth of academic interest, I also realized that there could be a very productive conversation between disabled Christian theology and the production of disability dharma. I originally thought that strategies for developing the former field could be applied to the latter, with both traditions highlighting the other in terms of disability. Yet I have found that it is also disability that illuminates the theologies of both traditions. This is despite both traditions being perceived on cursory impression as ableist (often due to healing stories in Christianity's case) or as uninterested in disability as a framework (often because of a lack of famous disabled figures, and little academic interaction).

Thus, this project aims to show that despite these first impressions, both Buddhism and Christianity offer liberatory viewpoints and imaginations of disability. For both traditions these

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<sup>1</sup> As of April 5, 2026 this is the correct number.

<sup>2</sup> As of April 5, 2026 this is the correct number.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in the same library system, a search for "Christianity" and "health" gives 2,178 results.

include the potential to see disability as human variance rather than moral failing and recognizing disability as an experience positioned to understand beliefs of suffering; additionally for Buddhism there is precedent to encounter disability with accommodation while in Christianity there is room to, in light of disability's rupture of virtuous suffering, turn towards the life of Jesus as a theological locus. After moving through these points systematically, I end by looking towards next steps for scholarship and imagining disabled joy and existence into each tradition.

### **Project Limits and Notes by the Author**

It is important to note that this project has limits. First, the author is limited by language, relying on English translations of sutras and the New Testament. Secondly, the author is limited by their knowledge and own social location. The lack of research into Buddhism and disability made this project difficult, and the lack of secular engagement with the value of religion in disability studies made it difficult to derive overarching opinions on the subject. Thus, many views on disability as an experience, and the nature of what it is, come from limited secular scholarship (especially in defining terms) and are heavily influenced by lived experience. The lived experience of this author, in particular, is as a queer, disabled, white American Episcopalian.

As a disabled person, it is difficult to go to church, centers, or temples, which is why this project focuses on theological theories as opposed to ritual and practice.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, it is important to note that the Christian portions of this paper are primarily from a protestant perspective. While in Buddhism's case, because of limited resources, the Buddhist portions of

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<sup>4</sup> Because of this, I imagine there will be critiques that come from lived practical and ritual experience, which I welcome!

this paper, while mostly Mahayana (focusing on *upaya*, and the Lotus Sutra), also draw on Theravada points to showcase diversity or widespread opinion. It is said that it is more accurate to claim there are “Buddhisms” rather than “Buddhism,”<sup>5</sup> and it should be noted that no universal claim for either tradition is being made in this work. Rather, different viewpoints are brought up and looked over to form a systematic survey.

### **Outline of Paper**

This paper is divided into five sections. In the first section, I will critique religious doctrines as they relate to disability in a punishment or retributive stance. Specifically, I will look at sin in Christianity and karma in Buddhism. By examining textual examples, I explore how these doctrines can contribute to negative talk about disability and to the perception that disability is caused by negative morality. However, as these doctrines are extremely important to the spirit of both traditions, I move to reimagining them or revisiting earlier iterations to make them universal equalizers that highlight how disability is part of human variance, a perspective influenced by Deborah Creamer’s limits model.

In the second section, I move to discuss the Buddhist concept of *upaya*, or skillful means, as accommodation following an argument from Stephen Harris. I will also complicate enacting *upaya* by discussing how to use it ethically, especially in light of seeing it as a form of accommodation. In a subsection of this discussion, I will also look at how examples of *upaya* are not always liberatory for disability. This leads me to examine ways outside of *upaya* that Buddhism might approach disability, and in turn this begins the third section.

The third section in this paper is about suffering. After explaining why disability is positioned to understand suffering, and why disability has been linked to it, I look to how both

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<sup>5</sup> The same can be said for saying there are “Christianities” and not just “Christianity”!

traditions understandings of suffering can be illuminated by disability. First, I turn to how Buddhism views suffering negatively from its onset, and in turn views disability through a negative lens by placing illness and aging as a form of suffering. Despite this, I argue, by looking at the other ways suffering is defined in Buddhism, that the disabled experience is still positioned to understand Buddhist concepts of impermanence, craving, and ignorance. This understanding is present both despite of Buddhism's negative appraisal of suffering and disability. I then examine how Protestant Christianity views suffering through a positive lens, focusing on notions of virtuous suffering and social blessing. I examine here how disability disrupts these notions and forces an uncomfortable but necessary reevaluation of these narratives of suffering.

This then leads to the fourth section, where I walk through Nancy Eiesland and Delores Williams' work in light of this re-evaluation of suffering narratives through the disabled experience. I argue that a focus on Jesus' life is necessary to this work, despite the prominent healing stories in the gospels.

In the fifth section, the conclusion, I summarize these points and revisit Eiesland's wheelchair God, introducing the lotus-seated bodhisattva as an example of liberatory joy and recognition of existence, before ending with a call for more scholarship in this area.

#### MOVING FROM RETRIBUTION TO UNIVERSALIZATION: DISABILITY, SIN, AND KARMA

In both Christianity and Buddhism, there is a doctrinal precedent to view disability through a retributive framework, or, phrased differently, to view disability as the result of a negative cause. In Christianity's case, this is most noticeable in discussions on the relationship between sin and disability, where sin is viewed as the cause and disability the effect. For

Buddhism, disability as retribution is present in certain understandings of karma, where negative moral action results in a karmic fruit that becomes a disability in this life or the next.

While sin and karma have different theological and cosmological functions and are not the same, a similar approach can be taken to revisit both doctrines to find liberatory value in them. After detailing examples of how internal and external prejudice can be created against disability through these doctrines, I will argue that one can understand both sin and karma as a universalization of human limits. By universalizing sin and re-complicating karma, one can transform what might be harmful into doctrines that help one recognize shared humanity. In reworking these retributive understandings, one can problematize questions such as “why does disability exist?” with an answer that supports human variance.

### **The Conflation of Sin and Disability**

Tension between the relationship of sin and disability can be found in both worship and textual encounter. To explore how this happens, I will look at the example of John 9.

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him” (John 9:1-3) <sup>6</sup>

In the opening of John 9, Jesus is asked by his disciples if there is a relationship between the man’s blindness and a past sin, with the implication that sin caused the disability. In response, Jesus rejects the claim of the disciples, dismissing the notion of sin as a cause in relation to the man’s congenital disability. He even presents a third option for a relationship; that God might work through the man because of his blindness.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when John 9 is read in only its beginning,

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<sup>6</sup> All biblical quotations from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE).

<sup>7</sup> This third option, however, would claim the man has an uncommon or unusual relationship with God, and might condone the man’s disability and healing as divinely ordained, which is also a problematic understanding.

it can be read as a reversal of the sin-disability conflation and in support of a divine presence in disabled individuals. Yet, churches do not read only the beginning of John 9; and the end of the chapter contains the following segment.

Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see and those who do see may become blind. Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."  
(John 9:39-41)

At the end of John 9, the text's author plays on the ideas of seeing and unseeing. While with a careful reading, one can argue that Jesus claims those with blindness are without sin, this can still be an infantilizing interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there is an implication that when Jesus asks the Pharisees if they are blind, he is asking whether they are spiritually ignorant. This spiritual ignorance is thus linked to the phrase "blindness" and the concept of sin.

While this is a metaphorical association, it is not hard to make a literal analysis from a metaphor in the Bible. This can be coupled with the presence of hymns such as "Holy, Holy, Holy," which originally contained the line "though the eye made blind by sin."<sup>9</sup> Biblical instances like these are often minor moments in the story of healing that then get transformed into art, music, and sermons. The biblical stories and the responses to them reinforce each other and contribute to the cause-and-effect conflation of the concepts of sin and disability through their vagueness.<sup>10</sup> It follows then that for a Christian who hears the story of John 9, notes the healing aspect and the strange discordance and the end, and subsequently maybe sings "Holy,

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<sup>8</sup> By infantilizing, I mean that this reading that removes the possibility of negative action from a disabled individual, and is dehumanizing and limits the capability of others to recognize the disabled individual's own free will, and its consequences. It turns the disabled figure into a child-like being without agency.

<sup>9</sup> Craig A. Satterlee, "The Eye Made Blind by Sin": The Language of Disability in Worship," *Liturgy* 25 (2009):33.

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God, Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 71.

Holy, Holy” that a mental link of the vague metaphor may play out unintentionally or become cemented in an already ableist world. This is just one example of how a biblical healing narrative can contribute to a sin-disability conflation.

### **Disability as Retribution Through Karma**

Similarly to how John 9 asks if there has been a spiritual and/or moral action that resulted in disability, there are also Buddhist texts that link a direct cause and effect from unwholesome karma to disabling conditions. Karma, which simply means “action” in Sanskrit, is the term used to refer to moral action. What is classified as a karma-inducing moral action is debated, but karma is generally understood to have three parts. First is the action, the thought, or volition that is morally qualifiable as wholesome or unwholesome.<sup>11</sup> Second, this action produces a “fruit” which is the result of the action, which will ripen later, either in this life or a future one.<sup>12</sup> Then, finally, because karma ripens to “their author” or where the action was done, there is a retributive entity.<sup>13</sup> The nature of what constitutes the retributive entity is also debated, but the fact that karma exists and that all sentient beings have karma is an important canonical understanding.

To discuss karma and disability, I will look at two different Buddhist texts, from two different Buddhist traditions. The first is the Dhammapada or DHP, from the Theravada school, and the other, the Lotus Sutra, comes from the Mahayana tradition. In showing two examples from different schools, I aim to illustrate not that this is a universal viewpoint, but rather that there exists a potentially common understanding, despite the reality that there is no unified Buddhist view.

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<sup>11</sup> Etienne Lamotte, *Kamasiddhiprakarana, The Treatise on Action by Vasubandhu*, Kindle Edition, trans. Leo Pruden (Asian Humanities Press, 1987) 15.

<sup>12</sup> Lamotte, *Kamasiddhiprakarana*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Lamotte, *Kamasiddhiprakarana*, 15.

To start with the DHP, I would like to point to the Story Cycle of King Udena, specifically the conversion of Queen Samavati. In this story, Queen Samavati is converted by a new female lay disciple of the Buddha's way named Khujjuttara.<sup>14</sup> While Khujjuttara is noted to be a foremost disciple of the Buddha, credited with hearing and reciting a portion of the canon called the Itivuttaka, and is documented as bringing others to stream-entry,<sup>15</sup> she is less often noticed as a disabled character.

Beyond the conversion of Queen Samavati, Khujjuttara comes up in the Udena Cycle when various *bhikkhus* (monks) ask the Buddha about past lives. Among other individuals, and other questions, the bhikkhus ask "how did Khujjuttara come to be a hunchbacked? How did she become so wise?"<sup>16</sup> In response to being questioned about Khujjuttara's previously unmentioned curved spine, the Buddha answers as follows:

Bhikkhus, while that same king was ruling in Bārāṇasī, there was a Paccekabuddha who was slightly hunchbacked. Now a certain serving-woman, throwing a blanket over her shoulder and taking a golden vessel in her hand, bent over so that she looked like a hunchback, and saying: "This is the way our Paccekabuddha walks," imitated his manner of walking. It was in consequence of this that she came to be a hunchback.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> As it goes, Khujjuttara was tasked with eight pieces of money to buy flowers for the Queen, but routinely kept half of it for herself. One day when going to the garden, the gardener instructed her to wait as the Buddha was going to be a guest. So Khujjuttara waited and listened to the Buddha, becoming a stream enterer. That day she spent all eight coins on flowers, and confessed to Queen Samavati her past embezzlement. The Queen, upon hearing this, does not berate her and instead asks to experience what she experienced, leading to Khujjuttara teaching the Dharma to Queen Samavati and 500 women, leading to them too becoming stream enterers. (Summarized from the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies Translation: *Khujjuttara, the Servant who Taught Her Queen What is Right*, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, <https://www.buddhinqury.org/resources/women-in-the-buddhas-life/khujjuttara/> )

<sup>15</sup> In the Theravada tradition this means that one has reached the first step or stage of awakening.

<sup>16</sup> Burlingame, Eugene Watson. *Dhammapada Commentary as Buddhist Legends Translated from the Original Pali Text of the Dhammapada Commentary*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921. Accessed online at <https://ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Buddhist-Legends/02-01.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Burlingame, *Dhammapada Commentary as Buddhist Legends Translated from the Original Pali Text of the Dhammapada Commentary*, Ancient Buddhist Texts, <https://ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Buddhist-Legends/02-01.htm>

According to the Buddha, Khujjuttara’s current spine is a result of her making fun of a solitary Buddha (a *paccekabuddha*) who was “hunchbacked.” The use of the term consequence imply that this is a negative moral action that resulted in a negative effect. In other words, Khujjuttara is being affected by unwholesome karma, and it has resulted in a disability, although this disability does not prevent her from becoming a stream-enterer.

This idea that a morally negative action results in disability is also found in the Lotus sutra. Stephen Harris specifically cites<sup>18</sup> the last page of Burton Watson’s translation, *The Lotus Sutra*, where it states that those who disparage the sutra “will be born eyeless in existence after existence.”<sup>19</sup> Considering the status the Lotus places on itself as a great and powerful sutra, one can infer that to disparage it creates great and powerful karma. In this case, that karma manifests in blindness in rebirth after rebirth. Here, there is another direct link between negative moral action and disability as a consequence. However, it is interesting to me that Harris quotes the very last page of the sutra, when this in fact occurs for the first time in the sutra in chapter three “Simile and Parable.”

Chapter three of the Lotus sutra is most famous for its parable of the burning house, but it is less known for the four or so pages of verse that detail what will happen to one who slanders the sutra. Among rebirth’s in hell, as animals, and destruction of all the karmic seeds for becoming a Buddha, the verses in chapter three also lists disability as a penalty three times:

If he should become a human being,  
his faculties will be blighted and dull, he will be puny, vile, bent, crippled,  
blind, deaf, hunchbacked.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Harris, “Buddhism and Disability,” in *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction*, ed. Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stolfus (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016): 37.

<sup>19</sup> Kumārajīva, *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. Burton Watson, *Translations from the Asian Classics* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 342.

<sup>20</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 75.

A sinful person of this sort  
will constantly be born amid difficulties,  
crazed, deaf, confused in mind,  
and never will hear the law.  
For countless kalpas  
numerous as Ganges sands  
he will at birth become deaf and dumb,  
his faculties impaired. . .<sup>21</sup>

If he should become a human being,  
he will be deaf, blind, dumb. . .  
water blisters, diabetes,  
scabs, sores, ulcers,  
maladies such as these  
will be his garments.<sup>22</sup>

In the first and third examples, these penalties are mentioned as punishments particular to a human rebirth.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, throughout the pages of verses, there is a repeated refrain that reinforces a direct cause and action karmic link: “Because he slandered this sutra, this is the punishment he will incur.”<sup>24</sup> This refrain is said four times.

It should be noted that this lengthy discussion of punishment comes up in the text as a way to assuage those listening from preaching the Lotus sutra to those who would not receive it. The goal of this sutra chapter is not actually to share itself with any and all sentient beings if doing so would bring them more suffering; in fact, it says quite frankly, for those who are deeply attached to desires, “Do not preach it to them.”<sup>25</sup> These examples of punishment, therefore, should not necessarily occur if those listening follow the advice of the Buddha. However, this

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<sup>21</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> The second example is a more general example, it is unclear if it is for a human rebirth or not because it is prefaced by a lengthy discussion of the human rebirth, but it precedes verses that summarize other rebirth possibilities.

<sup>24</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 75 and 77.

<sup>25</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 74.

caveat does not erase the very strong cause-and-effect relationship established between disability and negative moral action in the text. Unlike John 9, where the link can be created and assuaged via its vagueness and Jesus's earlier stance, in chapter three of the Lotus, the link is made three times in clearer language. The same prejudice, in creating a causal link between a moral action and a person's ability status, is also brought forward.

### **The Human Experience is Characterized by Limits: Sin as Universal and Re-Complicating Karma**

In my experience, I have not been approached with “Your disability makes me uncomfortable/disgusted because it is caused by sin or karma.” Nor have I been approached with attempts to cleanse me of sin or break karmic links to cure my disability. Instead, the potential harm appears in how both sin-disability conflation and the link of unwholesome karma to disability in how we discuss these concepts. Stephen Ray in his book *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* calls these discussions “sin-talk,”<sup>26</sup> and I would like to add that “karma-talk” exists as well.

When a theologian, preacher, or person giving a dharma talk is not careful with the metaphors and language they invoke, they may “use and thereby legitimate stereotypic figures”<sup>27</sup> and thus contribute to marginalization by furthering the condition of the “other.” While in his first chapter, Ray uses the stereotype of the AIDS patient and the Welfare Queen and their interactions with Christian “sin-talk,” it is not hard to see how this idea could also play out with disabled individuals and “karma-talk.”<sup>28</sup> As I said, no one comes up to me directly, but they do

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<sup>26</sup>Stephen Ray, *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* (Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Ray, *Do No Harm*, 122.

<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, simplistic and common Western cultural constructions of karma create another type of unique “karma-talk” with disability. While not a particularly religious example, the modern cultural understanding of karma has “karma-talk” with disability, too. One example is how the villain or a morally grey character in a film

look and act uncomfortable when I use a rollator in church or in a Buddhist center. No one tries to cleanse me, but offerings of prayer do not cease; incense is burned.

This is an example of the potential for harm in using these texts without critically engaging with or acknowledging the negative appraisal of disability they present, and how they might contribute to ableist views of disgust or discomfort at disability. In order to reimagine and revisit these doctrines, I will provide a brief explanation of different models of disability.

According to M. Miles models exist “for interpreting human life and activity all cultures construct and juggle with verbal models and metaphors, whether descriptive—‘it is this—or analogical—‘it is like this.’”<sup>29</sup> For similar reasons, the disability rights movement has often used models as a way to understand disability, and interpret what it means for this world. Models are often created in the movement by defining them in opposition to other models, particularly the medical model. The medical model<sup>30</sup> is understood as a model that locates disability within the individual, viewing it as something that, due to biological factors or outside events, ought to be cured or at least significantly alleviated. This leads to a view that disability does not belong in a healthy normative body. In turn, this view aids the spreading of prejudice and the belief that the only appropriate outcome for disability in an able-bodied world is found in searching for a cure.

In response to this predominant model, disability rights activists began developing the social model of disability. The social model of disability in contrast to the medical model locates

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ends the story with an accident, sometimes permanently disabling, or sometimes temporarily, and the audience response is “well that’s karma!” or sometimes “that’s justice”.

<sup>29</sup> M. Miles, “Disability on a Different Model: Glimpses of an Asian Heritage,” *Disability & Society* 15, no. 4 (2000): 90.

<sup>30</sup> For this definition, I am drawing on Eiesland, Barnes, and Creamer, and what they define as the medical model via definitions of the social model. I am also drawing on the very helpful compilation list online at Disabled World, which you can find here: <https://www.disabled-world.com/definitions/disability-models.php#social>.

disability within society rather than the individual by drawing a line between impairment and disability, with impairment being defined as the fact of difference and disability as the experience of difference meeting environments, barriers, and attitudes that do not accommodate it, or furthermore discriminate against impairment.<sup>31</sup> For Deborah B. Creamer, both of these models ignore the reality of disability's fluidity, and as for myself I find these two models limited as well.<sup>32</sup>

Creamer's limits model, introduced in her 2009 monograph, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, starts with the belief that limits are a human experience and that theology has much to gain by engaging with differences in embodied experience.<sup>33</sup> In this view, disability can be understood as a limitation not accommodated by the current environment a person is in.<sup>34</sup> This allows for disability to be a flexible identity in different locations and cultures while still holding the importance of the social model's locus on society. This is also an idea very similar to Garland-Thomson's notion of "misfitting," where disability exists in spaces that cannot accommodate it, akin to a square peg trying to fit into a

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<sup>31</sup> Colin Barnes "Understanding the Social Model of Disability: Past, Present, and Future" In the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (Routledge, 2020): 20, 25.

<sup>32</sup> For my own critiques, despite the ableist implications of the functional limitations put forward by the medical model, and the overall applauding of the social model in return via its opposition to such approaches and the real change it's caused politically, it can be argued that both models view the category of or term "disability" as a negative. As Barnes writes of the social model's impairment-disability distinction, "For advocates, impairment may be a human constant but 'disability' need not and should not be" (Barnes, 20). This negative appraisal of a term, which for those in my age range often serves as an identity label, is one reason I, as a disabled scholar, hold a critique for both major models. This is because I see both models as aiming to eliminate my experience, and as negatively appraising my own identity language. I think this negative framing of the term "disability" only aids ableism, rather than disrupts it. Additionally, no model can encapsulate all cultural norms and present a "correct" interpretation because of the internal diversity with disability, a point that Creamer draws on for her limits model. This idea of a correct interpretation or universal claim is also why I use the term "viewpoints" as opposed to "model" throughout my essay, despite the fact that the latter term may still make sense.

<sup>33</sup> Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>34</sup> Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 33.

round hole.<sup>35</sup> Both the limits model and the idea of misfitting highlight the fact that limits are experienced by all people, that they differ, and that they can be accepted or rejected to various degrees. Through this model, Creamer offers a way to view disability not as an abnormality or insult but as an experience of human life.<sup>36</sup> This is a way disability can be seen as a neutral reality, that is, as existing in its relationship to simply being human, rather than as a moral failure or as a blight to be eradicated. I believe this idea of human limits can be applied to understanding sin and karma, and their relationship to disability.

To start with sin, I will return to Stephen Ray. Ray uses Augustine's notion of original sin to put forward a principle of participation that disrupts the theological urge to create a "unique margin of sinners,"<sup>37</sup> or a hierarchy of sin(ners). This notion of original sin, the reality that all humans participate in sin by being equally marked with a distorted relationship to God due to the fall, makes sin into a human condition rather than a category that can be judged relatively.<sup>38</sup> Sin then becomes one of humanity's limits; it becomes universalized.<sup>39</sup>

To turn back to John 9 with this understanding, I will look at my own tradition, that of Episcopal Christianity, and how sin is defined in the Book of Common Prayer. In the catechism, sin is defined as "seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our

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<sup>35</sup> Rosmarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 591–609.

<sup>36</sup> Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Ray, *Do No Harm*, 108.

<sup>38</sup> Ray, *Do No Harm*, 109.

<sup>39</sup> In this instance, I use 'universalized' to mean that sin becomes a universal aspect of being human; to be human, in a Christian understanding, means simply to have sin. It should also be noted that sin does not equal "evil" in this equation; sin is instead understood as this distortion of the human-divine relationship.

relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.”<sup>40</sup> This is a very relational understanding of sin with some language reflective of original sin, and it is also universal, with the understanding that sin distorts us all. When John 9 is reapproached through this lens, it doesn’t necessarily erase the textual link between blindness and ignorance; however, if we understand spiritual ignorance as related to the world distorted by sin, suddenly, every person experiences a degree of this ignorance. We all have spiritual ignorance; we all have sin. Furthermore, this understanding supports Jesus’s original claim that no one sinned, for if sin is both universal and relational in the Episcopal definition, in doing Jesus’s will to wash his eyes, the blind man never commits sin. He listens to God’s will for him. Of course, God’s will was still to heal him, and that should be problematized in light of the prevalence of harmful rhetoric from the medical model, but from a theological standpoint, there is no sin in this story on the part of the blind man.

In another understanding, sin is not an action taken in this story by the man born blind, or by any other disabled person, nor is sin something that takes an action. To paraphrase Julian of Norwich on this, sin has no substance of being; it is only present in the suffering it causes.<sup>41</sup> It follows then that if sin has no substance of being, and it is a universal status of being in a distorted relationship with God, and the suffering it causes is more so divine-human relational, then disability cannot be related to sin. It would not make sense for sin to cause disability because it is not a cause, but an effect. Thus, universalizing sin through an Augustinian motif

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<sup>40</sup> The book of common prayer’s catechism, which lists this definition, can be found here: <https://www.bcponline.org/Misc/catechism.html>

<sup>41</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing, Penguin Classics (Penguin Random House, 1998), 79-80.

helps problematize the conflation of disability with sin present in biblical stories and real churches.

This idea of universalizing sin leads me to discuss re-complicating notions of karma. As I have said, Buddhism affirms that all beings have karma; it is a universal condition of being alive in any realm. Furthermore, we all have a mixture of unwholesome and wholesome karma, the latter being shown in our being born as a human in this life at all.

Among the four pages of punishments in chapter 3 of the Lotus, there is a verse that reads as follows:

If a person fails to have faith  
but instead slanders this sutra,  
immediately he will destroy all the seeds  
for becoming a Buddha in this world.<sup>42</sup>

If one were to destroy all seeds from becoming a Buddha, they would be destroying all wholesome karmic seeds, hence why the following verses have the individual who slandered the sutra be reborn in a hell realm. This, however, leads me to wonder, with the awareness that attempting to discover all the causes and conditions of a sentient being would drive one to despair, if there are more karmic actions than simply slandering the sutra at play. The slander of the sutra may simply result in being reborn in the hell realm, but being reborn next as an animal then a human, as the sutra verses go, might be due to the unwholesome karma arising from the nature of being a being in the hell realm. In other words, it is not the singular that determines the effect of punishment, but the conditions one finds themselves in that create branching dominoes. The verses that mention disability involve a human rebirth, a rebirth that one can achieve only

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<sup>42</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 74

with wholesome karma. As the mention of “*If* he should become a human being” shows, it’s a hard thing to gain enough merit to be reborn as a human from hell, then as an animal. Yet the “*if*” implies that it is, in fact, possible.

The reality that there is an achievement in human life, and then the achievement of becoming a bodhisattva, is supported by the Lotus in later chapters as well. In the chapter “Devadatta,”<sup>43</sup> A prediction of Buddhahood is given to Devadatta, a man who is generally depicted as sinister if not downright evil in Buddhist stories. It is said this will happen because of his past life friendship and help to the Buddha.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in the same chapter, a young dragon girl becomes a Buddha. While she transforms herself into a man, it should be noted that she is a bodhisattva first, despite being nonhuman, before adulthood, and female. Thus, the Lotus Sutra supports the idea that no one is ever truly damned to a point where they cannot achieve Buddhahood. Thus, even if there is a karmic link to disability, it should not be viewed in any way as an absolute spiritual damnation.

Another karmic understanding from David Loy is that karma does not need to be something we have but instead it is something we as selves are, because our self is made of continuous choices and reactions.<sup>45</sup> In this framework, it makes sense to also suggest, as Loy does, that karma should be viewed, when it is a punishment at all, not as punishment *for* an action but *by* an action<sup>46</sup>. To be punished for an action is a direct cause and effect; you did the action, and a separate effect happens because of it. To be punished by an action, however, feels

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<sup>43</sup> This chapter begins on page 182 of Watson.

<sup>44</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 184.

<sup>45</sup> David Loy, “Conclusion: Reflections on Karma and Rebirth,” in *A New Buddhist Path: Enlightenment, Evolution, and Ethics in the Modern World* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2015), 138.

<sup>46</sup> David Loy, “Conclusion: Reflections on Karma and Rebirth,” 138.

more akin to how cause might be removed from sin. Karma as punishment by an action collapses the cause and effect into the moral action taken, becoming difficult to distinguish as it joins the endless stream of causes and conditions that affect all sentient beings.

Together, these points make me question the straightforwardness of the Lotus' claim that disability is definite if one slanders the sutra. Perhaps its straightforwardness is also an example of *upaya*, or skillful means, to get a point across even if it is not entirely true. For Khujjuttara, though, in a tradition where *upaya* is not a doctrine, it is harder to argue with or for other options. The text is quite plain: x caused y. Yet, if we re-complicate karma, that is, acknowledge that there are things about it we cannot know, we realize that as readers, we cannot actually know the full causes and conditions of a disabled person. If we tried to discriminate on the basis of a condition perceived as caused by unwholesome karma, we ourselves would collect it. In both instances, this does not erase the text's bluntness or its characterization of disability, but it does make us reconsider how we respond to it.

When we introduce a notion of re-complicating karma into the understanding of disability in the limits model, it highlights, as does the universalization of sin, the reality that all humans are affected by limits. Additionally, this understanding of karma and the view that sin simply is, for reasons unknown, shows how the human experience is characterized by the realities of not knowing. This is a more liberatory approach than a retributive model. Instead of looking to see all the causes of disability, whether literally or metaphysically, or asking the “why does disability exist” question,<sup>47</sup> one can simply turn and say, “I do not know, it simply happens.” Disability simply is, in some cases,<sup>48</sup> human variance, a part of the human condition, and therefore does not

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<sup>47</sup> This “why does disability exist” question is in some sense what retributive understandings of sin, and understanding of karma try to answer. They say, “why disability? Because something wrong was done.”

<sup>48</sup> In other cases, such as disability from an accident, the why disability is much easier to answer.

make one more sinful or more karmically challenged; it simply exists and will continue to do so. This viewpoint allows one to encounter disability outside prejudiced rhetoric or to reconsider said rhetoric wherever it is found.

## ENCOUNTERING DISABILITY IN BUDDHISM: UPAYA-KAYSALYA AS ACCOMMODATION

In the first section of this thesis, I have argued that both Christianity's and Buddhism's understandings of sin and karma, and those doctrines' relationship to disability, can be rethought through an understanding of disability as product of human variance and part or either a human condition in a way that cannot be explained by simple cause and effect. For this section, I will turn to discuss the idea of *upaya-kaysalya* in Mahayana Buddhism as a form of accommodation. If the first section tried to complicate the question "why is there disability?" in retributive frameworks, this section begins a conversation on how Buddhism, in particular, can encounter disability through accommodation and social change.

The notion that *upaya* is an example of accommodation is found in Stephen Harris's chapter in *Disability and World Religions*, which is a major source for this paper. After Harris outlines core Buddhist tenets, he turns to Mahayana Buddhism and the Bodhisattva path to argue that *upaya* is a concept aimed at helping those with different psychological and intellectual abilities, and is therefore an accommodation.<sup>49</sup> As an example, he mentions sections of the Lotus Sutra: the parable of the burning house and chapter five of the sutra, featuring the medicinal herbs metaphor. For my own analysis, I will first define *upaya*, and then address its ethical concerns, how said concerns relate to accommodation, and will end with looking at the Sanskrit version of Chapter Five of the Lotus Sutra.

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<sup>49</sup> Harris, "Buddhism and Disability," 41-42.

The term upaya is most commonly translated as “skillful means” but can also be translated as “expediency” or even “adapted teachings.”<sup>50</sup> However, as authors have pointed out, the common translations listed above, or the explanation as an alternative below, may paint upaya<sup>51</sup> as an “inferior teaching bearing only a marginal relationship to Buddhist philosophy,”<sup>52</sup> despite the reality that it is a highly developed concept that reflects the teachings in its own right. Thus, upaya has been revisited again and again to make its case.

Outside of the technical meaning of the word, in my first encounter with this term, upaya was explained to me as an alternative method of teaching, used by the Buddha or a bodhisattva in order to teach someone the dharma in a way that meets them where they are at. This is a limited understanding, however, as upaya is more expansive than this definition, it can be understood as both the method the enlightened being uses to teach, and the method of spiritual awakening used by the unenlightened or “ignorant” being.<sup>53</sup> Another way to phrase this is to say that upaya is both the teacher’s method of communication and the practitioner’s method for attaining enlightenment. It is a two-way experience. However, there is an ethical concern raised with this understanding: if so many of us are not enlightened, how can we, as simple sentient beings, use upaya ethically? This question is taken up in a 2015 article by King Cheung.

While Cheung does not mention disability at all in her article “Ethical Implications of Upāya-Kausalya: Helping Without Imposing,” I believe their arguments have implications for understanding upaya as a practical doctrine and as an accommodation form. Cheung writes that

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<sup>50</sup> Daigan Matsunaga and Alicia Matsunaga, “The Concept of Upāya in Mahāyāna Buddhist Philosophy,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (1974): 51.

<sup>51</sup> In part because of the notion that “alternative” is somehow lesser.

<sup>52</sup> Matsunaga and Matsunaga, “The Concept of Upāya . . .” 51.

<sup>53</sup> Matsunaga and Matsunaga, “The Concept of Upāya . . .” 72.

“there is a tension between the motivation, even obligation, to help, and the potential dangers of projecting or imposing one’s conception of what is best for others or how best to help.”<sup>54</sup> This line reflects the fact that we are not aware of all causes and conditions like the Buddha, or a near-buddhahood bodhisattva, which means there are ethical concerns in us acting as if we do.<sup>55</sup> This concern for our own knowledge gaps is similar to this paper’s earlier emphasis on not attempting to understand the causes and conditions of karma – we cannot simply imitate skillful means without risking tensions of hubris, paternalism, or projecting our desires and failure to help, whether they are perceived or real.<sup>56</sup> It is because of this that Cheung states that it is not about being careful with who you help, but rather *how* you help.<sup>57</sup> If we as ordinary beings are to use upaya, Cheung suggests, we should always consider the audience or the being we wish to help, and that person's unique circumstances of the situation, while acknowledging our own limitations.<sup>58</sup> To use upaya ethically in the current reality, where we have gaps in knowledge, means we must, as the article’s title says, help without imposing, and, I would add, acknowledge the gaps that are present. This is especially important if we remember that, as Matsunaga and Matsunaga point out, upaya partially comes from the gap of human language’s capacity to explain the Buddha’s enlightenment.<sup>59</sup> With these definitions and complications in mind, I will turn to imagining overlaying accommodation on upaya.

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<sup>54</sup> Kin Cheung, “Ethical Implications of Upāya-Kauśalya: Helping Without Imposing,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 22 (2015): 371.

<sup>55</sup> Cheung, “Ethical Implications of Upāya-Kauśalya,” 375.

<sup>56</sup> Cheung, “Ethical Implications of Upāya-Kauśalya,” 379.

<sup>57</sup> Cheung, “Ethical Implications of Upāya-Kauśalya,” 381.

<sup>58</sup> Cheung, “Ethical Implications of Upāya-Kauśalya,” 392, 393.

<sup>59</sup> Daigan Matsunaga and Alicia Matsunaga, “The Concept of Upāya . . .” 53.

When Harris discusses upaya as accommodation, he does so while comparing it to modern Western notions of reasonable accommodation. This leads him to detail the story of a monk with low intelligence who, through an accommodation and upaya, begins to progress toward enlightenment.

The monk is unable to remember any of the teachings the senior monks give to him. To compensate for this, the Buddha gives him a clean cloth and tells him to say 'removal of impurity' repeatedly while handling it. As the cloth becomes dirty, the monk suddenly realizes his mind is likewise defiled with negative mental states like anger and greed. After realizing this insight, he quickly progresses to liberation.<sup>60</sup>

Harris' example, which echoes a cleaning cloth removing impurities, feels dissatisfactory or tonally insufficient. This is because in the American context, some of the highest amounts of disabled workers are found in janitorial jobs, and these workers are often exploited, with half of the disabled janitor workforce making less than \$15,000 a year (compared to a third of their able-bodied counterparts).<sup>61</sup> Additionally, while Harris praises this story and modern workplace accommodations, he does not acknowledge that the use of “reasonable” is subjective, which means one can deny someone an accommodation if it does not meet someone’s view of reason.<sup>62</sup> So when Harris says upaya echoes reasonable accommodation, and uses this example in particular, it feels off-putting and suggests possibilities where upaya and accommodation can be denied or one can be degraded because of it.<sup>63</sup> This, of course, does not entirely match with more comprehensive understandings of upaya, but it does raise questions similar to those posed by

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<sup>60</sup> Harris, “Buddhism and Disability,” 43.

<sup>61</sup> Melissa Chiu, “The Occupations of Workers with Disabilities.” <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2013/03/the-occupations-of-workers-with-disabilities.html>.

<sup>62</sup> In my experience, the language of “reasonable” also hinders one from asking for accommodation due to the fear that it will be denied, because of the ambiguity and subjectivity of the term.

<sup>63</sup> I should be clear, I am not saying that working as a janitor or cleaning staff is degrading, but not being paid a living wage is.

Cheung: What happens if we do upaya wrong? Harris does not sufficiently acknowledge the ways in which either upaya or attempts at helping under notions of accommodation can go awry.<sup>64</sup>

Despite my clarifications about Harris, it should be noted that when accommodation is done correctly and upaya is used skillfully, both can change lives. As I have discussed, upaya works in two directions; the same can be said for accommodation as well. When you accommodate someone, your worldview can shift, more possibilities for understanding one another open—and when you are accommodated, you can thrive. Curb cuts for example are a well-worn example but an important illustration of how accessibility does not just benefit the disabled population. When a city installs curb cuts they benefit any person using wheels, not just people with disabilities, such as mothers with strollers, delivery workers with trolleys, and anyone who just can't do the step up or down in that moment. I would add to this list ramps, as well as professors or instructors making a version of a lecture material accessible online or providing slides for the visually impaired and those of us who struggle to type or process audio.<sup>65</sup> This potential for two-way change is also not outlined extensively in Harris's argument.

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<sup>64</sup> For example, when I walk through New York City with my rollator or cane and move to step off the curb to board a bus, I have had my arm grabbed from behind by a well-intentioned bystander. In their own mind, they recognize there is no curb-cut, and they attempt to help, but in the process, I lose my balance instead. Another example is how my friend in a wheelchair has had their chair's handles grabbed and has been pushed without any communication. In both instances, these are attempts to help, but to echo Cheung, these attempts to help impose instead. What the bystander missed in my case is that I did not ask for help, or in some cases, I may motion for the ramp to be lowered. In my friend's case, if they were going uphill when this happened, a bystander would not notice the small motor on what appears to be a push wheelchair that helps them climb. In other words, there is a knowledge gap: the bystander does not know either the conditions of the situation or the causes (i.e., the intricacies of my disability) that would actually enable them to make good use of an attempt to be accommodating and helpful.

<sup>65</sup> When one does this, one both give a record to what you've taught, potentially lowering the mental load for a future iteration of the course, and for the students in the current one.

In Harris's defense, he focuses primarily on text as a call to integrate adaptive teachings into Buddhist centers;<sup>66</sup> his focus is on finding precedent, not necessarily potential ethical concerns, possibilities, or even pitfalls. On this last point, Harris also mentions the example of upaya found in Chapter Five of the Lotus Sutra, yet does not examine the Sanskrit version of that chapter that has direct interaction with disability.

### **The Lotus Sutra, Chapter Five: Medicinal Herbs**

Chapter five of the Lotus in Watson's translation, which Harris quotes, is quite short. In this chapter, the Buddha's way and its expedient means are likened to rain, falling everywhere on various plants.<sup>67</sup> Each plant gets exactly what it needs, despite each being different and despite the different volume of rain required for them to thrive, the Buddha causes "the Dharma rain to rain on all equally."<sup>68</sup> It is a wonderful chapter, with great support for the universal ability of all beings to become Buddhas. However, Watson's version does not include portions from the Sanskrit text of the Lotus, which, while not popular today, provides an addition to this chapter. Specifically, the Sanskrit text adds a story called the parable of the blind man. The Sanskrit introduction to the parable involves more discussion of the three vehicles to nirvana, and if they are in fact one. It is upon this discussion that the Buddha tells the parable, which I will now summarize.

There was a man born blind, who in speaking would claim that "there are no sightly or unsightly shapes, nor are there any viewers of sightly or unsightly shapes. There are no sun and

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<sup>66</sup> Harris, "Buddhism and Disability," 44.

<sup>67</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 101, 105.

<sup>68</sup> Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, 103.

moon. . . There are no planets, nor are there any viewers of planets.”<sup>69</sup> Upon saying this, which, despite its apparent non-dualist potential, is a false statement, other men say in the blind man’s presence that these things do exist. The blind man does not believe them, and a physician (who is meant to be like the Buddha) sees this and realizes the man has “fallen victim to an ailment thanks to a former evil deed”<sup>70</sup> and realizes he has a way to treat said ailment, via four medicinal herbs found on the snowy king of mountains. The physician, with compassion for the man, goes to the mountain, finds the herbs, and prepares them for the man who regains his sight upon the treatment. The previously blind man exclaims his past foolishness but also claims in his healing that “there is now no one superior to me,”<sup>71</sup> a point immediately refuted by nearby seers.<sup>72</sup> Again, the blind man realizes his foolishness and asks the seers how to gain wisdom like theirs. The seers tell him to go to the forest, or mountain caves, think of the dharma, and forsake defilements. The formerly blind man does this and attains wisdom. The chapter then ends with the Buddha explaining that the three vehicles (including both Mahayana and Theravada) have been devised as expedient means, and that the blind man in the story is akin to the individually enlightened.<sup>73</sup>

This story is meant to answer why three vehicles were created as an expedient means; thus the parable of the blind man seeks to illustrate an example of upaya and why upaya exists:

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<sup>69</sup> Leon Hurwitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (Columbia University Press, 1982), 111.

<sup>70</sup> Hurwitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, 111. It should also be noted here, again, that this is an example of disability being seen as a retribution.

<sup>71</sup> Hurwitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, 112.

<sup>72</sup> I would like to add as an aside, that their final portion of their speech feels strangely akin to John 9. It reads “And how can you say, “I see everything!?”? Very Well, Sir! Take darkness for light and light for darkness, If that is what you wish!” (Hurwitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, 112).

<sup>73</sup> Hurwitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, 113, 114.

Upaya exists to help different beings in different ways, just as the four herbs show different paths to nirvana.<sup>74</sup> As for upaya and accommodation, I do not read this parable as favoring either Harris' or my own argument. The blind man is not accommodated through upaya, rather upaya is used to heal him, in an early echo of the medical model. Furthermore, the goal of each individual who meets the blind man is to make him understand the way and the world on their terms. The blind man claims there are no viewers of shapes, and in response, a bystander immediately shuts down what is his perception of the world. No one offers to let him touch their own eye, their hand, or attempt to describe what he touches without touching it themselves (therefore showing they had another way to perceive it). If upaya in an accommodating form is present in this story or this chapter, it is oddly present only in a single lens: as one-directional and only as healing.

Thus, while I agree with Harris in that upaya can be understood as an accommodation, and that it gives precedent for accommodation or reasonable accommodation, I think we must also understand that textual examples of upaya and accommodation may not live up to a modern standard of what is considered social justice. Now, there is the question of whether they should have to, considering the context is different, and cultures have different values. Yet, as this paper is based on an American understanding, I find that, because of the difficulties of enacting upaya ethically and the shortcomings of accommodation as an end goal,<sup>75</sup> I do not think that upaya alone can be the only precedent for encountering disability in a more liberating fashion in this context. Furthermore, even if we attempt to help without imposing, do we end up stuck, never wanting to rock the boat? One may encounter a disabled individual and want to help with

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<sup>74</sup> Hurwitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom*, 114.

<sup>75</sup> This is not to say that accommodation is wrong, bad, or unnecessary. Rather, as an end goal, it can only go so far. To just have accommodation means that we have not fully reached a society where disabled people are actually integrated into life and culture.

accommodation, but nothing more. Or one might wish to emphasize everything positive in the situation, yet in doing so, we may become stagnant in Buddhism's own purpose of liberating beings from suffering.

## DISABILITY AS A LENS TO UNDERSTANDING SUFFERING IN CHRISTIANITY AND BUDDHISM

### **Interlude**

The way to end suffering takes various forms in different Buddhist traditions. Primarily in the arhat and the bodhisattva, but a call to relieve suffering is present in all Buddhist paths. A discussion on suffering here may seem unrelated to my discussion of upaya, but when upaya is defined as a method for achieving liberation, and accommodation as a form of upaya, then we should also see accommodation as a method for liberation, i.e., a method to alleviate suffering. But as it stands, accommodation is not enough, and there are other ways disabled individuals (as all humans do) suffer that accommodation cannot alleviate.

For example, when ableism appears, it is a form of suffering. In the disability rights movement, ableism is often understood as environmental barriers, attitudes of pity, hate, or fear, as well as continued political ostracizing and intentional separation from community. Accommodation is uplifted as one way to solve (some of) these ableist barriers; a ramp or curb cut can mean access into a center of community otherwise blocked off, but in other cases it is quite limited. There comes a point at which you cannot make a building accessible without tearing it down to rebuild it. Instead, what is needed is the alleviation of suffering in all ways, and that starts by understanding the systems we live in and how the traditions of moral character we are part of contribute to them or can dismantle them in their own ways.

This is why this paper’s earlier focus on karma, sin, and the way we discuss those notions is important. To draw on Ray again, our discussions and words are actions, motivated by the conviction that comes from ideas.<sup>76</sup> These ideas are backed by imagination, including moral imagination, that creates the meaning we draw from the world. When it comes to concepts and realities of disability, the imagination of the world, moral or otherwise, often depicts disability as a tragedy to be fixed or eradicated. As a type of tragedy, disability is inherently linked to notions of suffering in that it is seen as a form of suffering both for the individual and for the people and societies around them.<sup>77</sup>

This moral imagination is, of course, harmful, there are a;sp moral imaginations that have overcorrected this harm moving in the other direction. Some imaginations of disability look to only see the positive in it, hence we have terms like “differently abled”<sup>78</sup> and concepts such as “inspiration porn.” “Inspiration porn,” a term coined by the late Stella Young and made well-known in her 2014 TED talk “I’m Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much,”<sup>79</sup> refers to how the non-disabled media and able-bodied individuals objectify disabled individuals for their own benefit as objects of inspiration. These overcorrections to the positive can be unhelpful despite their good intentions, as while they may make room for disabled joy and acceptance, they do not make room for disabled pain, and I mean pain quite literally. Suffering then exists in the

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<sup>76</sup> Ray, *Do No Harm*, 112, 113.

<sup>77</sup> In regard to the people and societies around them, an example of disability as suffering for a caretaker can be found in the ways media reports on the filicide of disabled individuals. The Disability Community Day of Mourning was created to remember the disabled victims in response to how they were viewed as somehow more justifiable or seen as mercy killings. For more information on this, I would recommend looking here: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/anti-filicide/> .

<sup>78</sup> To make my stance clear, personally, I find this term offensive. However, if it is the identity term people use for themselves, I respect that label.

<sup>79</sup> Available to watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8K9Gg164Bsw>

disabled experience in a variety of different ways: suffering happens through ableism, suffering happens in the body, such as in the experience of a seizure, and suffering happens when one is portrayed as somehow extraordinary for simply living in their body, as one is never held to true expectations.

If suffering exists in the disabled experience in a multitude of ways, it follows that the disabled experience is positioned<sup>80</sup> to understand, complicate, or illuminate the doctrines, beliefs, and theologies related to suffering. This is true in both Christianity and Buddhism. In Buddhism, beyond the way suffering might be a call for social justice, the experience of disability, present in discussions of old age and illness, shows the nature of impermanence, craving, and ignorance. This understanding is present both despite of and because of how Buddhism negatively appraises old age and illness in its texts.<sup>81</sup> In Christianity, the experience of disability and suffering problematizes notions of virtuous suffering and forces interaction with how foundational understandings of social blessing can create harmful narratives.

### **Buddhism, (Negative) Forms of Suffering, and Disability**

One of the most common stories I have heard regarding the Buddha's life is that of the four sights<sup>82</sup>, or the Buddha's four encounters while he was still a crown prince. Following Aśvaghōṣa's epic poem<sup>83</sup> the story goes that the young prince one day wished to see beyond the

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<sup>80</sup> While one might be inclined to include the word "uniquely" before positioned, I will refrain from doing so. This is to emphasize my earlier points on overcorrecting disability as inspiration or as something to produce, as well as honor the reality that this is the same for nearly any marginalized group. All marginalized and othered peoples and groups have important contributions to religious fields, not limited to understanding suffering. Therefore, to say disability is unique in this regard is false and creates superiority alongside drawing boundaries.

<sup>81</sup> Harris, "Buddhism and Disability," 25.

<sup>82</sup> Harris also discusses this story in his chapter.

<sup>83</sup> Aśvaghōṣa, *The Buddhacarita, or, Acts of the Buddha*, trans. E. H. Johnston (University of the Punjab, Lahore., 1936; Second Edition, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972).

castle walls. His father, the king, duly arranged for anyone who might perturb the prince's mind to be "cleared away" from the road.<sup>84</sup> Yet, by the intervention of gods who sought for the young prince to become a Buddha and teach them the way, the crown prince saw four sights across four different excursions: an old man, an ill man, a dead man, and an ascetic. The first two will be the focus here.

Before encountering the first sight, that of an aged man, (who notably walks with a "staff")<sup>85</sup> the Buddha had never encountered a person of old age. When he is informed by his charioteer that this fate will too befall him, he asks to turn back as "the fear of old age rules in [his] mind."<sup>86</sup> Similarly, upon seeing an ill man for the first time, lying on the side of the road, and learning that he too is not immune to sickness, the crown prince once again returns to his palace, reflecting on the ignorance of man at the "calamity of disease."<sup>87</sup>

It is potent here that a man who had never encountered the concept of age or illness, two of the most disabling human realities, is so dismayed or frightened by their suffering-creating capabilities that it changes the course of his life. While the fourth sight of an ascetic is what gives Siddhartha Gautama the idea to turn to renunciation to treat suffering, he would not have done so if he had not recognized age, illness, death, or ignorance of these life events as a form of suffering first. These encounters no doubt influenced the Buddha in listing them as *duḥkha* (suffering or dissatisfaction), and therefore linking them to negative experience, in his teaching

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<sup>84</sup> Aśvaghōṣa, *The Buddhacarita*, 32, 33.

<sup>85</sup> Aśvaghōṣa, *The Buddhacarita*, 37.

<sup>86</sup> Aśvaghōṣa, *The Buddhacarita*, 38.

<sup>87</sup> Aśvaghōṣa, *The Buddhacarita*, 39, 40.

on the four noble truths found in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (Pali. Skt: Dharmacakra Pravartana Sutra).

In this sutra, translated as “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma,” the Buddha lays out, among other foundational Buddhist tenants, the four noble truths. The first noble truth, that of suffering of dukkha, reads as follows:

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.<sup>88</sup>

This noble truth lists the disabling old age and illness as suffering among other realities, such as birth and death. Besides the story of the four sights, this is an example of how Buddhist texts characterize disability as a negative experience by linking the experience to illustrations of dukkha. However, because dukkha is not moralized as karma is, the first noble truth and the common story of the four sights do not moralize this experience of disability. Therefore, while it is something experienced in a negative light, it is not necessarily a negative comment on the person. Yet the negative appraisal of experience seems to remain, and following this, the remainder of the noble truths emphasize how suffering related to these negative experiences arises, the reality that this suffering can cease, and how to achieve this cessation.<sup>89</sup>

For Buddhism, the cessation of these sufferings is, for lack of a better term, a primary spiritual goal in the tradition. Therefore, Buddhism may seem to support a medical notion of cure for disability.<sup>90</sup> However, I would argue that this is a limited viewpoint, and does not

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<sup>88</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, vol. 2 (Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1844.

<sup>89</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 1844, 1845.

<sup>90</sup> The thought process looks something like this: “After all, if illness and aging is seen as suffering, and there is a wish to alleviate it, wouldn’t this mean that the goal is to cure illness?”

acknowledge the reality of how suffering is said to be created in the first or in the second noble truth:

Now, this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there, that is craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.<sup>91</sup>

In the second noble truth, the origin of suffering is craving, particularly craving for sensory pleasures, selfish attachment, and permanent existence. This highlights the non-material realities in the first noble truth that are suffering: not getting what you want, separation from pleasure, and joining with what is displeasing. It is not surprising that the foremost examples of dukkha—birth, aging, illness, and death—are the most mundane; they are inherent to the human condition and the most common examples of separation from pleasure and joining with displeasure.

Following this, I argue that Buddhist understandings of suffering in the framework of craving help illuminate the various forms of suffering in the disabled experience and vice versa.

The presence of the disabled body creates suffering because the able-bodied person, in ignorance, sees the disabled body and does not acknowledge either being true impermanence. Bill Hughes, albeit from a different perspective, develops these ideas further. He writes that the disabled body/experience challenges “the stable view of embodied self that is characteristic of non-disabled identity.”<sup>92</sup> While Hughes is not drawing on a Buddhist framework when he writes this (in fact, he refers to Christianity throughout the essay), he inadvertently conveys a notion of how individuals crave and create a self around a “healthy” body. Thus, suffering felt because of illnesses and aging in Buddhism, and the disabled experience is not just limited to the actual

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<sup>91</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 1844.

<sup>92</sup> Bill Hughes, “Invalidating Emotions in the Non-Disabled Imaginary: Fear, Pity and Disgust,” in *Routledge International Handbooks: Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (Routledge, 2020), 93.

suffering of pain, but includes how our interpretation of and the unrelenting grasping for a permanently healthy body creates suffering through craving. This notion is brought about partially due to the ableist and capitalist norms of society, which promote production and facades of personal control and contribution above all else. It is the disabled experience running against this viewpoint that forces both the disabled person and the able-bodied friend, family, or stranger to encounter the impermanence of both the health of the human body and how the world responds to it.

When disability is brought into the discussion of suffering and Buddhism, it shows how the move from craving to suffering plays out in real life. Illness, aging, and disability are negatively appraised as experiences of suffering. Yet, by being situated within that same framework, these categories, and disability, have the potential to help one realize Buddhist practice. This practice that is recognized is not just in recognizing craving, but it also aids to recognize aversion or ignorance as well.

Each time we encounter disability in a Buddhist framework, we are left with a choice: we can double down on our reliance on an unchanging body and therefore continue in ignorance while creating suffering for ourselves and others or we can look reality in the eye and release craving. When an able-bodied person does the former and ignores disability, such as by ignoring accessibility requests or denying accommodations, for example, cause suffering because of the reaction of fear and disgust. If one lives long enough, one will almost certainly become disabled; the reality is that by creating a framework that enables the other disabled person to thrive, one also create a world in which one's future self will thrive as well.

Alternatively, in ignoring disability through a persistent search for a cure, one can also cause suffering for the disabled individual and the able-bodied friend or family. It is my opinion,

as a disabled individual, who is often met with prayers to heal and well-wishes to get better, that well-wishing without basis can cause more suffering if it comes from the craving of the able-bodied friend to have a return to normal. It emphasizes that there is a level of displeasure experienced by the observer and it also functions as an erasure of the disabled person's experience during flare-ups, sickness, and recovery. Even if one does get better, the memory of every episode, of pain, of having to reconstruct a future, and the looks of pity, disgust, confusion, and fear remain.<sup>93</sup> Thus, there can be no return to a time before, or to a normal. I assert that in light of this, Buddhism teaches us to embrace the latter option and guides us to try to relieve suffering, which leads back to upaya and calling for accommodation and disabled integration into the tradition.

There may be an inclination in this section to uplift the disabled experience, and other marginalized experiences on a pedestal; after all, if it can illuminate the teaching, and the teaching illuminates it, does that not make it a great teacher? However, while I think there are ways to recognize disabled individuals as teachers,<sup>94</sup> and their experiences as important to their individual teaching, I will turn now to Christianity to illustrate why I am wary of placing the disabled experience in a place of inherent positive value.

### **Christianity and (Positive) Forms of Suffering: Disability, Virtuous Suffering, and Models of Care**

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<sup>93</sup> Now I do not think this is true in all cases, some people really do have less suffering with well-wishes! Hence my emphasis on having a basis.

<sup>94</sup> I believe a great example of this is found in Peter Hawkins (now the monk Thich Truc Thong Phap) and his article titled "The Buddhist Insight of Emptiness as an Antidote for the Model of Deficient Humanness Contained Within the Label 'Intellectually Disabled.'" While I dislike the title of this article, Hawkins recounts his relationship with an intellectually disabled man, Stephen, with a level of respect that is hard to describe. In recounting Stephen's death, Hawkins writes "My Teacher had passed away" (54). The text comes with a reverence for Stephen not as disabled and therefore a teacher, but because he was human and therefore a teacher.

Unlike Buddhism, which generally views suffering negatively, Christian traditions have at times viewed suffering as a positive or redemptive force. Nancy Eiesland calls this positive view of suffering “virtuous suffering.” For her, this is found in the belief that suffering is a kind of divine test that is passed through submission.<sup>95</sup> When entering this conversation as a type of suffering, a belief supported by biblical narratives positing a cure, disability too becomes something to “be endured” for a heavenly or divine reward<sup>96</sup> in this life or the next.

Thomas Reynolds finds a similar experience in protestant Christianity as a whole, calling this a “test of faith model.”<sup>97</sup> and relating it to his idea of social blessing. This idea of social blessing, I argue, is a Christianized version of inspiration porn, or alternatively, inspiration porn is a secularized version of social blessing. Both rely on the notion that living with a disability is extraordinary, as opposed to a relatively common human experience. This overcorrection dehumanizes disabled people by making caricatures of them and often reducing them to a story of overcoming. In Reynolds’ argument around social blessing he argues that because disability is valued as non-normative and expected to be “useless,” or a tragedy, a normative society moves to either dismiss it entirely, eliminate it, or reimagine it in a way that it becomes useful.<sup>98</sup> In reimagining it to become useful, Protestant communities in particular land on a social blessing model. Drawing on redemptive suffering, where disability is understood as a cross to bear the social blessing model argues that disability is a blessing in disguise—for both the disabled

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<sup>95</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 72.

<sup>96</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 72.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Reynolds, “Protestant Christianity and Disability,” in *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction*, ed. Darla Y Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016): 152.

<sup>98</sup> Reynolds, “Protestant Christianity”, 152-152.

person and the congregation.<sup>99</sup> Like Eiesland's virtuous suffering, Reynolds holds that the disabled person is expected to suffer and endure, thereby growing in internal spirituality.<sup>100</sup> While the disabled person does this, they serve as a kind of spiritual hero in overcoming hardship; their disability is what makes them exceptional.<sup>101</sup> By being spiritually exceptional, they become a gift to others, and their disability becomes an inspiration.

An example of this language playing out can be found in an older article from 1998 by Beth Porter in the *Journal of Pastoral Care*.<sup>102</sup> In her article, Porter recounts working with a young woman, Ellen, who is developmentally disabled. While Porter no doubt helps transform Ellen's life and the L'Arche<sup>103</sup> community they live in as she works to help Ellen have her Bat Mitzvah, the language used is reminiscent of inspiration porn and social blessing understandings of disability. Most notably in the beginning of Porter's conclusion, which reads as follows:

I believe Ellen's story is representational. It is often the gift of individuals with a disability to overcome barriers and bring together around them many quite different people. When that gift is lived out in an interfaith context, its richness and fruitfulness is further amplified as people of diverse backgrounds and belief systems join together in a common commitment that nurtures mutual respect, appreciation, and friendship.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Reynolds, "Protestant Christianity," 153.

<sup>100</sup> Reynolds, "Protestant Christianity," 153.

<sup>101</sup> Reynolds, "Protestant Christianity," 154.

<sup>102</sup> Beth Porter, "L'Arche Daybreak: An Example of Interfaith Ministry Among people with Developmental Disabilities," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 52, no 2 (1998): 157-165.

<sup>103</sup> L'Arche International is a Christian-rooted organization of intentional communities that places people with developmental or intellectual disabilities in communities with able-bodied neighbors and caregivers. These communities are meant to be alternatives to psychiatric facilities. It should also be acknowledged that L'Arche has recently been criticized following news that the founder, Jean Vanier, sexually abused over 25 women who worked in the community.

<sup>104</sup> Porter "L'Arche Daybreak," 165.

The language of “gift” alongside section titles such as “Implications of Ellen’s Faith Journey” (a section in which Porter explores how her journey with Ellen has helped her in her ministry, her community, and Ellen’s synagogue) echoes the same rhetoric that Reynolds critiques. Additionally, the uplifting of “overcoming barriers” and “bringing together” different people is exactly the type of representation that Young critiques in “inspiration porn.” While I have no doubt that Porter and Ellen’s experience was transformative and helped both women gain self-confidence, the inclusion of what Ellen’s story can offer others leaves the article with a bad taste.

It should be noted that because Porter’s article is from 1998, it is dated, views have changed since then, and so my critique might be unwarranted. Yet, the presence of this language in care structures is important; Eiesland discusses this when she links the views of virtuous suffering to what she calls segregationist charity, a notion that expresses how modern charity does not motivate individuals to change the social structures of ableism and rather contributes to their continued segregation from the community. Both Eiesland<sup>105</sup> and Reynolds<sup>106</sup> argue in different ways that charity, if not done carefully, continues to create a paternalistic category of the disabled other. Similarly, concepts of virtuous suffering do not move one to change structural suffering; rather, it excuses it.

Together, these facets create a particular Christian narrative of dis-/respect.<sup>107</sup> This narrative, developed from Christian notions of redemptive suffering on the cross to the virtuous suffering of the ill, places the disabled body on a locked pedestal while alleviating the able-

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<sup>105</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 74.

<sup>106</sup> Reynolds, “Protestant Christianity and Disability”, 152.

<sup>107</sup> “dis-“ meaning it is actually disrespectful, “/respect” referring to this disrespect hiding behind a facade of respect and honor.

bodied persons' consciousness of their own reluctance to change ableist norms in both the world and in the tradition. However, the presence of disabled individuals in church communities and the inevitability of old age force others to look at these narratives of suffering and blessing and begin to think of new interpretations. I believe, following the Protestant urge to use scripture, that re-reading the scriptural narratives surrounding the cross and healing is the first step.

RETURNING TO AND IMAGINING THE SCRIPTURE: NANCY EIESLAND AND  
DELORES S. WILLIAMS

I believe that in rereading scripture or sacred texts, one does the work of imagining or imagination. I acknowledge that using the term "imagination," which is often associated with "imaginary," may be seen as saying that something is false. However, I use the term "imagination" in the sense of "creative," as well as "imaginary" in the sense of myth, or mystical, or unknown yet still true. When one needs to undo an idea or at the very least deconstruct an ideal, one has to imagine, before one can start to reconstruct new viewpoints. Therefore, I use this word to say re-reading text is a work of new creation, and a work of mystic cosmology and understanding.

As I have said earlier while discussing the work of Ray, imagination of the world is what creates ideas, and ideas combined with moral understanding create action and conviction that can be good (or helpful), bad (or harmful), or somewhere in between. I believe the narrative of virtuous suffering present in Christianity, and the way it interacts with social blessing, to be a harmful application of a misunderstanding of suffering in disability alongside simultaneously infantilizing the disabled body. I see this narrative of suffering as atonement, redemption, or, as is the case with narratives of sin, retributive, as having come emerged from narratives surrounding the cross, healing, and the nature of God. Thus, to offer up a counter, as I did with

sin and karma, I will turn to another work I would consider to be an imagining work: Nancy Eiesland's *The Disabled God*.<sup>108</sup>

In the fifth chapter of her book, Eiesland describes her epiphany as the vision of God in a sip-puff wheelchair, she describes this God as

Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, un pitying and forthright. I recognize the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged “not feasible,” unemployable,” with “questionable quality of life.” Here was God for me.<sup>109</sup>

Her emphasis on God as a survivor,<sup>110</sup> and not the suffering servant, reflects her counter to the virtuous suffering narrative. This (en)counter leads her to look to Jesus Christ as the disabled God in a conversation rich with discussion of physical embodiment and religious symbols. For Eiesland, it is Jesus in the resurrection with impaired hands, feet, and side wounds that shows how the *imago Dei* is present in the disabled body, and that disabled bodies are included in the *imago Dei* “not in spite of our impairments and contingencies, but through them.”<sup>111</sup> Thus, Eiesland sees a disabled kinship in the resurrected body of Christ. Yet, while the disabled God in the resurrected Jesus, whose wounds are touched by disciples, is an evocative figure and has great potential in the eucharistic realm, I wish to push further.

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<sup>108</sup> I have drawn on Eiesland's work throughout this paper, and while I recognize more works have come since here, and that there are points to critique, I still find it to be groundbreaking. Some include critiques on the lack of engagement with trinitarian theology, the lack of consideration for disabilities that are not physical (such as mental health, intellectual disabilities, and so on), and I would also add a lack of engagement with ideas about disability outside of the minority model (an offshoot of the social model). This last critique, however, might be unfounded, again because of chronology. Another way to phrase the last critique is that *The Disabled God* is influenced by disability rights language, of which rights are a primary focus, often without consideration of political intersectionality.

<sup>109</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 89.

<sup>110</sup> Eiesland points out that here is where language fails to describe, as survivor makes one think of victimization and individualism that is unhelpful. (102). Rather by survivor, what Eiesland means is a “simple, unself-pitying, honest body, for whom the limits of power are palpable but not tragic” (102).

<sup>111</sup> Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 100, 101.

The belief in virtuous suffering comes from the narrative that Christ's suffering on the cross is rewarded. In the classical Christian understanding, this reward is life over death for all people, as evidenced by Jesus's resurrected body. Thus, because Eiesland's disabled God centers on the resurrected Jesus, it inadvertently requires the suffering of the cross and therefore must reconcile with that suffering without falling into social blessing. To do so, the suffering on the cross must be recognized as suffering with no purpose. The question then becomes where one can find life over death for all people if not in the cross? To that I say one can find it in the life of Jesus, including the time after resurrection. In order to consider how to hold both the resurrected disabled Jesus, the gross suffering of the cross, and the life of Jesus as triumph, I will turn towards the work of Delores S. Williams.

The narrative of Jesus's death is bloody and a fate incomprehensible for the son of God to undergo. I registered this incomprehensibility even as a child in Sunday school, where I am sure I asked my teacher, "Why did Jesus have to die?" While I do not remember the answer I was given, perhaps it was "to remove sin," or "to beat death," or God forbid, "because it was God's will." Having grown up, I now believe the question itself is faulty; like the existence of disability, there is no "why" in this equation—it simply happened. However, that simple happening is more complicated. For Williams, the event of the cross is a gross amount of sin. It reflects how when humans attempt to right relationships, they are often attacked by those in power and those who support the status quo.<sup>112</sup> This understanding of the cross echoes back to relational understandings of sin; the cross is related to sin not because our sins are on it and in

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<sup>112</sup> Delores S. Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption," in *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooney et al. (Orbis Books, 1991), 12.

Christ's death we are atoned, but rather it is the sin of wrongful relationship, and thus it should not be glorified.

This term "glorified" is also used by Williams as she ends her piece with a reminder that Black female Christians cannot forget the cross, but they also should not glorify it because to do so would glorify sin and make their own exploitation "sacred."<sup>113</sup> I am not a Black woman, so I cannot comment on how this feels for its intended audience, but as a disabled individual, I believe it is also important to hold the disabled God in the resurrected Jesus, but also to not glorify the events that led to his impairment. Instead, what we should glorify is the life of Jesus. As Williams exclaims, when Jesus conquers death, it is not on the cross but through resisting temptation in the wilderness; he conquers death and sin not in dying and resurrecting but in living instead.<sup>114</sup>

However, from a disabled perspective, focusing on the life of Jesus does present an obvious elephant: the multitude of healing miracles he enacts. The healing miracles of the New Testament have long been problematized by disabled theologians as uplifting medical model notions of disability instead of promoting social change. The question here is why didn't Jesus change the social norm? Why didn't he simply include disabled people as they were? Could he not see that they had lives worth living in community?" The fact that Jesus does not seem to challenge ableist norms aids in continuing narratives of dis-/respect.

I wonder then, to take a cue from Buddhism and upaya, if we can rethink healing narratives with the idea that sometimes different explanations are given to different individuals because that is all they can personally imagine or conceive of in that moment, or because that is

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<sup>113</sup> Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience," 13.

<sup>114</sup> Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience," 12.

what they personally need at that time. Perhaps a world where disabled individuals are integrated into the community was just out of reach.

There are moments in the Bible where this world seems possible or plausible, if not likely to happen soon. One example I find of this is in the story of the paralyzed man lowered through the roof.<sup>115</sup> In that story, a moment akin to how the Buddha uses three vehicles to teach is found as the paralyzed man is forgiven of sins before he is healed, and is only healed so that Jesus can prove he has the authority to forgive sins.<sup>116</sup> Here is a moment in Jesus's life when the inclination was not to resolve the disability, but rather to forgive sins and thereby restore right relationships. The healing of the disabled man shows that removing sin is, in fact, possible, and, considering the man is so loved by his friends that they would tear the roof off, perhaps the paralyzed man already has right relationships! Perhaps that is why his sins are so easily forgiven.

This shows me that perhaps Jesus, and therefore God, can and does imagine a world outside the medical model, and that, rather, it was the world and environment of Roman-occupied Palestine that had limited options and opportunities for social change. Thus, despite the prevalence of healing miracles, there are ways to view them that differ from saying God or Jesus supports medical model notions of disability, and therefore, looking to the life of Jesus and his resurrection as opposed to his death is a viable option.

In terms of virtuous suffering and social blessing as they relate to disability, I believe focusing on the life of Jesus disrupts both notions. In the case of virtuous suffering, the Jesus who performs miracles often does so in mundane settings, for altogether normal, mundane people. Virtuous suffering relies on a notion that there will be a heavenly reward for ordinary

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<sup>115</sup> Luke 5:17-26.

<sup>116</sup> Luke 5:21-25

people if they suffer well, yet when a miracle can be described as a reward in the New Testament, they are rewards for belief, and not for suffering. Focusing on the life of Jesus reminds one that miraculous moments occur in this life, not the other. Even in the case of resurrections, the miracle lies in returning one to earthly life; there is no moment of ascension for anyone but Jesus.

As for social blessing and inspiration porn, I believe shifting focus onto the life of Jesus and his everyday being helps decenter a figure that is a spiritual superhero. Jesus is the son of a carpenter from a nowhere town; he weeps, feels fear, eats, and drinks. He is challenged, and sometimes he changes his mind.<sup>117</sup> This entirely divine but entirely human Jesus reminds us that the divine can be found in ordinary life, not in perceived extraordinary being. This brings me back to Eiesland's vision of God in sip-puff wheelchair: it is the ordinary divine.

Thus, in walking through both Eiesland's and Williams' arguments, I find that a disability perspective on the disabled God in Jesus, combined with a turning towards Jesus's life as opposed to his death, helps combat virtuous suffering and social blessing.

## CONCLUSIONS, COUNTERARGUMENTS, REFLECTIONS, AND FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP

In the case of Buddhism, in reflections on karma, upaya, and suffering, I have found that despite texts that, on a cursory approach, seem prejudiced in an American context, Buddhism offers ways within its own tradition to disrupt ableism. First, when karma is understood as a complicated and unknowable doctrine, it, like universal sin, supports seeing disability as human variance rather than a moral failing. Secondly, upaya, which gives precedent for accommodation, still illuminates the failures of accommodation (or failures of a lack of accommodation), and in

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<sup>117</sup> I would uplift the encounter with the Canaanite Woman in Matt. 15:21-28 as primary example of this.

turn shows the ethical concerns of enacting upaya and the ways certain texts portray disability. I acknowledge that this viewpoint has changed over time and context, as evidenced by the example of the Lotus Sutra. Finally, while Buddhism views suffering and disability as a negative experience, a belief that is concerning if overwrought, at the same time, this placement allows for disability to take a central part in understanding key concepts in the Buddhist tradition.

In concluding my arguments on Buddhism, I would like to address a few counterarguments I have heard from peers. The first counterargument is that my overreliance on Buddhist texts is unfounded, since Buddhism is a tradition of practice. My response to this counterargument is first an acknowledgment that, yes, I do not delve into the practice realm of Buddhism, such as meditation, chanting, and ritual. I have chosen not to do so because of my own limitations in experiencing those practices, and my own biases due to negative meditation experiences. My second response to this argument is that the rituals and practices present in Buddhism are linked to sacred text, particularly sutras. Meditation retreats I have attended, and centers I have visited, use texts, such as the Lotus Sutra, as a primary focus for chanting, and as a locus for meditation. Text is, in fact, part of Buddhist practice, though often presented in an oral form.

In relation to this, the second counterargument (one to this whole project) is that there is not much to say about Buddhism and disability because Buddhism is more accessible than Christianity. I believe those who have said this to me are speaking regarding the physical accessibility of centers, which may be true in some cases but not in others. Considering religious institutions are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act, unless they have a certain number of employees, when a Buddhist center is accessible, it is usually because a conscious choice has been made to make it accessible. This is something to highlight, but if a center is only

*physically* accessible, there is still work to be done. Buddhist places of practice still have room to learn to be theologically accessible and practically accessible; by practically accessible, I mean relating to practice. One example is that, during still meditation, there should be sitting, standing, and lying-down options.<sup>118</sup> By theologically accessible, I mean it must be theologically non-glorifying of disability and simultaneously non-stigmatizing. In both Buddhism and Christianity, there are locations (churches, centers, or temples) that struggle with this latter point. One tradition is not better or worse than the other when it comes to accessibility, and attempting to argue that one is, when both still have work to do, feels against the spirit of interreligious engagement and collective liberation.

In Christianity's case, in reflecting on sin, suffering, and the life of Jesus, I have found that, despite the presence of texts that conflate disability and sin, Christianity offers a liberatory perspective by seeing disability as a form of human variance. Additionally, I have found that because of the disabled experience's position to understand suffering, the disabled experience highlights the ways that Christian narratives concerning suffering involve virtuous suffering and social blessing. In an attempt to offer a liberatory perspective here, I have walked through both the benefits of Eiesland's disabled God imagery and also its failure to address particular narratives around suffering because of its' focus on the resurrection. Subsequently, I turned to the work of Delores S. Williams to discuss the potential for shifting focus away from the cross (the locus of suffering) to focus on Jesus's life as a way to move beyond narratives of suffering. Thus, I have tried to show that, despite precedents that may support ableism in my American context, Christianity does offer liberatory viewpoints and ways to counter its own prejudice.

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<sup>118</sup> It should be noted these options exist; the question is whether the options are explained and then offered.

As I have done so for the Buddhist sections of this paper, I will address the common counterpoints I heard regarding my portions on Christianity. The first counterpoint and critique I have received is that by focusing on sin and virtuous suffering but not discussing how virtuous suffering is a doctrine of redemption for said sin, I do not allow for the possibility of virtuous suffering to be a healing force in some practitioners' spiritual lives. My response to this critique is that while the narrative of virtuous suffering can, in fact, be helpful for some because it gives meaning to suffering, I still find it troubling when the suffering is linked to disability and inspiration. The issue I have is not finding meaning in suffering, but rather what we classify as suffering, and how we use god's will to avoid social and theological change.

Another critique, one that applies to this whole paper, is that I have focused too heavily on suffering and retribution. Even when discussing upaya and Eiesland's work, I still critique or complicate those arguments, and therefore, I focus too heavily on the negatives of disabled experience. While I have already explained why focusing too heavily on positive aspects is harmful, I do admit that the tone this paper has taken may lean too far toward the negative. Thus, I have some additional personal reflections to end on regarding liberatory joy, proof of existence, and hope for continued scholarship in this area.

### **Endings: Joy, Proof of Existence, and Hopes for Further Scholarship**

One of the reasons I believe Eiesland's work has been continuously cited in circles looking at Christianity and disability is because of her vision of God in Their wheelchair. It is such a clear, intimate, and evocative description, and it is hard not to wonder in awe at it. I, too, have had my moment of encounter with this image. While for Eiesland God in their chair represents interdependence, the ability to survive and thrive in ways that do not create pity, what I feel in this encounter is the *imago Dei* in myself. In my own disabled experience, I face suffering when

I am not accommodated or when accommodations fail; I face suffering from the pain of my condition as well. Yet when I envision Eiesland's God in their chair, I feel joy and see proof of my existence.

I think of how my own set of wheels, my rollator, enables me to get a little further, so my world expands beyond five blocks in New York City, and I think of how God uses humans through the Holy Spirit to enact social change. I also think of past experiences with mobility aids, with forearm cuffs that make an unknown chord when the wind blows through them, and I hear God's creation singing as he walks through the Garden of Eden. Eiesland's disabled God is so powerful to me because it shows existence on a divine or cosmological level, and I believe that possibility is present in Buddhism as well and should be explored.

For example, when I encounter stories in Buddhism, such as the Lotus Sutra, that describe bodhisattvas and other beings arriving on lotus seats, never seeming to stand, I immediately think: the dharma and lotus seat is their mobility aid! I imagine Khujjuttara too might have needed a cane.<sup>119</sup> I even imagine the Buddha, who sits in a way that suggests hypermobility, and considering the proportions described in the thirty-two marks of a great man, must have had joint issues.<sup>120</sup> Outside of physical disability, I also think to the Vinaya, and how it allows acquittal for monks identified as *ummattaka* (mentally disordered)<sup>121</sup> as evidence of my own mentally ill existence across time.

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<sup>119</sup> I also wonder if she might, like me, have wished to have bashed others on the street when they stand and leave me to do all the moving out of the way. I wonder if that urge changed when she became a stream-enterer.

<sup>120</sup> My personal favorite mark regarding this is that "When standing upright and not bending over, the palms of both hands touch the knees" (This is from the Lakkhanasutta, you can read it online here: <https://suttacentral.net/dn30/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin>).

<sup>121</sup> Koike Kiyoyuki, "The Acquittal (anapatti) of the Mentally Disordered Monks," *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* 58 (2010).

There is so much rich potential for discussion that I am often shocked by that original search in CLIO, where so little engagement between Buddhism and disability existed. I cannot answer why it is not there, and I cannot even begin to judge if the conversation has moved from academia to practicality or vice versa. Similarly, while Christianity and disability is a much more common topic, it still seems to be a slow-moving conversation in both the theological and the practical realms.<sup>122</sup> Following this, I believe the next steps for scholarship ought to include both theoretical and theological work, as this paper has tried to do, and the practical implementation of that work, which is beyond the scope of this project.

In Christianity, the movement to reconsider the harms of ancient doctrines must continue. A willingness to move with time and respect the changing needs of the body of worshippers, which is a skill disabled individuals are forced to develop, must grow. Additionally, the Church must be accountable for accommodations, such as advocating to amend the ADA to remove its exclusion.

Similarly, Buddhist institutions too should not be exempt; however, for this push to happen, a theological reason in each tradition that cannot be ignored must be given, hence the importance of continuing theological and liberationist analysis.

For Buddhism, this could look like developing disability dharma. By this, I mean the dharma found in the disabled experience, which is hidden by politics, power games, and erasure, despite the reality that there is a valid Buddhism practiced by disabled practitioners.<sup>123</sup> Following

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<sup>122</sup> To use the Episcopal Church again, in perusing the digital archives (found here: <https://episcopalarchives.org/>.) I have seen that while there was a task force on accessibility established in 1982 (1982-D020 “Establish a Task Force on Disabled and Handicapped Persons”) it seems to have been discontinued in 1997 due to not being renewed. While other motions were made to be ADA compliant, no new motion for a task force was made until 2018 (2018-D097 “Establish a Task Force on Accessibility and ADA Compliance”). The last General Convention in 2024, however, did pass 2024-D080 “Create a Committee on Disability and Deaf Inclusion.” Considering how many churches (that I have visited) that are still inaccessible theologically, practically, and physically, there is still much work to be done.

<sup>123</sup> The phrasing of this sentence in part comes from a comment made by my first reader (Rev. Greg Snyder) in a class on Socially Engaged Buddhism on April 1, 2025. My notes of the comment read as “Women carry rich Dharma, but are so hidden by political power games. . . The valid Buddhism that is done by women. . . why are

classical definitions of dharma, this would first include what is learned from the Buddha's teaching through disabled experience (for example, the section on suffering in this paper). Second, this could also include teachings about the Buddha through the disabled experience (for example, reimagining the thirty-two marks through a disabled lens). A third aspect of disability dharma is seeing the disabled experience as something that, like the dharma, embodies the nature of phenomena, especially impermanence. Relatedly, disability dharma would hold seeing the disabled experience as one of many aspects of truth or reality (an example of this could be how disability and human variance show and complicate karma, as defined by limits), the disabled experience holds unknowability. Practical implications and implementations of disability dharma are, in fact, accommodation, upaya, and movement towards widespread accessibility and integration.

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we renouncing all these things, but still holding onto gender?" Additionally, the phrase of disability dharma also comes from him, who on our first meeting about this paper in fall 2025 asked "I wonder what disability dharma would look like?"

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