

# The Core of Śākyamuni Buddha's Teachings and the Distinctive Features of the *Lotus Sūtra*

Hiroshi Kanno

## 1. Asian Buddhism

**B**UDDHISM was founded by Śākyamuni Buddha.<sup>1</sup> The Buddhist community (*Samgha*) subsequently divided into two schools based on different interpretations of the Buddhist precepts (*Vinaya*) in the third century BCE. One is *Sthavira* group, which was conservative in terms of carrying out the Buddhist precepts, and another is *Mahāsaṃghika*, which was more innovative. From that time, further schisms developed within these two schools and it is said that approximately twenty schools had been founded by the first century BCE. At around this time, that is, the first century BCE, the activity of compiling Mahāyāna sūtras began among monks belonging to early Nikāya Buddhist schools. Those who were involved in this activity thought that the teachings expounded by the historical Śākyamuni were neither fixed nor closed and should be newly developed according to the age. Thus they began to compile sūtras, which included a new type of Buddhist thought responding to religious needs of the new age. The conservatives, who were against the compilation of Mahāyāna sūtras, insisted definitely that Mahāyāna sūtras were not the Buddha's teaching but the teaching of Māra, and that they were heretical thought. Even though the foundation of Mahāyāna sūtras brought about a conflict between the conservative and advanced groups among early Nikāya Buddhism, Nikāya Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism seem to have come to coexist gradually in India.

Around the third century BCE, Emperor Aśoka's own son (or, according to other accounts, his younger brother), Mahinda conveyed one school of the *Sthavira* group to Sri Lanka and built the foundation of South East Asian Buddhism which developed after the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. On the other hand, early Nikāya Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism were introduced from the northwest district of India through the Silk Road to Central Asia and onward to China around the first century BCE or CE. Chinese Buddhism was conveyed to Korea in the fourth century and to Japan in the sixth century, respectively, and as a result, East Asian Buddhism was founded. On the other hand, Indian Bud-

dharma was introduced to Tibet in the eighth century. Thus, Buddhism spread throughout all of Asia.

In this paper I will first explain the life and core teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha who is the starting point of Buddhism, giving a rough description of the history of Indian Buddhism. Next, I will take up the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is one of the exemplary early Mahāyāna sūtras and had a major influence on Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. I will describe its distinctive features, showing how it reflects the major events of Śākyamuni's life such as enlightenment, the first preaching and nirvāṇa.

## 2. The Initial Founding of Buddhism by Śākyamuni and its Subsequent Development

Buddhism started from Śākyamuni's enlightenment. At his time, there were religious practitioners (*śramaṇa*), who renounced secular lives, rejecting the religious authority of Brahmanism of the Indo-Aryan people and seeking new religions and new truths, while Brahmanism was the dominant religion in India. Śākyamuni was one of those practitioners.<sup>2</sup> He was born as the son of one of the rulers in Kapilavastu, which was a capital city of a small republic and straddled the present border with Nepal. After he grew up, got married and had a son, he renounced worldly life at the age of 29 despite his father's objections. It seems that because Śākyamuni disliked the miserable situation of living in a world where the law of the jungle prevailed and felt his political future uneasy, he sought the lasting peace and consolation in the place transcending the secular world. After his renunciation, he aimed at enlightenment through the *yoga* (meditation-practice) current in his day, and practiced and realized the sphere of "nothingness" and that of "neither-cognition-nor-noncognition."<sup>3</sup> However, he was not satisfied with these spheres and went on to try other ascetic practices current as well as *yoga*. Ascetic practices aim at purification of the mind or soul through experiences of physical pain such as fasting and so on. After he had spent six years undergoing austerities, he renounced ascetic practices and finally became enlightened through repeated contemplation which he newly launched. According to the Buddha's biography, he meditated on the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination (described at a later point) and attained enlightenment as a Buddha.

After Śākyamuni became enlightened, he pondered that all the public who were ruled by desire would not be able to understand the truth he had realized because it was subtle and beyond thinking. Then, he con-

sidered entering final nirvāṇa immediately, giving up teaching that truth. At that time, Brahmā, the lord of the world of Brahmanism, appeared before him and asked him to preach. I think that this mythical legend may reflect the idea of Buddhists that religious authority was transferred from Brahmanism to Buddhism. Anyway, Śākyamuni accepted Brahmā's request and began to teach his former ascetic companions. It is told that at that time he expounded the middle way transcending the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. Then, Buddhism came into the world. Afterward, Śākyamuni played an active role around the middle range of the Ganges River, leading a large community of monks and nuns and guiding many more lay followers. At the age of eighty, having completed a mission of forty-five years, he guided his last disciple on his deathbed.

After Śākyamuni's death, his teachings were collected and edited by his disciples several times. Their content was handed down orally and at last was transcribed in writing in Sri Lanka in the first century BCE.

As mentioned above, Buddhism shifted from early Buddhism to early Nikāya (sectarian) Buddhism around the third century BCE. In this age, each school took over and compiled sūtras and Buddhist precepts (*Vinaya*), while it developed treatises (*Abhidharma*), which were doctrinal research on the Buddha's teachings. This was the foundation of the three branches of the Buddhist scriptures.

Early Nikāya Buddhism thus developed, while the compilation of Mahāyāna sūtras began around the first century BCE. It is assumed that because some Mahāyāna sūtras criticized vehemently a part of early Nikāya Buddhism as the "Lesser Vehicle" (*Hīnayāna*), while those who were criticized did not accept the religious authority of Mahāyāna sūtras, there appeared bitter confrontation and tension between the two.

I think that there was an intention which would try to answer new religious needs at that time in the background of the compilation of new Mahāyāna sūtras. If we would like to know their contents, there is no alternative but to infer them on the basis of ideas expressed in Mahāyāna sūtras. If we describe these very roughly, we find the expectation of the appearance of Buddhas and great bodhisattvas who have overwhelming power to save people, a strong exhortation to perform altruistic acts based on compassion, a hope for the abolition of discrimination in religious authority between monks and lay followers<sup>4</sup>, the ideal of the attainment of Buddhahood by everyone, valuing the actual seeing of Buddhas in visionary experience in the age without a Buddha, explanations of concrete steps of bodhisattvas up to attainment of Buddhahood, and so on.

We can thus assume the following circumstances in the background of such new thoughts. At that time, there was a fluctuation of the traditional culture and a desire for a new cultural ideal, brought about by the cultural exchange between India and the Greco-Roman world. Under such a trend of the times, some Buddhists argued vehemently that a part of traditional Nikāya Buddhism could not answer the religious needs of a new age any more, and they therefore created a new type of Buddhist thought responding to them by newly interpreting the Buddha's life and thought based on their own religious experiences. Then, based on such new Buddhist thought, they compiled new sūtras, which they insisted in a determined manner that the historical Buddha actually expounded. Is this not a trait of the Mahāyāna sūtras which were compiled during the first period?

Even though Mahāyāna Buddhism appeared, however, early Nikāya Buddhism did not vanish. We can presume that it continued to have greater social power than Mahāyāna Buddhism in India. Mahāyāna Buddhism prospered in Central Asia and East Asia rather than in India.

In general, the compilation of Mahāyāna sūtras is divided into the following three periods. During the first period from the first century BCE to the third century CE, there appeared scriptures such as the *Prajñā Sūtras*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the *Larger Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra*, the *Smaller Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra* and the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*. During this period, Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE) made the idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of the *Prajñā Sūtras* into a philosophical theory and became the founder of the Madhyamaka school.

During the second period from the fourth century to the sixth century, there appeared scriptures including the Yogācāra *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* and *Tathāgata-garbha* sūtras such as the *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* and the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. During this period, Asaṅga (c. the fourth century) and his younger brother Vasubandhu (c. the fourth century) established the Yogācāra school. Here, the two major schools of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra were founded.

During the third period from the seventh century onward, there appeared esoteric sūtras such as the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* and the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha Sūtra*. Mahāyāna Buddhism aimed at the popularization of Buddhism and this popularization involved a positive incorporation of magical or esoteric elements. These esoteric elements gradually became the foundation of the esoteric sūtras of the third period. Esoteric Buddhism came to have ritual and magic very similar to those of Hinduism as an Indian ethnic religion. We can say that Buddhism became esoteric and as a result, became buried in Hinduism. At

the beginning of the thirteenth century, Muslims destroyed the Vikramāśīla temple and Buddhism in India disappeared.

### 3. The Core Teachings of Śākyamuni—the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve-linked Chain of Dependent Origination

We can say that the core teaching of Buddhism is the four noble truths, assumed to have been expounded at Śākyamuni's first preaching. They are the truth of suffering, the truth of the arising of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering.

The truth of suffering is that all existence is suffering. The basis of the world-view of Buddhism is suffering and Buddhism thinks that life is full of suffering such as the “four and eight kinds of suffering.” The “four kinds of suffering” are birth, aging, sickness and death. The “eight kinds of suffering” are the “four kinds of suffering” and the four derivative forms of suffering: separation from that which we love, association with that which we hate, inability to fulfill our desires, and the suffering from the instability of the five *skandhas* (aggregates). The suffering from the instability of the five *skandhas* is the basis of the other seven sufferings and refers to unenlightened existence subject to the cycle of death and rebirth.

The truth of the arising of suffering is that the cause of suffering lies in earthly desires. The truth of the cessation of suffering is that if we eliminate earthly desires which are the cause of suffering, we can attain *nirvāṇa* which is a state of absolute quiescence. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering is that *nirvāṇa* is attained by carrying out eight types of practices. They are right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, and are designated as the middle way transcending the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. There were two extremes of asceticism and hedonism in the religious thought current in Śākyamuni's day as well as in his own experiences until he attained enlightenment. He realized the middle way transcending these two extremes.

These four noble truths have a resemblance to the system of medical diagnosis, identifying the current state of disease, its cause, presentation of method of treatment, and recovery. They constitute a very simple and clear theory, which everyone can easily understand.

Metaphysical discussions were very common and were repeated fruit-

lessly without any solutions at the time of Śākyamuni. In this situation he taught the famous parable of the poisoned arrow to a person who asked him, "Is the world eternal, or not eternal? Is the world finite, or infinite? Are body and soul separate, or but one? Does the perfect man exist after death or not?" That person said to the Buddha, "If the Buddha cannot answer these questions, I will not become your disciple." The Buddha admonished him, "Your attitude looks like that of a stupid man who, hit by a poisoned arrow, says it should not be pulled out and rejects treatment before he receives minute information about the nature of the criminal, the material of the lethal weapon, and so on. The Buddha became silent before such metaphysical problems, but in contrast to this he explained resolutely the four noble truths in detail.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Śākyamuni's core teaching is ultimately the four noble truths. In other words, Buddhism teaches people to find the cause of suffering in their own earthly desires, spend simple and economical lives in terms of food, clothing and housing, contemplate correctly the causal relationship of earthly desires and suffering, control desires by wisdom attained by the practices described above, and finally attain nirvāṇa, being completely liberated from suffering. However, if they are contented with their own liberation from suffering and do not get engaged positively on saving others based on compassion, they can be criticized as self-benefiting and self-righteous by Mahāyāna Buddhists. Needless to say, Śākyamuni worked diligently at saving others as his life showed.

It is said that when Śākyamuni became enlightened, he contemplated the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination. This theory is elaborated based on the same idea as the four noble truths. This theory starts from the reality that we spend our lives experiencing various sufferings, of which aging and death are representative, and seek the cause of such sufferings one after another. For example, the ground and condition upon which aging and death arise is birth. Next, the condition of birth is cyclic existence. Thus we find the causal relationship of twelve issues such as aging and death, birth, cyclic existence, grasping, craving, feeling, sensory stimulation, the six sense-bases, mind-and-body, discriminative consciousness, constructing activities, and spiritual ignorance. To gain insight into this causal relationship in its entirety brings about the cessation of spiritual ignorance and further annihilation of the sufferings of aging and death.

This causal relationship is called "dependent origination" (*pratītya-samutpāda*) as a Buddhist term. This idea points to the fact that we do wrong action influenced by desires and gain the effect of sufferings. The

term “dependent origination” as used in the *Suttanipāta* (verse 653), which is one of the oldest sūtras of early Buddhism, also means the relationship between action and its result.

This twelve-linked chain of dependent origination is similar to the four noble truths in the idea of the quest for the cause of suffering and the achievement of the ideal based on the cessation of the cause. In short, Śākyamuni's core teaching is to clarify the causal relationship between desires and suffering and to provide practices which aim at the cessation of desires and the attainment of enlightenment, respectively.

As this dependent origination means the relationship of cause and effect, it originally referred to a one-way relationship from cause to effect in terms of time. However, in the subsequent development of the idea of the dependent origination, it came to mean inter-dependent relationship among all things and the fusing of the whole and the part, and it is now used in modern ecological thought.

#### 4. The Distinctive Features of the *Lotus Sūtra*

Buddhism spread to the entire region of Asia and has a 2,500-year history. Even though there have naturally been various traditions in the course of this development, I will here take up the *Lotus Sūtra*, which had a major historical influence on Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, and which continues as a living faith among many people in contemporary Japan.

The early Mahāyāna sūtras can be seen as a new interpretation of the Buddha's life and teachings. This description is especially appropriate for the *Lotus Sūtra*, since it seems that the compilers of the *Lotus Sūtra* consciously modeled its narrative on the Buddha's life. The most significant events in the Buddha's life, in addition to his birth are his attainment of Buddhahood, his first preaching, and his nirvāṇa at the age of eighty. In Buddhism, needless to say, everything begins with his enlightenment. Moreover, Buddhism could not have been formed if the enlightenment of the Buddha had not been taught through speech. Therefore Śākyamuni's first preaching, based on the request of Brahmā, is naturally very significant. Since then he never ceased to preach for more than forty years until he entered final nirvāṇa at the age of eighty.

##### 4.1 Śākyamuni's Enlightenment and the *Dharma* and *Saddharma* in the *Lotus Sūtra*<sup>5</sup>

The *Lotus Sūtra* tells the story that some past Buddhas preached the *Lotus Sūtra* before Śākyamuni did. If we draw out the intention behind

this account, it seems that the *Lotus Sūtra* is recognized as the supreme and ultimate teaching preached commonly by all Buddhas in the past, present, and future. All Buddhas including Śākyamuni become Buddhas only after awakening to *dharma* (*dhamma* in Pāli and *fa* in Chinese) or *saddharma*<sup>6</sup> (*saddhamma* in Pāli and *Zhengfa* or *Miaofa* in Chinese), and the scripture which expounds that *saddharma* in detail is none other than the *Saddarmapūṇḍarīka Sūtra*, or the *Lotus Sūtra*. Because the compilers of the *Lotus Sūtra* thought in this way, they incorporated “*saddharma*” into the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Therefore, all Buddhas preach the “*saddharma*” which they awakened to by themselves, and its content is considered to be none other than the *Lotus Sūtra*. We can say that the universality and the eternity of the *Lotus Sūtra* are symbolically shown here.

The second chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, “Skillful Means,” renames characteristics of the Buddha, which had been acquired and understood through practices over a long time under innumerable previous Buddhas, as “*dharmas*” and takes up the abilities, wisdoms and stages of various meditations of the Buddha as concrete contents of “*dharmas*.” In a word, “*dharmas*” are not the abstract and objective truth as an object of enlightenment. They are realized through practices by Buddhas themselves and comprise a Buddha’s wisdom and spiritual stages. In other words, two meanings of “*dharma*” are shown in the *Lotus Sūtra*: an objective meaning of “*dharma*,” which Buddhas awaken to as the truth, and a subjective meaning of “*dharma*,” which Buddhas actualize as characteristics making up their own spiritual stages, such as wisdom and compassion.

The idea that such an actualization of “*dharma*” is opened widely to all people is expressed as the “one Buddha vehicle” in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which I will discuss in the next section.

## 4.2 The First Preaching and the “One Buddha Vehicle” of the *Lotus Sūtra*

As I mentioned above, immediately after Śākyamuni’s attainment of enlightenment, when he hesitated to preach the teaching, Brahmā appeared before him and asked him to do so. This story is paralleled by Śāriputra’s request to Śākyamuni to preach the teaching in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Śāriputra does not understand why Śākyamuni praises the “*dharma*” he had acquired and his own supreme power of skillful means to expound it with ingenuity. This is because Śāriputra has taken it into his head that there is only one liberation and that *arhats* (saintly persons in Nikāya Buddhism) including himself had already attained it.

Śākyamuni complies with Śāriputra's request by expounding the "one Buddha vehicle," or the teaching that all sentient beings can attain Buddhahood. This preaching is in perfect accordance with Śākyamuni's first sermon in response to Brahmā's request. When Śākyamuni makes a decision to preach in response to Śāriputra, however, five thousand arrogant people leave the assembly of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Immediately after their withdrawal, Śākyamuni finally clarifies his one great purpose. What is it? The *Lotus Sūtra*, which uses a repetitive style for emphasis, says it is to open the door of Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to show Buddha wisdom to all living beings, to cause living beings to awaken to Buddha wisdom, and to induce living beings to enter the path of Buddha wisdom. Namely, Śākyamuni appeared in this world to make it so that all living beings could attain Buddhahood.

The passage explaining the Buddha's one great purpose is a direct expression of the idea of "one Buddha vehicle" found in the *Lotus Sūtra*, and as such is one of the most important religious messages of the entire scripture. Gods listening to this sermon in the assembly say about this message, "In the past at Vārāṇasī (the modern Benares) the Buddha first turned the wheel of the *dharma*. Now he turns the wheel again, the wheel of the unsurpassed, the greatest *dharma* of all." This statement defines the "one Buddha vehicle" of the *Lotus Sūtra* as Śākyamuni's second preaching of the supreme *dharma* in contrast with the first turning of the wheel of the *dharma* at the Deer Park of Vārāṇasī.

The idea of "the second preaching," as contrasted with the first preaching, is not only found in the *Lotus Sūtra*. This fact is clear evidence that the compilers of the *Lotus Sūtra* were well aware of their dependence on the second preaching, while early Buddhist sūtras, which were accepted by Nikāya Buddhists, were based on the first preaching. In other words, they were completely conscious that Mahāyāna sūtras were new creations.

The greatest religious message in the *Lotus Sūtra*, I think, is the idea of the "one Buddha vehicle" as expressed in vividly dramatic form in the story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. This chapter includes the following narrative.<sup>7</sup> Whoever Bodhisattva Never Disparaging happened to encounter, whether monks, nuns, laymen or laywomen, he would bow in obeisance to all of them and speak words of praise, using a certain set of phrases. According to the Kumārajīva translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, he would say, "I have profound reverence for you. I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood" (T 9.50c. Translation by Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra* [New York:

Columbia University Press, 1993], pp. 266–267). The actions of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging express an attitude that attributes the utmost dignity to all humankind, bespeaking the possibility that all human beings will, without fail, become Buddhas if they practice the bodhisattva way. In other words, the scripture counsels us to respect all human beings equally as future Buddhas.

However, certain persons became exceedingly upset by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's bestowals of prophecy of future Buddhahood, since he was not yet a Buddha himself and thus had no recognizable authority to make such momentous statements. However, even though he was severely persecuted, he kept up this practice for his entire life.

The dedication of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging also represents a great revelation for us in the present age. His behavior indicates that we should believe firmly in our own abilities to attain Buddhahood, and it conveys the idea that all other people are none other than potential Buddhas, all of whom have the ability to attain Buddhahood. What is important here is not a practice of offering something concrete to other people, but rather the undertaking to teach us all to awaken to our own fundamental dignity. When I bow in obeisance to another person as Buddha, in response his Buddha nature bows in obeisance to me as Buddha—even though it has not yet manifested sufficiently in either of us. In other words, here the scripture establishes the idea that respecting other people is directly connected with the manifestation of our own Buddha natures. The concept of peaceful coexistence is required by the age in which we live. In the *Lotus Sūtra* the idea of coexistence is based on the interdependent relationship between people, in which we mutually respect each other as beings of integrity, all of us with the prospect of attaining Buddhahood.

Keisei (1189–1268), who was a monk in the Jimon line of the Japanese Tendai school and the elder brother of the powerful aristocrat Kujō Michi'ie (1193–1252), says of the meaning of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice in *A Friend to One who Dwells in Solitude (Kankyo no tomo)*, “Generally speaking, the heart that embraces this behavior of refusing to belittle others lies in bowing to the Buddha nature existing deep within the breast of every living being. Deluded beings such as ourselves may not be directly aware of this principle, but even before we become enlightened we are fully endowed with Buddha nature, and there is no creature, even as seemingly lowly as an ant or a cricket, that deserves to be looked down upon. Even among the hells and the realms of hungry ghosts there is not a single being that does not possess the Buddha nature. Hence, if you are truly cognizant of this principle, you

will not fail to respect even the lowly birds and beasts." So saying, Keisei infers that a slightly earlier historical example of a Japanese priest named Genjō shōnin, who bowed to birds and beasts, might have its foundation in the notion that even animals have the Buddha nature.

Moreover, having put his finger on the fact that spite and ridicule towards others will naturally disappear if we know that all beings have Buddha nature, Keisei cites the words of Fu Xi 伏羲 (also known as "Mahāsattva Shanhui" 善慧大士, 497–569), "Night after night, I sleep in the embrace of the Buddha; morning after morning, I arise with the Buddha." Keisei found great inspiration in these words. The statement by Fu Xi shows that we who possess the Buddha nature are engaged with the Buddha in all our actions. If each and every person had the awareness of acting as a Buddha, how would the world change? I think bullying at schools and offices, as well as sexual and other types of harassment, fundamentally cannot be solved unless we awaken to the inherent dignity of self and others.

The *Lotus Sūtra*'s idea of the attainment of Buddhahood by all people is also illustrated well in the story found in the Devadatta Chapter, of the attainment of Buddhahood both by an evil man and a female. Devadatta was regarded as a consummate villain in the history of Buddhism and is assumed to have fallen into hell while still alive, yet he is given a prophecy of future enlightenment. It is even said that he had been a teacher of Śākyamuni in a past life. The Devadatta Chapter also says that the dragon girl, who is a daughter of the dragon king Sāgara and is only eight years old, would become a Buddha speedily. Actually, men and women were equal in attaining enlightenment at the time of Śākyamuni. However, Buddhism gradually accepted the influence of male-dominated society in India and came to think that women could not attain Buddhahood.

The *Lotus Sūtra* expounded the attainment of Buddhahood by the dragon girl so as to break down such an idea. The attainment of Buddhahood by the dragon girl in the *Lotus Sūtra* reflected the gender discrimination of India at that time, because she had to be transformed from a female to a male before becoming a Buddha. Even though Nichiren (1222–1282) in Japan naturally knew this story of the dragon girl, he affirmed his own view that the dragon girl actually attained Buddhahood in her present female form.

### 4.3 The Final Nirvāṇa of the Historical Śākyamuni at the Age of Eighty and “Skilful Display of Nirvāṇa” in the *Lotus Sūtra*

The *Lotus Sūtra* newly interpreted Śākyamuni's final nirvāṇa at the age of eighty as a “skilful display of nirvāṇa,” and claimed that Śākyamuni had already been enlightened in the remote past. In short, it is the idea that Śākyamuni, though he has an immense life span, provisionally shows himself to enter final nirvāṇa as a skilful measure to save sentient beings. This thought is expounded in the chapter on “The Life Span of the Thus Come One.”<sup>8</sup>

If Śākyamuni's life span as a Buddha is so immense, in terms of past and future, that one might say that he is eternal, is the fact that Śākyamuni enters final nirvāṇa not a contradiction? Such a question naturally arises. From the standpoint of the public position of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which was said to have been expounded more than forty years later than the attainment of Buddhahood by Śākyamuni under the Bodhi-tree, he is due to enter final nirvāṇa soon after he expounds the *Lotus Sūtra*. And what's more, from the historical viewpoint of the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it must be admitted that the historical Buddha entered final nirvāṇa at the age of eighty, several hundred years before the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Then, the question arises as to why Śākyamuni would have to close his life at the age of eighty in spite of his immense life span. To this question the *Lotus Sūtra* answers that even though in truth Śākyamuni has an immense life span, he manifested himself to sentient beings as entering final nirvāṇa as a skilful measure.

Above I presented the four noble truths and the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination as Śākyamuni's core teachings. Actually, the *Lotus Sūtra* designates those teachings as skilful means for *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*, respectively. In a word, these teachings are a means of elevating their religious abilities so that they can listen to and understand the *Lotus Sūtra*. From the standpoint of the *Lotus Sūtra*, these two teachings are criticized for aiming only at liberating *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* from their earthly desires. The *Lotus Sūtra* contends that if those who consider themselves *arhats* do not further seek a Buddha's enlightenment (including not only liberation from desires but also the salvation of other people), they are not true *arhats*, but instead are merely arrogant people.

As mentioned above, Śākyamuni was not content with his own liberation from desires, but dedicated his life to the salvation of many people and the cultivation of his disciples. Emphasis on the bodhisattva having a self-image as the envoy of the Thus Come One, which is one of the

distinctive features of the *Lotus Sūtra*, seems to be based on this understanding of Śākyamuni's life.

#### 4.4 The Integration of Buddhas and the Buddha's Teachings

Thus the *Lotus Sūtra* is constructed on the basis of major events of Śākyamuni's life, and in this regard it is very different from many other Mahāyāna sūtras, which talk about new Buddhas and bodhisattvas other than Śākyamuni and their salvation of sentient beings. The *Lotus Sūtra* devised its own concept of the eternal Śākyamuni, a new figure of the Buddha that developed out of the historical figure, and its theme is none other than the salvation by such a Buddha.

The intention of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which values Śākyamuni Buddha, is shown well in the idea of the integration of Buddhas in terms of space, as expounded in the chapter on "The Emergence of the Treasure Tower," and the integration of Buddhas in terms of time, as expounded in the "Life Span" chapter. And we can find not only the integration of Buddhas but also the integration of the Buddha's teachings in the idea of "one Buddha vehicle" expounded in the Skilful Means chapter. We can thus say that the *Lotus Sūtra* has a clear intention of integrating Buddhas and the Buddha's teachings.

In short, the *Lotus Sūtra* gives a new interpretation of Śākyamuni's life and teachings, proposing the idea of awaking to dharma, the "one Buddha vehicle", which enables the attainment of Buddhahood by all sentient beings, and a new image of the Buddha as universal and eternal.

### 5. The Development of *Lotus Sūtra* Thought in China and Japan in the cases of Zhiyi and Nichiren

In the sixth century, when approximately five hundred years had passed since Buddhism was conveyed to China, Zhiyi (538–597), who valued the *Lotus Sūtra* and founded the Tiantai school, proposed in his *Mohe zhiguan* (the *Great Calming and Contemplation*) the theory of the three thousand realms in a single moment of thought based on the *Lotus Sūtra*. This theory explains that all realms, from the realm of hell to the realm of Buddha, are inherent in every single moment of thought. It shows our infinite potentialities, especially our possibilities of attaining Buddhahood. We can say that this theory provides nothing less than a theoretical basis for the "one Buddha vehicle" and the attainment of Buddhahood by all sentient beings advocated in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Further, this theory explains that the spiritual stage of subjective life is in accordance with that of its environment. The spiritual stages are classi-

fied into ten stages, that is, the levels of a Buddha, a bodhisattva, pratyekabuddha, śrāvaka, heavenly-being, human being, asura, animal, hungry spirit, and a hell-dweller. For example, the environment where beings of hell live is referred to as hell, and the environment where a Buddha lives is referred to as a pure land or a Buddha-land.

Even though such a relationship is usually understood as static, I think it is necessary to view it as a mutual relationship, in which each has an influence on the other, through interaction between subjective life and its environmental setting. According to this new interpretation, we can say that subjective life and its environment are dependently originated, and therefore purification of our own lives is realized and reflected in our environment, while conversely the environment has a major influence on the spiritual stages of human beings. As mentioned above, Śākyamuni taught that the desires inherent in individuals are the cause of suffering. If Buddhism focuses solely on inner desires, there might be a danger that Buddhists would indulge in spiritualism or subjective idealism, caring less about outer society and the environment. It is a historical fact that Buddhism has been criticized for this for a long time. However, if we regard society, culture, and the environment as the embodiment of human desires, Buddhism, which regards controlling inner desires as significant practices, can also open up possibilities of dealing with various social problems such as wars, violence, extreme economic difference, discrimination in various fields, human rights abuse, environmental pollution, and the undervaluing of life. In a word, I think that to deal with these problems can be understood as a form of Buddhist practice in itself, in the sense of a meaningful confrontation with “outer desires,” that is, the concrete embodiment of those desires. Therefore, from a Buddhist standpoint, to deal with these problems can be regarded as nothing other than practices aiming at the attainment of Buddhahood.

The *Lotus Sūtra* thought of Japan was developed mainly by Saichō (767–822), who founded the Japanese Tendai school, and Nichiren. In his positive concern for society, Nichiren was quite outstanding. Nichiren valued a living human being's enjoyment of happiness more than his or her salvation after death, and he wrote *On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land* and appealed aggressively to statesmen concerning the stability of society. Such a positive valuation of society has been very rare in the history of Buddhism both before and after Nichiren's time. In contemporary Japanese society new religions related to the *Lotus Sūtra* have a major influence in the field of religions. The attitude of hoping for happiness in this world and dealing positively

with various problems in actual society, seems to resonate with many people. This feature of valuing actual society, as seen in the Japanese new religions related to the *Lotus Sūtra*, is very similar to the Humanistic Buddhism that appeared in 20<sup>th</sup>-century China and the Engaged Buddhism that appeared in war-time Vietnam. In my view, Buddhists should care not only about their own spiritual cultivation, but should also seek to contribute broadly to the society in which they live.

Note: I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Prof. Jan Nattier for her expertise in editing the English version of this paper.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are two theories about his date of birth and death. One is from the 6<sup>th</sup> century to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and another is from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

<sup>2</sup> Nirgrantha-nāpauṭra, who was the founder of Jainism, was also one of *śramaṇas* as well as Śākyamuni.

<sup>3</sup> The yoga teacher Ārāḍa Kālāma proclaimed the sphere of “nothingness” and Udraka Rāmaputra proclaimed sphere of “neither-cognition-nor-noncognition.”

<sup>4</sup> Concretely speaking, monks can become *arhats*, or supreme practitioners, who sever all the earthly desires and will not be reborn in this world, while lay followers ordinarily cannot become *arhats* in household lives.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning this topic, see Hiroshi Kanno, “Inclusivism and Religious Tolerance in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 15 (2005): 94–108.

<sup>6</sup> Just after Śākyamuni became fully enlightened, he thought, “It is ill to live paying no one the honour and obedience due to a superior.” But he did not see anyone more accomplished in contemplation or the knowledge of emancipation than himself. Therefore he concluded that he would live under, pay honor to, and respect this Dharma to which he had awakened.” And Brahmā also declared his support for this conclusion of the Buddha and pointed out that all the Buddhas in the past, present, and future respect the *saddhamma*. Cf. *Samyutta-Nikāya*, I, pp. 139–140; *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, part I, pp. 175–176, translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, P.T.S., 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Concerning this topic, see Hiroshi Kanno, “The Practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in the *Lotus Sūtra* and its Reception in China and Japan,” in *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 12, (2002): pp. 104–122.

<sup>8</sup> This chapter in its entirety has the following three main points. The first is that Śākyamuni’s life span is immense; the second is that his entry into nirvāṇa is intended as a “skillful display of nirvāṇa,” and the third is that persons of deep faith can actually see Śākyamuni, who appears before them.