

The Reception of *Lotus Sūtra* Thought in China

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INTRODUCTION

THE topic of this essay, “The Reception of *Lotus Sūtra* Thought in China,” is a potentially vast one, which makes it necessary to delimit our field of concern. Tales of miraculous response speak of numerous worldly benefits to be gained from faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*; widespread devotion to Bodhisattva Guanyin was inspired by the 25th chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* (known, alternatively, as the *Guanyin Sūtra*)—all of these are important developments associated with the reception of the *Lotus Sūtra* in China. However, in this essay, such topics will not be discussed. Instead, my concern is to investigate the way in which doctrinal concepts central to the *Lotus Sūtra* were appropriated in China. I would suggest that the core thought of the *Lotus Sūtra* may be summarily grasped from three basic points of view: The first point is the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle,” whereby all sentient beings are considered equally to attain Buddhahood; The second point is the idea of Buddha Śākyamuni’s “age-old existence,” according to which Śākyamuni Buddha is conceived to have eternal existence and to function as the absolute savior of all sentient beings who dwell in the Sahā world; The third point is the idea of the “bodhisattvas emerging from the earth,” who signify the upholders of the *Lotus Sūtra* in a world where the Buddha is no longer present.¹

The first of these three ideas, the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle,” is expounded in the second “Expedient Means” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. To paraphrase the text, the chapter teaches that the Buddha appeared in the Sahā world for one great purpose, which was to bring about the equal salvation of all sentient beings. This is the original way in which the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle” was presented in the sutra. There are embedded within this notion two complementary motifs, one being the idea that sentient beings may have equal access to Buddhahood and, the other, an emphasis on Śākyamuni Buddha’s existence and role as a savior figure. Generally speaking, there is a strong tendency to overlook

the importance of the latter point of the Buddha's salvific role in favor of emphasis on the foregoing idea of sentient beings' equal attainment of Buddhahood. Hence one must not be remiss in paying close attention to the latter of these two points, namely, the salvific role of the Buddha.

The second concept, the "age-old existence of the Buddha," is expounded in the 16th "The Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The idea that Śākyamuni's life-span as a Buddha is eternal, and the related notion that his entry into nirvāṇa at the age of 80 was merely intended as an "expedient display of nirvāṇa" (the idea that the Buddha provisionally showed himself to enter final nirvāṇa merely as an expedient measure to arouse a keen resolution on the part of sentient beings to seek the way), in fact teaches that the eternal Buddha will appear to persons of deep faith. From the perspective of sentient beings themselves, this is to grant the possibility that one may "see or meet the Buddha."

The third idea, that of the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth, is expounded in the 10th "The Teacher of the Law" chapter and the 15th "Emerging From the Earth" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The bodhisattvas emerging from the earth are powerful bodhisattvas who have realized enlightenment in a past age, and who appear in the Sahā world out of compassion for sentient beings. It seems plausible to me that the persons responsible for compiling the *Lotus Sūtra* during its formative period seized on the idea of the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth for purposes of articulating their own self-image as devotees.

By limiting our subject to the *Lotus Sūtra* "in China," I mean to say that this essay will focus largely on commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra* that were representative in China. Translations of the Buddhist scriptures into Chinese began around the latter half of the second century, and this ultimately allowed Chinese to study Buddhist teachings in their native language. The Buddhist scriptures were traditionally divided into three broad categories of sutra, vinaya, and treatise. However, as the study of Buddhism progressed, additional commentaries and exegetical materials began to be composed for the newly translated sutras, vinaya materials, and treatises. In China, as in India and other regions, the sutras were considered to be the most legitimate basis for investigating the thought of the Buddha. Thus expository works on the sutras (i.e., "sutra commentaries") came to be composed with utmost fervor.

Altogether we count three complete translations of the text of the *Lotus Sūtra* into Chinese: (1) the 10-fascicle *Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經, translated in 286 A.D. by Dharmarakṣa (Fahu 法護) of the Western Jin (born around 230; died age 78); (2) the seven- or eight-fascicle *Miaofa*

lianhua jing 妙法蓮華經, translated in 406 by Kumārajīva of the Yao-Qin 姚秦 (dates variously given as 344–413 and 350–409); and (3) the seven-fascicle *Tianpin miaofa lianhua jing* 添品妙法蓮華經, translated jointly by Jñānagupta (523–605) and Dharmagupta (d. 619) in 601A.D. The *Tianpin miaofa lianhua jing* is basically an emended edition of Kumārajīva’s translation.

The Chinese text of the *Zheng fahua jing* is difficult to understand. However, the real focus of Buddhist learning during this period was the prajñā teachings, and it is probably this latter factor, more than the text’s intelligibility, that accounts for the relative failure of the *Lotus Sūtra* to arouse the attention of the Buddhist world at that time. Nevertheless, we should not forget the lectures on the sutra given by Zhu Daoqian 竺道潛 during the period of the Eastern Jin. In contrast to the situation of the *Zheng fahua jing*, the *Miaofa lianhua jing* ultimately basked in the footlights of its age, capturing the faith and scholarly interests of many people. The majority of the exegetical treatises that we shall introduce shortly were composed with the Kumārajīva text as their referent. The *Tianpin miaofa lianhua jing* is a work that was designed to emend perceived lacunae in Kumārajīva’s *Miaofa lianhua jing*. But in the long run, it is the original Kumārajīva text that people continued to study and recite. In the most current version of the *Lotus Sūtra*, various materials have been introduced that did not appear in the original Kumārajīva translation, such as the “Devadatta” chapter.

When we turn our attention to extant Chinese exegetical literature on the *Lotus Sūtra*, the oldest surviving commentary is the *Miaofa lianhua jing shu* 妙法蓮華經疏 of Zhu Daosheng (竺道生 ca. 355–434). Daosheng was a disciple of Kumārajīva. However he was a person who, on the strength of his theories of sudden enlightenment and the *icchantika*’s attainment of Buddhahood, was also prized for his independent insights into Buddhist doctrine. Daosheng himself relates that he wrote his commentary on the basis of notes that he had taken down from Kumārajīva’s lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra*.

With the exception of fragments from various *Lotus Sūtra* commentaries discovered at Dunhuang 敦煌, the next oldest commentary after Daosheng’s *Miaofa lianhua jing shu* is the *Fahua yiji* 法華義記 by Fayun 法雲 (467–529) of Guangzhai 光宅 Monastery.² The *Fahua yiji* is a record of Fayun’s discourses on the *Lotus Sūtra* as recorded by his disciples. Along with Zhizang 智藏 (458–522) of Kaishan 開善 Monastery and Sengmin 僧旻 (467–527) of Zhuangyan 莊嚴 Monastery, Fayun was personally revered as one of the three great masters of the Liang 梁 Dynasty. Fayun’s studies of the *Lotus Sūtra* occupied foremost place in

the North-South Dynasties Period prior to the advent of Jizang 吉藏 (549–623) and Zhiyi 智顛 (538–598). While Jizang and Zhiyi themselves recognized this fact and were deeply influenced by Fayun's work on the *Lotus Sūtra*, Jizang and Zhiyi went on to construct their own views of the *Lotus Sūtra* which entailed rather severe criticism of Fayun's position that the *Lotus Sūtra* was inferior in status to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.

Among the works ascribed to Zhiyi we have the *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義,³ which is a synthetic exposition of doctrines from the *Lotus Sūtra* organized according to five aspects of 'profound meaning' (*xuanyi* 玄義). The five aspects include: (1) the significance of the sutra's title (*ming* 名), (2) the doctrinal substance or foundation (*ti* 體) of the sutra, (3) the specific thematic or doctrinal thrust (*zong* 宗) of the sutra, (4) the salvific function (*yong* 用) of the sutra, and (5) the respective place that the sutra's teachings hold within comprehensive (and extra-textual) systems of doctrinal classification (*panjiao* 叛教). There is also the interlinear commentary to the text of the *Lotus Sūtra* known as the *Fahua wenju* 法華文句 (Passages and Lines of the *Lotus Sūtra*). However, neither of these two works was actually compiled by Zhiyi himself. They were taken down from Zhiyi's lectures by his disciple Zhang'an 章安灌頂 (561–632), who later reworked them into their final form. Zhiyi is by no means an advocate of "Lotus absolutism," but he definitely did establish a system of doctrinal classification that centered squarely on the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁴

In addition to Zhiyi, we also have various works on the *Lotus Sūtra* by Jizang, the great systematizer of the Three Treatises (*sanlun* 三論) school (The school derives its name from its emphasis on the "three treatises" of the *Zhonglun* 中論 and *Shi'er men lun* 十二門論 of Nāgārjuna and the *Bailun* 百論 of his disciple Āryadeva). He was the most prolific author of commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*, which include the *Fahua xuanlun* 法華玄論,⁵ *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏, *Fahua youyi* 法華遊意,⁶ and *Fahua tonglüe* 法華統略.⁷ Jizang compiled his commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra* with the idea that the different Mahāyāna sutras are equal in their common aspiration to reveal the ultimate truth of Buddhism.

Finally, there is the *Fahua xuanzan* 法華玄贊 of Master Ji 基 (632–682) from Ci'en 慈恩 Monastery. As a master of the Faxiang 法相 school, Ji explains the *Lotus Sūtra* from a standpoint where the three vehicles are regarded as real and the one vehicle is regarded as expedient. It is a perspective that differs completely from previous commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*, in which the three vehicles are deemed expe-

dient and the one vehicle is regarded as real.

No matter how you look at it, these individuals represent some of the most illustrious figures of Chinese Buddhist history; and all of them grappled with study of the *Lotus Sūtra*, to which they brought a diversity of religious and scholastic concerns. From the eighth century onward, sub-commentaries on the commentaries mentioned above came to be compiled.

Relying largely on Chinese commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*, this essay will look into the question of how the three core ideas of the *Lotus Sūtra* were received in China.

THE IDEA OF THE “ONE BUDDHA VEHICLE” IN CHINA

The “One Buddha Vehicle” as a Foundational Rubric for “Doctrinal Classification” (panjiao)

The practice of “doctrinal classification” is considered to be one of the most distinctive features of Chinese Buddhism. One of the central attractions of the *Lotus Sūtra* for Chinese lay in the *Lotus Sūtra*’s role as a scriptural foundation for this practice of doctrinal classification. The introduction of Buddhism to China is thought to have occurred around the first century of the Common Era, with the translation of Buddhist scriptures beginning sometime during the second half of the second century. By this time some 500 or 600 years had already passed since the death of the Buddha. Over the course of these centuries, Indian Buddhism divided into various schools. Mahāyāna Buddhism also arose; and along with it, there appeared an attitude of stern opposition to Nikāya Buddhism (or to a part of them). This enormous diversity of Buddhist thought was unsystematically introduced to China through translation of works into Chinese, leaving Chinese followers without any knowledge whatsoever of the circumstances of its historical development in India. By accepting this diversity of Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna scriptures as the direct words of the Buddha, it was inevitable that Chinese Buddhists would be thrown into considerable confusion.

For example, Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠 (334–416) was perhaps the foremost figure in Chinese Buddhist circles of his day. Yet contrary to our expectations, when we examine the collection of letters exchanged between Kumārajīva and Lushan Huiyuan (the *Dasheng dayi zhang* 大乘大義章), we are surprised to find out that even he did not have a clear understanding of the distinction between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna. As the study of Buddhism began to flourish, efforts were undertaken to sort

out the pedagogical system by which the Buddha was presumed to have preached the Dharma over the course of his career, which mainly amounted to providing a semblance of cohesion to the contradictory ideas found in the scriptures. This development marked the birth of what we call “doctrinal classification” (*panjiao*).

The practice of doctrinal classification came to flourish during the fifth century, just after the period when translation of the most important Mahāyāna scriptures had been completed. By way of example, we might introduce the five-period classificatory scheme of Huiguan 慧觀, a figure who was especially prominent in the southern regions during the North-South Dynasties Period. (Huiguan’s dates are uncertain, but he was a disciple of Kumārajīva, and his brief *Fahua zongyao xu* 法華宗要序 still survives.)

To begin with, Huiguan distinguishes the two categories of the sudden teaching and gradual teaching as the most elemental division in the Buddha’s teachings. The former (the “sudden teaching”) corresponds to [the preaching of] the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*. The latter (“gradual teaching”) is conceived as a progressive exposition of the Dharma that spans the period from the Buddha’s first sermon at Deer Park to his final entry into nirvāṇa and advances gradually from shallow to profound. The gradual program is divided accordingly into five sub-categories or phases of teaching. They comprise: (1) the teaching that expounds the three vehicles individually or separately, which corresponds to the Hīnayāna doctrines found in works such as the *Āgama* sutras, (2) the teaching wherein the three vehicles are expounded conjointly or in common, which corresponds to the *Dapin banruo* 小品般若 or *Large Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra*, (3) the evangelical teaching, which represents the *Vimalakīrti* and *Brahmapariṣcchā* sutras, (4) the teaching that reverts to commonality or sameness, which corresponds to the *Lotus Sūtra*, and (5) the teaching of eternal abiding, which corresponds to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*.

There are several distinctive features to Huiguan’s classification scheme: One is the elevated status that it gives to the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* as the sudden teaching. Another is its organization of the Buddha’s preaching in terms of the extended temporal framework of his career, so that the Buddha’s different expositions of the Dharma are understood to progress sequentially from shallow teaching to profound teaching. Finally there is the fact that Huiguan’s system itself achieves theoretical integration on the basis of this foundational principle of a progression from shallow teaching to profound teaching.

Within this progressive program of the gradual teaching, the *Nirvāṇa*

Sūtra occupies the highest place (as the fifth of the five teachings). Consequently, the *Lotus Sūtra* is relegated to a position that is lower in status than both the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. Then again, when one looks closely at Huiguan's gradual teaching, one can easily see how his first, second and forth gradual teachings were conceived on the basis of the idea of the "expediency of the three vehicles and the reality of the one vehicle," as expounded in the second "Expedient Means" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The *Lotus Sūtra* itself represents the Buddha's preaching career as a progression from the three vehicles to the one vehicle; and as such, we can see how Chinese practitioners of doctrinal classification (such as Huiguan) gave form to their classificatory systems by consulting the *Lotus Sūtra*. Because the Chinese exegetes on the *Lotus Sūtra* did not succeed in organizing the instructional content of the Buddha's career sufficiently by relying solely on the progression from the three vehicles to the one vehicle, as a result of that they sought to develop even more detailed arrangements by making use of such parables as the tale of the prodigal son preached in the fourth "Belief and Understanding" chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

This five-period scheme of doctrinal classification placed the *Lotus Sūtra* in a position lower than that of the two *Avataṃsaka* and *Nirvāṇa* sutras, and for this reason it was severely criticized by the likes of Jizang and Zhiyi. However, one could say that, even for Zhiyi and Jizang, the abiding tendency to look to the *Lotus Sūtra* as a generative foundation for doctrinal classification in itself remained unchanged.

In summation, the *Lotus Sūtra's* concept of the one Buddha vehicle—the first of our three core concepts—was appropriated in China as a foundational rubric for the formative development of Chinese Buddhist doctrinal classification. In so far as the attention given to the second and third core concepts of the *Lotus Sūtra* was never comparable to it in scope, one could also argue that this first of three concepts was the primary point of concern for Chinese Buddhists.

The Three Vehicles as Expedient, the One Vehicle as Real ("Elaborating the Three Vehicles to Reveal the One"), and the Distinctive Interpretation of the Lotus Sūtra Found in the Faxiang (法相) School

We have noted that Buddhists in China seized upon the *Lotus Sūtra's* concept of the one vehicle as a foundational rubric for their practice of doctrinal classification. In point of fact, they assimilated ideas from the *Lotus Sūtra* in ways that were consistent with the original idea of the *Lotus Sūtra*, so that a formulation such as "the three vehicles as expedi-

ent and the one vehicle as real,” which in the specialized terminology of Chinese exegetical discourse becomes “elaborating the three to reveal the one” (*kaisan xianyi* 開三顯一), was specifically appropriated as one of the elemental concepts of the *Lotus Sūtra*. But be that as it may, the *Fahua xuanzan* of master Ji from Ci'en Monastery interprets the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle” from a perspective that is polar opposite to the explanations of both the *Lotus Sūtra* and previous exegetes. Ji's perspective is that of the Faxiang School, which held that sentient beings could be divided into five basic categories according to their salvific natures or dispositions (*zhongxing* 種性). They include: (1) individuals endowed with the fully determined disposition of a śrāvaka, (2) individuals endowed with the fully determined disposition of a pratyekabuddha, (3) individuals endowed with the fully determined disposition of a bodhisattva, (4) beings whose salvific disposition is yet to be formed or determined and (5) beings who are deprived of salvific disposition altogether. Among these five, beings of the first, second and fifth disposition cannot attain Buddhahood. According to Ji, the *Lotus Sūtra* preached the idea that “the three vehicles are expedient and the one vehicle is real” merely in order to direct beings of undetermined disposition (category 4) away from the path of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha and toward the path of the bodhisattva. This is because the defining position for Ji presumed “the three vehicles to be real and the one vehicle to be expedient.” Such an interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra* is actually different from the intentional meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra* at the time when it was compiled. However, problems of this sort continued to recur, and in Japan it was picked up in the form of a controversy between Saichō 最澄 (767–822) and Tokuitsu 徳一 (d.u.) over the “expediency and reality of the three and the one.”

Zhiyi's “Three Benefits” of “Sowing, Maturing and Reaping”

As we have indicated, the idea of the one vehicle not only contains an implicit emphasis on sentient beings having equal access to Buddhahood, but also places an emphasis on the role of the Buddha as a savior of sentient beings. This issue, in turn, intersects with certain discrepancies that occur between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* regarding the attainment of Buddhahood. For example, the Mahāyāna *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* asserts that “all sentient beings are endowed with ‘Buddha-nature’ (*foxing* 佛性),” or an inherent disposition to Buddhahood. The basis for sentient beings' attainment of Buddhahood is posited on the basis that this Buddha-nature is intrinsically present in all sentient beings. However, the *Lotus Sūtra* took shape before the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. When the

Lotus Sūtra professes that all sentient beings will attain Buddhahood, it develops this idea from the position that “Śākyamuni Buddha, in order to enable all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, beneficently appeared in this saḥā world. That, in itself, was the World Honored One’s sole, great purpose.” Thus it combines universal attainment of Buddhahood with a profound religious bond that exists between the Buddha and sentient beings themselves.

As for the interpretation of the “one Buddha vehicle,” the importance of the Buddha’s existence concerning the salvation of sentient beings did not draw much attention in China. However, in thinking through his theories on the attainment of Buddhahood, Zhiyi was attracted to this idea as a point of inspiration and gave it expression in his views on the three benefits of “sowing the seed, maturing [the seed], and reaping the fruit.” Specifically speaking, the “benefit of sowing the seed” refers to the process through which the Buddha forges the initial karmic connections—the first religious bonds—with sentient beings; the “benefit of maturation” refers to the process of maturing the salvific capacities of sentient beings; and the “benefit of reaping the fruit” correlates to the act of bringing about their final liberation and realization of Buddhahood.⁸ Zhiyi took the story of the Buddha Excellence of Great Penetrating Wisdom in the seventh “The Parable of the Phantom City” chapter to be an illustration of the idea that the salvific process has a beginning and an end. Accordingly, he conceived the idea that the Buddha actively provides sentient beings with the three benefits of “sowing the seed, maturing the seed, and reaping the fruit” of Buddhahood.

The Question of Whether the Lotus Sūtra Expounds or Does Not Expound the Notion of Buddha-nature

The Mahāyāna version of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was compiled in India sometime during the fourth century of the Common Era. As its core concept, the sutra teaches that the fundamental essence of the Buddha is the Dharma-body (*dharmakāya*). In addition to the idea that this Dharma-body abides eternally, it also advocates that every living entity is intrinsically endowed with the nature of or disposition to Buddhahood (i.e., “Buddha-nature,” *foxing*). At the risk of oversimplification, it simultaneously holds that the Buddha’s body or being is eternal and that the Buddha’s nature is universal.

One will notice right away that, on this point, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* closely resembles the ideas of the one vehicle and the age-old existence of the Buddha that are so central to the *Lotus Sūtra*. The concept of the one vehicle implies that all sentient beings are equally capable of attain-

ing Buddhahood, while the age-old existence of the Buddha suggests that the Buddha is ever-abiding. However, as presented in the *Lotus Sūtra* proper, the one Buddha vehicle establishes the possibility of sentient beings' attainment of Buddhahood by positing the existence of a religious bond between the Buddha and sentient beings that persists from the distant past. Hence its idea of the age-old existence of the Buddha entails a particular historical emphasis which construes this eternal Buddhahood as precisely a Buddha in history. As the product of a long and gradual process of formation, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* eventually laid a foundation for sentient beings' attainment of Buddhahood by developing the purely interiorized principle of intrinsic Buddha-nature. Furthermore, incipient teachings on the eternity of the Buddha-body underwent increasing theorization, until it alone prevailed as a concept in the abstract.

Despite these parallels, the conviction was widespread during the North-South Dynasties Period that notions of intrinsic Buddha-nature and the eternity of the Buddha as they appeared in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* were not expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁹ To illuminate this point, let us introduce some of the criticisms that Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523–592) made of received speculations regarding the *Lotus Sūtra*'s failure to expound the Buddha-nature. Tradition holds that Huiyuan compiled a commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* in seven fascicles. However, the work no longer exists. Thus we will turn to the brief critique of Liu Qiu's 劉虬 doctrinal classification that Huiyuan provides in his *Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章, in which Huiyuan took up the question of Buddha-nature and the *Lotus Sūtra*:

If you say that the *Lotus Sūtra* is [doctrinally] less profound than the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* because it does not yet expound the idea of Buddha-nature, then such a theory is not correct. There is a point in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* where, in effect, it says, "Buddha-nature is, in itself, the one vehicle." Why should we necessarily say that the exposition of the one vehicle in the *Lotus Sūtra* is not to be equated with the Buddha-nature? Moreover, when, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging encounters members of the fourfold assembly, he announces in a loud voice: "It is possible that you will become a Buddha, so I will not make light of you." It is because he knows that sentient beings possess the Buddha-nature that he declares, "You will all become Buddhas." This shows that identification [of the one vehicle] with the Buddha-nature is present [in the text]. (T 44. 466a–b)

There are two aspects to the method of critique that Huiyuan adopts

here. His first approach is to cite the passage from the northern version of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* that reads, “Buddha-nature is an alternative name for the one vehicle.” (Bodhisattva Lion’s Roar Chapter, fascicle 27, T 12. 524c.) This he uses as a proof-text for establishing identification between the Buddha-nature and the one vehicle of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The second approach is to find a rationale for Never-Disparaging’s practice of reverence in the idea that sentient beings are worthy of respect because they possess Buddha-nature and are destined for future attainment of Buddhahood.¹⁰

Jizang and Zhiyi go to even greater lengths to provide proof of the notion that the *Lotus Sūtra* preaches the idea of Buddha-nature. However, we will spare further discussion of this point here.¹¹

THE IDEA OF THE “AGE-OLD EXISTENCE OF THE BUDDHA” IN CHINA

As for the “long-enduring or age-old existence of the Buddha,” the second of our three core concepts from the *Lotus Sūtra*, was relatively insignificant in China. This situation is closely related to the historical influence of the five-period classification that we introduced above, in which the preaching of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* was equated with the fifth-period doctrine of the Buddha’s eternal abiding, and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* itself was affirmed as the sutra that revealed the true eternity of the Buddha.

In China, the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa* sutras circulated within one and the same arena, and it was considered best to study the eternity of the Buddha on the basis of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. Consequently, with the single exception of Zhiyi, one could say that the *Lotus Sūtra*’s unique vision of the historical Buddha as super-historical or eternal Buddha was not well understood. And yet, severe criticism was later directed to representations of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the five-period scheme, especially the idea that the Buddha described in the *Lotus Sūtra* has an impermanent existence.

To begin with, when we look back to the era before the five-period classification took shape we find that disciples (especially Sengrui 僧叡) immediate to the circle of Kumārajīva (the *Lotus Sūtra*’s translator) understood the representation of the Buddha in the 16th “The Life Span of Thus Come One” chapter to be something that symbolized an eternal and limitless life span. As they saw it, the use of hyperbolic similes to express vast stretches of time (such as, “eons equivalent to motes of dust contained in five hundred thousands of tens of thousands of millions of *nayutas* of *asaṃkheyas* of trichiliocosm world-realms”) made it

possible to strongly impress the idea of the Buddha's eternity on its audience. Similes of this sort were accordingly explained as attempts to convey the eternity of past and future. Thus the existence of the Buddha was understood to be substantially limitless, both in terms of past and future.

Be that as it may, Fayun offered an interpretation from the perspective of the five-period scheme that was polar opposite to this idea. According to Fayun's *Fahua yiji*,¹² representations of the Buddha's life span in scriptures prior to the *Lotus Sūtra* assign it a duration of either 80 years (as in the more familiar biographies of the Buddha) or seven hundred *asaṃkheyas kalpas* (as in the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi Sūtra*). By contrast, the duration of the Buddha's life put forth in the *Lotus Sūtra* is considerably longer than in these other works. This excessive length is attributed to the idea that the Buddha simply used his supernatural powers to extend his life span in order to save sentient beings. Therefore, the representation of the Buddha's life span found in the *Lotus Sūtra* is still considered by Fayun to be nothing more than a relative sense of duration. Fayun illustrated his point with the following simile: A post of five *zhang* 丈 (one *zhang* equals to about ten feet) is covered over with dirt, so that two *zhang* of that post is concealed beneath the surface. The three *zhang* of that post that stand exposed correspond to the life span of 700 *asaṃkheya kalpas*. But when the dirt is removed and the additional two *zhang* of base of that post is revealed, the length of the pillar adds up to five *zhang*, and that length corresponds to the life span of the Buddha as revealed in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus the difference between earlier and later representations of the life span of the Buddha is no more than the difference between three *zhang* and five *zhang*—it remains purely a matter of relative measure. If we look at this situation from the perspective of the eternity of the Buddha as taught in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, we can only conclude that, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the existence of the Buddha is still presented as impermanent.

Huiyuan of Jingying Monastery has the following to say about the eternity of the Buddha in relation to the *Lotus Sūtra*'s representation of the Buddha as impermanent:

It is suggested [in the *Lotus Sūtra*] that the life span of the Buddha extends into the past for eons that exceed in number the sands of the Ganges River, and that it will extend into the future for twice the length of its past duration. If one posits that this does not yet illumine the idea of the Buddha as eternally abiding, then such a theory is not correct. One must realize that, in the case [of the *Lotus Sūtra*], it is the manifes-

tation body (*yingshen* 應身) seen by the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth that is under discussion. The idea of enduring in the past for eons that exceed the number of sands in the Ganges, and enduring into the future for twice that length, does not actually concern the reality body (*zhenshen* 真身). If we were to take the reality body into consideration, its existence would ultimately be inexhaustible. How do we know that the *Lotus Sūtra* is referring to the manifestation body and not to the reality body? The *Lotus Sūtra* says, “I have preached the teachings and instructed the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth since I became enlightened.” And it says, “I ever dwell on Vulture Peak and in other locations, where I am seen by gods and humans.” It is absolutely clear that it is speaking of the manifestation body here. Why does the manifestation body endure for twice as long in the future as it does in the past? It is because the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth—the beings who, in fact, are the object of the Buddha’s instruction—will all attain Buddhahood within a future age that is twice the length of the Buddha’s past life-span, and at that point their dependence on the Buddha’s instruction will come to an end. The Buddha will thereupon extinguish his manifestation body and revert to his reality body. Hence his duration into the future will come to twice the length of his past life span. However, there is ultimately no end to the Buddha’s salvific activity [of the reality body]. (T 44. 466b)

Basically, Huiyuan derived the passage that reads, “its duration over the past exceeds the number of sands in the Ganges River; its future duration will be twice the life span of the past,” from “The Life Span of Thus Come One” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The line “its duration over the past exceeds the number of sands in the Ganges River” is drawn from the line, “Since I attained Buddhahood, it has already been more than hundreds of thousands of tens of thousands of millions of *nayutas* of *asaṃkheya* eons,” which appears in the *Lotus Sūtra* right after the simile of eons as numerous as the atoms of dust contained in five hundred thousands of tens of thousands of millions of *nayutas* of *asaṃkheya* of worlds (T 9. 42b). The passage referring to “a future duration that is twice that of the life span of the past” comes from the line in the *Lotus Sūtra* that states, “The span of life that I have experienced since I first completed the bodhisattva path is still not exhausted, and will yet be double in length the foregoing life span.” (T 9. 42c)

Persons who advocated the impermanence of the Buddha, such as Fayun, often quoted this passage to prove their theories. However, according to Huiyuan’s interpretation of this passage, the form of the

Buddha expounded here is a manifestation body intended to serve the purpose of instructing the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth. If those bodhisattvas from the earth succeed in attaining Buddhahood in the distant future, that manifestation body will have fulfilled its function. Hence it stands to reason that it also would come to an end. By contrast, the reality body is considered to be unconditionally eternal; but in fact, Huiyuan does not say a word about where the idea of the reality body might be illumined in the *Lotus Sūtra*. In this respect he differs from Jizang and Zhiyi, who construct all manner of painstaking explanations around such passages as “twice again the number of eons that came before” in an effort to promote the idea of the eternity of the Buddha. Jizang and Zhiyi both try to prove, with even more detail than Huiyuan, that the *Lotus Sūtra* taught a doctrine of the eternity of the Buddha. However, we will not delve into this subject any further at this point.¹³

THE CHINESE RECEPTION OF THE “BODHISATTVAS EMERGING FROM THE EARTH”

The persons who will receive, uphold and spread the *Lotus Sūtra* after the Buddha enters nirvāṇa are the so-called “bodhisattvas emerging from the earth.” However, in China we do not find evidence of individuals who actively propagated faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* with the subjective identification that they themselves were the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth.¹⁴ A concept of fervent faith and strict refutation of erroneous thought does appear in the *Fahuajing anlexing yi* 法華經安樂行義 of Nanyue Huisi 南岳慧思 (515–577), but nowhere do we find these ideas explicated in direct reference to the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth.

In my opinion, the most vital and dramatic expression of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s doctrine of the one Buddha vehicle is to be found in the veneration practice of the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging. The added fact that the master Xinxing 信行 (540–594) of Three Stages Teaching (*Sanjie jiao* 三階教) incorporated the veneration practice of Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging directly into his own practice is profoundly interesting, indeed. On this point, Teruma Nishimoto observes:

What stands out in Three Stages Teaching as a particularly unique form of practice is the generic worship of human beings undertaken in imitation of the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging’s religious practice as described in the *Lotus Sūtra*. This is a concrete expression, in the form

of religious practice, of the concept of universal veneration (*pujing* 普敬) that represents the pillar of the thought of Three Stages Teaching. As a single thread that knit together the Buddhists of the North-South Dynasties Period, the *Lotus Sūtra* was accorded very high status. But propagation of the idea that people should actually practice the sort of generic veneration demonstrated by Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging occurs only with Xinxing. When compared with the disciplines of other practitioners, this approach stands out as a signature feature of the practice of Three Stages Teaching. Moreover, it constitutes a highly significant practice for the fact that it derives directly from the core thought of their doctrine.¹⁵

The idea of “universal veneration” is something that involves a basic “recognition of evil” (*ren’e* 認惡) in the form of a stern critique of one’s own evil tendencies, which is a concept unilaterally central to the doctrine of Three Stages Teaching. At the same time it requires that one revere all persons other than oneself as “good.” In contrast to the position of Jingying Huiyuan, Zhiyi and Jizang, who looked to the veneration practice of Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging as justification for the claim that Buddha-nature is taught in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Xinxing actively singles it out as a paradigm for his own faith and practice, and this fact is an extraordinarily interesting point. Be that as it may, in Three Stages Teaching this practice still bears no direct relationship to a subjective identification with the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth.

CONCLUSION

Under the classificatory rubric of “elaborating the three and revealing the one,” the idea of the “one vehicle” (the first of the core concepts of the *Lotus Sūtra*) was assimilated as a signature feature of a Chinese Buddhist tradition that itself took shape through the practice of doctrinal classification. At the same time, as a foundation for sentient beings’ attainment of Buddhahood, this concept of the “one Buddha vehicle” became closely intertwined with the intense controversy over whether the notion of “Buddha-nature” expounded in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is also expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Moreover, emphasis of the role of the Buddha’s existence in the salvation of sentient beings was taken up in the form of Zhiyi’s three benefits of “sowing the seed, maturing the seed and reaping the fruit.” Concealed in the shadow of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, the second core concept concerning the “age-old existence of the Buddha” was not regarded as particularly significant. Nevertheless, the

question of whether the age-old existence of the Buddha expounded in the *Lotus Sūtra* was to be construed as an eternal existence or an impermanent existence was a heated issue. As for the “bodhisattvas emerging from the earth,” there were persons who advocated profoundly interesting views on bodhisattva practice, such as Huisi and Xinxing. However, we do not find individuals who centrally concerned themselves with propagation of the *Lotus Sūtra* while affirming a personal identification with the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth.

NOTE: I would like to offer my appreciation to Prof. Daniel Bruce Stevenson for the translation of my Japanese paper to English.

¹ Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokekyō no shutsugen* (Tokyo: Daizō shuppan, 1997).

² Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokekyō chūshakusho shūsei 2: Hokke giki* (Daizō shuppan, 1996).

³ See Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokke gengi: jō, chū, ge* (Daisanbunmeisha, 1995); also, Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokke gengi nyūmon* (Daisanbunmeisha, 1997).

⁴ Hiroshi Kan’no, “A Comparison of Zhiyi’s and Jizang’s Views of the *Lotus Sūtra*: Did Zhiyi, after all, Advocate a ‘Lotus Absolutism?’” *Soka Daigaku, Kokusai Bukkyōgaku kōtō kenkyūjo nempō 3* (March, 2000).

⁵ Shun’ei Hirai, *Hokke genron no chūshakuteki kenkyū* (Shunjūsha, 1987); also, “*Zoku Hokke genron no chūshakuteki kenkyū* (shunjūsha, 1996).

⁶ Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokke to wa nani ka: Hokke yū’i o yomu* (Shunjūsha, 1992).

⁷ Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokekyō chūshakusho shūsei 6: Hokke tōryaku, jō* (Daizō shuppan, 1998) and *Hokekyō chūshakusho shūsei 7: Hokke tōryaku, ge* (Daizō shuppan, 2000).

⁸ *Fahua wenju 1A*, T 34. 2c.

⁹ See Liu Qiu’s 劉虬 five-period scheme of doctrinal classification as discussed in the section on “Doctrinal Traces of the Sutras” (*zhongjing jiaoji yi* 衆經教迹義) contained in Jingying Huiyuan’s 淨影慧遠 *Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章, T 44. 465a. Also, in the criticism of Fayun found in fascicle 1A of the *Fahua xuanyi*, it is remarked:

Why is it that you so rashly claim that, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the idea of the one vehicle is illumined with full disclosure (*nīta-artha*), the idea of Buddha-nature is illumined with only partial or incomplete disclosure (*neya-artha*)? Why, also, is it that the Buddha-nature of contributory cause (*yuanyin foxing* 緣因佛性) is clarified in full in the *Lotus Sūtra*, but the Buddha-nature of comprehending cause (*liaoyin foxing* 了因佛性) is not fully expounded? Why does it say that [the life span of the Buddha] extends back in time for eons that exceed in number the sands in the Ganges River, and that its future span will be twice that of the past? Does this not, after all, indicate a cause that is impermanent? (T 33. 691c–692a)

¹⁰ A very similar interpretation of Never-Disparaging’s practice had been set forth in the *Fahua lun* (T 26. 9a) written by Vasubandhu.

¹¹ In the case of Zhiyi, see *Fahua xuanyi* 5B, T 33. 744c–746a; for Jizang, see *Fahua xuan lun 1*, T 34. 367a–b; also, Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokekyō no shutsugen*, chapter 5, “Busshō-Busshin jōjū no mondai to Chūgoku Hokke shisō.”

¹² *Fahua yiji 1*, T 33. 573c–574a.

¹³ For Zhiyi, see *Fahua xuanyi* 10A, T 33. 802c–803a; for Jizang, see *Fahua xuanlun 2*, T 34. 374c–378b. Also, Hiroshi Kan’no, *Hokekyō no shutsugen* chapter 5, “Busshō-

Busshin jōjū no mondai to Chūgoku Hokke shisō.”

¹⁴ The Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–1282) recognized himself to be one of the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth and possessed a keen religious self-awareness as someone whose task it was to uphold the *Lotus Sūtra* during the age of the decline of Dharma.

¹⁵ Teruma Nishimoto, *Sangaigyō no kenkyū* (Shunjūsha, 1998), pp. 47–48. Xinxing states in his *Duigen qixing fa* 對根起行法, “Concerning the Dharma of the single person and single practice: The single person refers to the idea that oneself is nothing but an evil person. The single practice refers to the idea, as taught in the *Lotus Sūtra*, that the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging engaged exclusively in a single practice. For persons other than himself he had nothing but reverence, regarding them as the tathāgatagarbha, as the Buddha-nature, as future Buddhas-to-be, or as living Buddhas. Thus it is called “single practice.” *Dunhuang baozang* 22. 237b; Nishimoto, p. 326.