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How to Will Backwards:

Time, Forgetting and Repetition in the Lotus Sūtra

Brook Ziporyn

Professor, Dept. of Religion, Northwestern University

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Summary

This essay is an investigation into the certain distinctive rhetorical features of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra, with special attention to their relation to Tiantai doctrine. In particular, it focuses on the relation between the śrāvaka disciples and the Bodhisattva's, or between a particular figure's own śrāvakahood and the same figure's bodhisattvahood, which is seen as the primary locus classicus for the Tiantai doctrine of "inherent entailment." In the case of Śāriputra, we are told that he has forgotten his own Bodhisattva vows, that he has been a Bodhisattva all along without knowing it. In the Tiantai reading, this further means that his practice as a śrāvaka has been a part of his practice as a Bodhisattvahood, and indeed his own forgetting of

his Bodhisattvahood has been a part of this practice. Zhiyi analyzes the sūtra according to four categories: 1) Narrative causes and conditions, 2) Categorization of Buddhist teachings, 3) Roots and traces and 4) Mind contemplation. It is the third of these categories that is of special relevance to the Lotus, the analysis of the “original” or “root” identities of all the characters in the text and their present “traces” of apparent situation and practice. We are told in this part of the Fahua wenju commentary that all the śrāvaka and Bodhisattvas in the text have long been Buddhas. Zhiyi further introduces the category of “Mahāyāna śrāvakas,” a contradiction in terms which crystallizes the Tiantai view on this

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matter. For he ends up concluding that we are not to understand the relation of roots and traces as a form of conscious dissimulation, where one is inwardly aware of one’s Buddhahood but pretends to be a śrāvaka or even a heretic, or as a differentiation between “real” Bodhisattvahood and “merely apparent” śrāvakahood, but rather in accord with the forgetting of one’s own status as a further exemplification of that status. The Mahāyāna śrāvakas are all the more Bodhisattvas the more they are real śrāvakas. Moreover, in a distinctive Tiantai move, they are only in this way “true śrāvakas”—to be a Bodhisattva, in fact, is simply to be a śrāvaka (literally, “sound-hearer”) only moreso: they now “make heard” the “sound” of the Dharma universally, as Bodhisattvas.

The vision of time that emerges from this, and the rhetorical Emphasis on repeated realization and homonymous Buddhas awakening again and again in the text, is one where certain moments of awakening distinguish themselves by their ability to recognize themselves in every past and future moment, to see all previous and future deviations from themselves as also instantiations of themselves; awakening is a moment which see all previous and future non-awakening as forms of awakening, as forgettings of awakening which further express awakening. This temporal position is analogous to the Tiantai treatment of the “Buddhahood of insentient beings” in the spatial register: being awakened means seeing awakening even in the non-awake insentient beings, as forms of the expression of awakening, such that it can never be definitively said that any of these beings are purely awakened or deluded, sentient or insentient. Hence we find that the Lotus

Sūtra's treatment of Śāriputra's forgetting of his bodhisattvahood serves as a model for some of the most distinctive Tiantai doctrines.

關鍵詞：1.Lotus Sūtra 2.Tiantai 3.Time 4.Śrāvaka 5.Forgetting

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The Lotus Sūtra presents a picture of time and the positioning of human activity therein which is, if we try to knit it together into a single coherent picture, somewhat baffling; vast stretches of past and present time are invoked, and various figures in the drama are said to attain “Buddhahood” either in the distant past or the distant future, and sometimes both. The Buddha’s vow to make all beings equal to himself as Buddha is “already accomplished”;^[1] the Buddha attained Buddhahood in the distant past, but also more recently, and over and over again in between. The Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta is also Śākyamuni, even though Śākyamuni had become a Buddha in the even more distant past, according to Zhiyi's specification of the sequence in the Fahuawenju. It is not always clear how the causes and effects of this attainment are to be understood in any given case; the situation is further complicated by the lack of tense specifiers in Kumārajīva's Chinese version. What comes first, what comes after, how does the past affect the future, and the future affect the past? What goes forward, what goes backward, how does one become or contain or reverse the other? These are some of the questions that come up when we begin to look at the depiction of the temporal process in the Lotus Sūtra, particularly with the further complications added by the Tiantai exegetical tradition. It is to be noticed immediately that this depiction of time is entirely dependent on the concept of cultivation of the Buddhist path and the attainment of Buddhahood, of which it is, we might almost say, considered a function. Hence our problem here is really the question of how the attainment of Buddhahood is depicted in the Lotus. I will try to approach this issue as it has come into focus through the lens of Tiantai exegesis, which has steered so much of the reading of this text in East Asia. This means that another tantalizing riddle, Tiantai doctrine, will be applied to the riddle of the Lotus, in the hopes that they will fit together like

pieces of a tally, filling in the empty places of one another.

The focal point of my discussion will be the treatment of a particular incident from the sūtra in the Tiantai tradition, and its bearing on the temporal issues involved in reading the sutra itself, as enumerated above. The episode in question is this: In the third chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, the śrāvaka disciple Śāriputra announces his delight in having learned, in the previous chapter, that there was only one vehicle, the Buddha-vehicle, and that he was, unbeknownst to himself, also destined for Buddhahood, not merely arhatship. The Buddha responds by declaring he has instructed Śāriputra in the Bodhisattva path for many aeons, that he, the Buddha, has caused Śāriputra to be born in his Law and to study as a śrāvaka in the present, and also that Śāriputra had long ago made the Bodhisattva vow, had undertaken the Bodhisattva path, but now had forgotten all about it. He goes on to predict that Śāriputra would, at a point in the distant future, indeed become a Buddha called Flower Light Tathāgata.^[2]

So far, given just this explicit sūtra-text, there is a simple real-time literal way to understand this incident. Recalling a common motif from the jāataka literature, a disciple is said to have forgotten his own past lives. Śāriputra once started out as a Bodhisattva, but then backslid to the level of a śrāvaka. The Buddha compassionately caused him to be born in the present assembly, to get him back on course. Once this is done, he will go on to become a Buddha some day in the future.

However, several factors complicate this straightforward picture, particularly as this text was understood in East Asia, primarily under the aegis of the Tiantai commentarial tradition. This tradition obviously interprets the sutra in terms of Tiantai doctrinal concerns, but we can also perhaps detect the ways in which these complications are necessitated by any attempt to read the Lotus as

a consistent whole—something modern interpreters are of course not obligated to do. The complications of the Śāriputra situation can be pinpointed through an examination of Zhiyi's fourfold method of

explication, employed intermittently in the Fahuawenju. The application of this method entails that each line of scripture is interpreted in terms of 1) causes and conditions behind the incident recounted in the text—construed to also include stimulus-response interactions between deities and practitioners, 2) the level of teaching being explicated, 3) the root and traces, of which more in a moment, and 4) mind-contemplation.[3] Zhiyi further specifies that of these, the first, second and fourth are applicable to all sutras, whereas the third, root and traces, is distinctive to the Lotus.[4] It is this Lotus-specific aspect of the commentary that adds most to the complication of the Śāriputra picture.

The most usual referent indicated by root and trace is, of course, the original enlightenment of Śākyamuni in the distant past as opposed to his repeated births as again deluded, as again practicing the path, and as again attaining enlightenment—a dominant note in the motif of repetition we shall return to presently. However, the terms root and traces have a more comprehensive set of meanings which bear on the issue in question, as will be discussed in a moment. For now, though, the aspect of this broader definition that concerns us is that it is not only Śākyamuni who has a root and traces. Rather, Zhiyi indicates the precise root of all the main characters in the Lotus saga, in the sense of their original status or past achievement. In the case of Śāriputra, he states that Śāriputra had long ago become a Buddha, by the name of Jinlongtuo. In his traces he helps Śākyamuni as the disciple of wisdom at his right hand. First he manifested as a heretic, then as a śrāvaka and finally as a Bodhisattva, exhibiting

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each of the “five flavors,” so as to bring benefits to various types of sentient beings. All these things are accomplished by his traces.[5] That is, his appearances as a śrāvaka, his “backsliding,” occurred only in his traces, and in order to fulfill his Bodhisattva vow to enlighten beings. His backsliding, qua trace, was his progress or fulfillment, qua root.

Here we see the scope of the problem. In his root, Śāriputra has long been a Buddha. In his traces, he is said to manifest various forms to benefit all creatures; his entire career, from heretic to Bodhisattva, has been a matter of traces. On the other hand, we are also told that he has forgotten his past vow, and will become a Buddha in the future—note, not the same Buddha

Jinlongtuo, but another Buddha, Huaguang. Two straightforward real-time accounts are now suggested, but they are, by any common sense notion of time, mutually incompatible. On the one hand, we can imagine that Śāriputra is really a Buddha all along, and has been consciously taking on the roles of heretic, Bodhisattva, backslider, śrāvaka, Bodhisattva again, and so on. On the other hand, we can imagine that he has really backslid, and really didn't know that he had formerly made the Bodhisattva vow. Zhiyi says both, of course, and the simplest way to understand this is of course to take the “real” as subsuming the “provisional,” but not vice versa—that is, that he has really been a Buddha all along, and when Zhiyi says otherwise, he is merely speaking of the traces which are superseded by the real. This, however, would be to ignore the main thrust of Tiantai concepts of provisional and real. Indeed, Śāriputra's case is emblematic of the fate of all the śrāvakas in the sutra, which is indeed emblematic of the case of all sentient beings, which is emblematic of the true mark of all dharmas. The issue is whether there are in fact such things as real śrāvakas or not—and by extension, whether there is “really” any other form of delusion. The

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treatment of the Śāriputra question is the treatment of the śrāvaka question, which is the treatment of the fundamental philosophical question obsessing the Tiantai tradition, the relation between provisional and ultimate, or between delusion and enlightenment.

Zhiyi explicitly addresses the question of the reality of the śrāvakas in the Fahuawenju. First he quotes the views of two previous commentators on the sutra, Guangzhai and Kaishan. Guangzhai said there were definitely real (shi 實) practicing śrāvakas—that is, real sentient beings deluded about the ultimate truth, floundering in the Tripitaka teaching—arguing that otherwise there would be no one for the upāyas, that is, the upāyically appearing śrāvakas who were secretly Bodhisattvas all along, to respond to and guide. Kaishan said there were definitely no real practicing śrāvakas—that is, all have been enlightened from the beginning, all are Buddhas in their “root”—citing scripture and claiming that when the contrary is stated this is a provisional teaching. Typically, Zhiyi rejects both of these views, which correspond to the two alternate straightforward accounts of Śāriputra's case outlined above, accusing them each of equally distorting the meaning of the sutra. It is not the case then that Śāriputra is

really a śrāvaka, nor simply that he has been merely pretending to be one, clearly knowing he was a Bodhisattva all along. Neither the presence or absence of real śrāvakas simpliciter should be one-sidedly clung to, Zhiyi says, and cites the intersubjective situation of the parable of the lost son:

Viewing it from the real wisdom of the father, there is no stranger at the gate. If we focus on the capacity and character of the son, he calls himself a stranger.[6]

In keeping with standard Tiantai usage, “real” here is just as one-sided, non-ultimate and inconclusive as “deluded,” and final

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privileging is given to neither side of the encounter. It is not the case that because the father sees things truly, we can definitively say that in reality there is no stranger—no śrāvaka. The deluded view of the son himself is just as irrevocable a determinant of the situation.

Zhiyi goes on to quote the Saddharmapundarīka Śāstra (Fahua lun) attributed to Vasubandhu, which specifies that there are in fact four separate types of śrāvaka: the definite (i.e., unchangeable) (jueding 決定), 2) the false-claimants (zeng shang man 增上慢), 3) those who have backslid from the Mahāyāna and 4) upāyic transformations, adding that the first two are not given the prediction of Buddhahood, while the latter two types are. Zhiyi first modifies this categorization, and then decisively rewrites its meaning. He says that there should really be five types, according to the Lotus: 1) those who have long practiced the Hīnayāna, and in the present lifetime can reach the Hīnayāna fruit by hearing the Hīnayāna teaching, equivalent to the unchangeable śrāvakas of the Śāstra. 2) those who were originally Bodhisattvas, but in the long aeons of their practice grew fed up with saṃsāra and backslid to the Hīnayāna; the Buddha preaches the Hīnayāna doctrine to them as well, so as to allow them to complete the Hīnayāna path. These have only recently backslid from the Mahāyāna and should be easy to reawaken to it. They correspond to what the Śāstra calls the backsliding śrāvakas. 3) The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who appear as śrāvakas for the sake of these first two types, to lead them to the Mahāyāna, corresponding to the Śāstra's upāyic transformation śrāvakas. Zhiyi's fourth type is also not a real śrāvaka, but in another sense; someone who falsely claims to have

attained the śrāvaka fruit, corresponding to the false-claimant śrāvaka in the Śāstra. The final type of śrāvaka, added by Zhiyi, is the Mahāyāna śrāvaka (da sheng shengwen 大乘聲聞). These are those who, as the Lotus puts it, are only now “really” “sheng wen” or “voice-hearers”: they make the “sheng”—voice—of the Buddha’s path “wen” —

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heard—by all beings.[7] We have here two types of apparent śrāvakas who are really śrāvakas, and two who are not, and then the final category, which, as we shall see, is what scrambles the whole picture. It would seem inevitable, however, given that there are two types who really are śrāvakas, that the answer to the question of whether there are or are not real śrāvakas would have to be affirmative: there are some real śrāvakas, and also some fake ones. But Zhiyi rejects this answer; there are neither definitively real śrāvakas, nor definitively fake ones. Using the same intersubjective logic as just sketched in the case of the parable of the lost son, he says:

From the side of the unchangeable and the backslid śrāvakas, there are śrāvakas. From the side of Mahāyāna [śrāvakas], there . . . are none If you comprehend this, having and not having are perfectly clear, and there is no need to dispute about it one way or the other.[8]

Having and not having are perfectly clear—that is, both are clearly present, which again does not end up meaning there “are” both, that we can conclude that there are in fact real śrāvakas, or that there are not.

The reason for this lies in the fifth category, the Mahāyāna śrāvakas, those śrāvakas who are, we may say, more śrāvaka than the śrāvakas. Zhiyi moves the question to the existence or non-existence of these peculiar creatures. “If we go by the fact that they provisionally transform themselves, externally manifesting the traces of the Hīnayāna while internally disguising their Mahāyāna meritorious properties, then there would be no Mahāyāna śrāvakas.

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If we go by their self-practice, putting forth the traces to reveal the root, then there are in fact Mahāyāna śrāvakas.”[9] Zhanran explains this to mean,

going by the fact that they have a root behind the traces, the traces are subsumed, but the root is hidden, and they are not Mahāyāna śrāvakas—that is, they are simply Bodhisattvas. But going by the traces being manifested, they are still manifesting as śrāvakas; śrāvakahood is itself set up within the Mahāyāna. That is to say, even after the traces have been revealed as traces, have been opened up and superseded, they “still manifest as śrāvakas.”^[10] That is, neither the root nor trace can finally subsume the other once and for all; the appearance of śrāvakaness is enough to make it undeniable that they are śrāvakas. A clear-cut picture of “really” being something, perhaps consciously aware of one’s own dissembling, while “pretending” to be something else, simply does not apply here. To be manifesting as something makes one as much that thing as one can be, whether or not one is aware of being merely pretending to be such—a sticky issue we will take up presently.

Zhiyi continues:

The real intent of the present sūtra’s opening of the three vehicles to reveal the one vehicle is make the unchangeable and backslid śrāvakas into Mahāyāna śrāvakas. Since their self practice is established, they can transform responsively to appear as śrāvakas. If you understand this, you can comprehend the question of the being or non-being of the śrāvakas.^[11]

Notably, Zhiyi has completely undermined the definition of the unchangeable and backslid śrāvakas from the Śāstra, in which they were excluded from the prediction of Buddhahood; here they become

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the Mahāyāna śrāvakas, they are not unchangeable after all. Moreover, in doing so, they do not cease being śrāvakas; it is their becoming true Bodhisattvas that then allows them to appear precisely as śrāvakas, that is, as what they have been appearing as all along.^[12] So perhaps they are unchangeable śrāvakas after all.

Do we understand this? If not, we are not alone. For the question of Śāriputra’s real status continued to plague many in the Tiantai and Tendai traditions for centuries after Zhiyi had supposedly settled the matter. A text purporting to record the questions put by the Japanese monk Enchō asks the

Tang Tiantai monk Guangxiu about the exact rank from which Śāriputra supposedly backslid, seizing on some inconsistencies in the attribution of the status of non-backsliding in Zhanran's comment on the situation. Guangxiu's answer is that the backsliding “is also a manifestation of his real practice, and thus the backsliding is not real backsliding.” That is, the backsliding is provisional, put forth as a warning to practitioners to be ever vigilant of backsliding, and hence also an expression of true practice.[13] The full import of this response should become clearer as we proceed. Enchō asks a

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similar question to Weijuan, citing contrary evidence in other passages from Zhiyi where it is said that views are already extinguished by the sixth stage—why then does Zhanran say that Śāriputra backslid from the sixth stage because he had not yet eradicated his false views? Weijuan, citing Zhiyi's Pusa jie shu, attempts to clarify by saying that the sixth dwelling here really means the sixth stage of faith.[14] Genshin asks the same question of Siming Zhili in the early Song. Zhili answers that the ranking system strictly applied is a matter of the Separate Teaching, and Zhanran was filling in the meaning with a free hand for fear that practitioners at that stage might backslide. Such calculations, he says, are not to be objected to on the basis of exoteric Separate Teaching rankings. Zhili adds that the question of backsliding naturally pertains only to the provisional, to the traces of Śāriputra, and that in the Integrated Teaching there is no backsliding to speak of.[15] The implication would seem to be that in the root, as considered in the Integrated Teaching, there is no backsliding. This is significant, because, as we shall see in a moment, it is not at all the case that the root is a simple across-the-board enlightenment—it too is a matter of practice and attainment. That there is no backsliding in relation to the root does not mean there is an originally enlightened state which is magisterially manifesting as backsliding now and then.[16]

The persistent recurrence of this question can perhaps be taken as symptomatic of an important point of stress or tension in the tradition. Although all the exchanges just cited are couched in

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terms of a concern for working through the exact minutiae of the doctrine—in particular, at what particular stage on the path Śāriputra had backslidden—we can easily discern here that the broader issue which is tied to this case, as I indicated above, is what is really bringing this question to the surface so unremittingly. The question is, what does it mean to attain Buddhahood, if it happens both in the past and in the future to one character, and if one can backslide and forget that one is a Buddha, in at least some sense, after one has attained it? This, it would seem, is the more pressing issue bubbling below the surface of the persistent Tendai/Tiantai concern about the implications of this incident.

This is borne out by the other questions that seem to come with this one in the fascinating records of cross-cultural pilgrimages in the Tang and Song just cited. Of particular interest are the questions concerning attaining Buddhahood put by Enchō to Guangxiu, and by Genshin to Zhili. Let's start with the first of these. The question listed just after the one about Śāriputra in the former dialogue touches on the infamous Tiantai doctrine of the attainment of Buddhahood by inanimate objects (*wuching cheng fo*). Enchō asks, if the Three Buddha-natures—as proper cause, revealing cause and conditioning cause, hence as object of enlightenment, awareness of enlightenment and practices leading to this awareness—pervade all places, why is it that there is awareness in sentient beings, but none in the insentient? The sentient, he goes on, give rise to practices to attain Buddhahood; the same should be the case for the inanimate, if they really have all three Buddha-natures, including the conditioning and revealing cause. Why then don't they attain Buddhahood through exertions on the path? Guangxiu's answer is worth quoting at some length: "In fact, the inanimate do, contrary to your question, also give rise to practice and attain Buddhahood. And why? Because they become Buddhas whenever the sentient do. Thus 'when one attains it, all attain it' —how could this exclude the inanimate? If you say

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that the insentient do not give rise to practices and attain Buddhahood, then the sentient also do not give rise to practices and also do not attain Buddhahood. And why? They would then be all together in the not-giving rise (to practices, apparently belonging to one side of the encounter). When one gives rise to practice, all give rise to practice. (By the same token, if one is said to not give rise to practice, then none do). . . . Moreover, a person's

ears and eyes are sentient, but at the same time are themselves insentient—what need is there to look outside for the insentient? . . . The sentient can become the insentient, the insentient can become the sentient. . . thus the four great elements compose the body, and precisely the body is composed of the four great elements; the body is sentient but the elements are insentient. **Just this body is completely sentient.** If the body gives rise to practices and attains Buddhahood, the four great elements also give rise to practice and attain Buddhahood”[17]

This answer is especially relevant to our present inquiry. For the question of the attainment of Buddhahood by the insentient structurally mirrors in the register of space, as it were, the problem of Śāriputra’s forgetting his status in the register of time. That is, to put it naively, if Śāriputra is sentient and enlightened in certain moments, how does this relate to those other moments, before and after, in which he is not regarding himself as enlightened, in which he does not know he is a Buddha, in which he has forgotten himself? These moments of forgetting are to his awakenings what the surrounding insentient beings are to the practicing and attaining sentient being. That is, if we can put together the two straightforward but mutually incompatible accounts of the temporal sequence of Śāriputra’s biography, and if it is not right to say either that there really are or are not śrāvakas since both views are entertained by the interested parties, and if this implies, as I think

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it does, that the question is not one of whether among all presenting themselves as śrāvakas there are some who really are and some who really are not, but rather than both determinations are applicable to every apparent śrāvaka, on the basis of his own varying self-conceptions as real śrāvaka or as transformed, “Mahāyāna”