

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the *Lotus Sūtra*: Involvement in the Human Society

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The Problem

THIS paper considers the *Lotus Sūtra*'s bodhisattvas of the earth.¹ Even though Buddhism is often regarded as a pessimistic religion, the idea of Humanistic Buddhism, advocated by the Chinese monk Taixu (1890–1947), established an innovative Buddhist notion, by urging us not to place priority on salvation after death, but rather to focus on our role in the society where we actually live and act. Even though Taixu involved himself in commentarial work, evinced in his writing of the *Fahua yanjiang lu* (*Record of Lectures on the Lotus Sūtra*),² it seems that there was a direct relationship between his idea of Humanistic Buddhism and the *Lotus Sūtra*. On the other hand, we can find the attitude of valuing one's interaction with society in the form of Buddhism established by Nichiren (1222–1282), which is also distinct from other, more commonly seen Buddhist approaches. Nichiren also valued salvation in this *sahā* world while criticizing vehemently the hope of being reborn in the Pure Land after death. It seems quite clear that Nichiren's thought on this matter was inspired by the themes of the *Lotus Sūtra*.³ Nichiren regarded himself as the “practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*” and emphasized that he was a successor of the practice of the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.⁴ It is known that in his later years he identified himself with Bodhisattva Superior Practices, one of the bodhisattvas of the earth.⁵ Nichiren's approach of valuing one's life in everyday society is deeply related to his awareness from his youth of being a practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and it seems not to have had a direct relationship with his identification with the bodhisattvas of the earth. But it might also be possible to locate his self-understanding as a bodhisattva of the earth as an extension of his being a practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

On the other hand, the fact that Jōsei Toda (1900–1958), the second President of the Soka Gakkai, which has a major influence in the field of Japanese religions, had a self-realization as a bodhisattva of the earth⁶ seems to have had a deep influence on the thought and practice of the

Soka Gakkai. In addition, we can infer that the attitude of valuing the importance of one's membership in society of new religions related to the *Lotus Sūtra* in contemporary Japanese society—including the Soka Gakkai—comes not only from the general tendency of emphasizing benefits in this life, which is shown often in new religions, but also from ideas of the *Lotus Sūtra*, including its bodhisattvas of the earth.

This paper considers the bodhisattvas of the earth from the viewpoint of positive involvement in society. In the first section, the story of the *Lotus Sūtra* from the tenth chapter “Dharma Preacher” to the fifteenth chapter “Emerging from the Earth” is outlined briefly and in the second section, the bodhisattvas of the earth in the *Lotus Sūtra* are considered.

1. The Development of the story from the “Dharma Preacher” chapter to the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter

There is a big difference in themes between the ninth chapter “Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts” and the tenth chapter “Dharma Preacher.” The theme of chapters from the second chapter “Skillful Means,” which follows the first chapter “Introduction” (a preface to the entire *Lotus Sūtra*) through the ninth chapter “Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts” advocates the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle” and confers prophecies on śrāvakas based on this vehicle. On the contrary, the theme of who will uphold and propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* underlies the chapters from the “Dharma Preacher” to “Emerging from the Earth.” I will briefly introduce the development of the story within this range.

The “Dharma Preacher” chapter clarifies that followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* after Śākyamuni's extinction, i.e. at the time without the Buddha, are powerful bodhisattvas who have realized enlightenment in a past age, and are born as bodhisattvas on the basis of their vows who dare to voluntarily choose to incarnate in the impure and evil *sahā* world after the Buddha's death, out of their great compassion for sentient beings. The fact that these bodhisattvas, who are born on the basis of their vows, are none other than the bodhisattvas of the earth in the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter will be discussed below.

The eleventh chapter “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower” describes the emergence of the treasure tower, the purifying of the *sahā* world and its surrounding worlds by the three purifying transformation of lands (三變土田),⁷ the gathering of all the Buddhas who are Śākyamuni's emanations from the worlds of the ten directions, and the two Buddhas, Śākyamuni and Many Treasures, sitting together. Afterwards the

audience rises into the air by Śākyamuni's supernormal powers and the preaching after this takes place in the air until the 22nd chapter "Entrustment." Then Śākyamuni Buddha announces that he will enter extinction in a short time and addresses the audience, saying, "Who on earth will be responsible for propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* after his death." In addition, the verses at the end of this chapter indicate through the usage of parables that it will be extremely difficult to uphold the *Lotus Sūtra* after Śākyamuni's extinction.

Most scholars know that the twelfth chapter "Devadatta" was not included in Kumārajīva's translation, but was incorporated into the *Lotus Sūtra* later. At least, as for the present text, it is easier to understand the story if the eleventh chapter "The Emergence of the Treasure Tower" and the thirteenth chapter "Encouraging Devotion" are consecutive.

In the thirteenth chapter "Encouraging Devotion," first Bodhisattva Medicine King, Bodhisattva Great Joy of Preaching and other bodhisattvas vow to uphold and propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* after Śākyamuni's extinction. Then, they say that because sentient beings in the evil age after Śākyamuni's extinction are very low in religious capacities and are difficult to cultivate, they need to summon up the power of great patience. Next, five hundred arhats and eight thousand śrāvakas, who have received a prophecy of enlightenment, make a vow to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra*. However, they vow to propagate it in lands other than this *sahā* world, which is at odds with the bodhisattvas' vow. The *sūtra* doesn't explain the reason for this, but contrasting śrāvakas' vows with bodhisattvas' allows us to infer that because śrāvakas lack the power of great patience shown in bodhisattvas' vows, they cannot propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* at all to sentient beings in the *sahā* world, whose religious capacities are very low. Next, nuns such as Mahāprajāpatī and Yaśodharā were bestowed with prophecies by Śākyamuni Buddha and they also made a vow to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* in lands other than this *sahā* world. In the verses at the end of the chapter, the bodhisattvas expressed the decision to endure any persecution of Buddhism and uphold and propagate the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Accepting the vows of bodhisattvas of propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* of the "Encouraging Devotion" chapter, the fourteenth chapter "Peaceful Practices" preaches the four kinds of peaceful practices including those of bodily action, speech, thought, and vows as the method of propagating in the evil age after Śākyamuni's extinction.⁸

While the chapter on "Encouraging Devotion" preaches the spirit of propagating the *sūtra* despite persecutions, the chapter on "Peaceful

Practices” shows a spirit of compromise, saying in effect that reconciliation with the society and the surrounding people should be regarded as most important. As for this difference between the two chapters, some Chinese exegetes made the following interpretations, namely, the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter is for high-ranking bodhisattvas and the “Peaceful Practices” chapter is for beginning bodhisattvas. For example, in the fourth fascicle of the *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏, Jizang 吉藏 says:

The end of the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter states that if we propagate the sūtra in the evil age, we will be despised and assaulted and receive a lot of suffering. If this is the case, followers of trivial practices cause the feeling of retrogressing and cannot propagate the sūtra. Therefore it is now clarified that if we abide comfortably in the four practices, we can always have pleasure even in the evil age. Now in order to show exemplary methods of propagating the sūtra in the latter days, this chapter is expounded (T 1721.34.594a11-14).

Zhiyi 智顛 and Guanding 灌頂 state in the second part of the eighth fascicle of the *Fahua wenju* 法華文句:

Question: These śrāvakas became great beings. Why can they not propagate the sūtra in this [*sahā*] world?

Answer: Because [the Buddha] guides beginning bodhisattvas, who have just started as bodhisattvas and cannot propagate the sūtra by conducting arduous practices. And [the Buddha] wants to preach the “Peaceful Practices” chapter (T 1718.34.117b9-12).

They state likewise:

If bodhisattvas, who are the first reliance [of four reliances⁹] and initially give rise to the intention for enlightenment, want to conduct practices in the perfect teaching and enter the defiled age to propagate the sūtra, they are bothered by the defiled age and their own practices are not established and they don’t have achievement of cultivating others. As it is necessary to show methods [of propagating the sūtra] and clarify peaceful practices for the sake of these people, this chapter [on “Peaceful Practices”] is preached (T 1718.34.118c28-119a3).

These interpretations quoted above seem to be possible, but we need to pay attention to the possibility of other interpretations.

The first possible interpretation is as follows. From the historical viewpoint of the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter can be interpreted as a reflection of the early circumstance on the process of the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The major religious idea is the “one Buddha vehicle,” which was an innovative and revolutionary idea at that time. Based on the content of the chapter on “Encouraging Devotion,” we can infer that this idea elicited an icy reception from surrounding people, as well as harsh criticism.¹⁰ The chapter “Encouraging Devotion” emphasizes the spirit of “patience” of upholders of the *Lotus Sūtra* in such harsh circumstances. The “Peaceful Practices” chapter is presumed to have been compiled after the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter at the point in time where its compilers took up a policy of reconciliation with the present society and part of the traditional and conservative Buddhist community, which is presumed to have wielded significant power.

The second approach is that of not paying attention to the differences in the respective teachings for high-ranking bodhisattvas and beginning bodhisattvas between the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter and the “Peaceful Practices” chapter but try to look at the continuity. A thorough understanding of the description of the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter seems not to indicate a recommendation of aggressive propagation at all, but instead to point out the persecution which the ideas of the *Lotus Sūtra* inevitably invites and preach patience in the face of it. This persecution is unavoidably provoked by the themes of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and is thus to some extent inevitable. Nonetheless, in order to promote prudent relations with society and the established Buddhist community, the avoidance of pointless friction is valued. We can say that the “Peaceful Practices” chapter explains the methods for this. At present I personally think that the latter interpretation has greater validity.

Next, in the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter the agents of upholding and propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* after the passing away of Śākyamuni show their true colors for the first time. Innumerable bodhisattvas far outnumbering the sands of eight Ganges Rivers, who came from lands other than *sahā* world, vow to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra*. Then, Śākyamuni declines their offer for the reason that there exist in his own world—the *sahā* world—other bodhisattvas equal in number to the sands of 60 thousand Ganges Rivers, and that they are the very ones who propagate the *Lotus Sūtra*. Just then, those bodhisattvas, who have lived in the space under the *sahā* world, emerge from the earth through a cleft in the ground. These are the bodhisattvas of the earth. Representing the audience, Bodhisattva Maitreya inquires who the bodhisattvas of the

earth are (the first question) and Śākyamuni replies that they are disciples whom he has taught since his becoming Buddha. Bodhisattva Maitreya, still perplexed as to how Śākyamuni could have taught so many brilliant bodhisattvas in the short period (some 40 years) after his attaining Buddhahood, continues to beg Śākyamuni to relieve his doubt (the second question). In response to this second question, Śākyamuni reveals in the next chapter of “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” that his attaining Buddhahood was not realized 40 or so years ago, but in the remote past shown by the account of “numberless major world-system dust-particle kalpas.” In sum, the Life Span Chapter explicates “elaborating the near to reveal the distant 開近顯遠,” which is a core tenet of the *Lotus Sūtra* along with “elaborating the three to reveal the one 開三顯一.”

Next, in the second section I will take up the description of the bodhisattvas of the earth for consideration.

2. The Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the *Lotus Sūtra*

2.1 The Description of the chapter “Emerging from the Earth”

To begin with, relying on the chapter “Emerging from the Earth,” where the bodhisattvas of the earth appear on the scene, I will clarify by setting up some items which describe the characteristics of the bodhisattvas of the earth.

2.1.1 The numbers of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth

As for the numbers of the bodhisattvas of the earth, at the beginning of the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter the sūtra says:

Because in this *sahā* world of mine there are bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who are as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, and each of these bodhisattvas has followers equal to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers (T 262.9.39c25-27; B. Watson, *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*, Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2009, p. 252 [with minor changes]).

There are vast numbers of the bodhisattvas of the earth, equal to the number of the sands of 60 thousand Ganges Rivers,¹¹ and each of these bodhisattvas is accompanied by as many followers as there are sands in sixty thousand Ganges Rivers. This number of followers is explained in detail immediately in the following part as follows:

Each one of these bodhisattvas was the leader of his own great assembly, and each brought with him followers equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers. To say nothing of those who brought followers equal to the sands of fifty thousand, forty thousand, thirty thousand, twenty thousand, or ten thousand Ganges Rivers. Or followers equal to as little as the sands of one Ganges River, half a Ganges River, one fourth of a Ganges River, or as little as one part in a thousand, ten thousand, a million *nayutas* of a Ganges River. Or those whose followers were only one thousand ten thousand million *nayutas*. Or only a million ten thousand. Or only a thousand ten thousand, a hundred ten thousand, or just ten thousand. Or only one thousand, one hundred, or ten. Or who brought with them only five, four, three, two, or one disciple. Or those who came alone, preferring to carry out solitary practices. Such were they, then, immeasurable, boundless, beyond anything that can be known through calculation, simile, or parable (T 262.9.40a4-12; B.Watson, p. 253 [with minor changes]).

According to this description, each bodhisattva is accompanied by a multitude of followers, and is called “the leader of his own great assembly.” As for the number of followers, the bodhisattva who has the most followers is accompanied by followers equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, and the one who has the least followers is accompanied by nobody. And the number of bodhisattvas who have the lesser number of followers is greater.¹² As the followers are the ones who the bodhisattvas of the earth have taught, the more followers there are, the more abundant experiences of cultivating sentient beings they have, and the higher ranking they have in general. If we accept such a presupposition¹³, the number of low-ranking bodhisattvas who have less followers is, conversely, more than that of high-ranking bodhisattvas who have more followers.¹⁴

2.1.2 The Dwelling Place of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth prior to their Emergence

As at the beginning of the chapter on “Emerging from the Earth” Śākyamuni states about the bodhisattvas of the earth, “In this *sahā* world of mine there are bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who are as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers,” (T 262.9.39c25-26; B.Watson, p. 252 [with minor changes]) which was quoted above, he referred only to “the *sahā* world” for their dwelling place. And responding to Śākyamuni’s preaching that those bodhisattvas of the earth would be in charge of propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* after his extinction, the earth

trembled and split open and they emerged from it. As for their dwelling place, the sūtra says:

Previously they had all been dwelling in the world of empty space underneath the *sahā* world (T 262.9.40a2-3; B.Watson, pp. 252-253 [with minor changes]).

The previous dwelling place of the bodhisattvas of the earth is regarded as empty space underneath this *sahā* world. According to Buddhist cosmology, the world is suspended in the air. The power of the karma of living beings, who will be born, first causes a small wind to arise in empty space out of thin air and this circles into a wheel shape. Upon this circling wind, circling water and then a gold circle take shape, and upon them form the land (earthly circle), mountains and seas. Therefore, if the earth splits open and we penetrate to its core, we will reach to empty space. Thus it is reasonable to assume that the bodhisattvas of the earth live in this empty space. Why, then, do they not dwell up in the world but underneath the earth? Because the summit of Mt. Sumeru is regarded as the dwelling place of heavenly beings. As heavenly beings are one of sentient beings of six paths and transmigrate, they are lower in status than bodhisattvas. In addition, there is a scene in which bodhisattvas from other worlds come to the dharma-gathering of the *Lotus Sūtra* and in this case they fly to the dharma-gathering from above. Therefore, “empty space underneath this *sahā* world” has a rationale based on Buddhist cosmology as an appropriate place which fulfills the condition that Maitreya had never seen or heard of the bodhisattvas of the earth as in his statement.

I have tried to explain the dwelling place of the bodhisattvas of the earth based on Buddhist cosmology. On the other hand, the first part of the ninth fascicle of the *Fahua wenju* gives a religious explanation, saying:

The dwelling place [of the bodhisattvas of the earth] is Land of Eternally Tranquil Light 常寂光土. “Eternity” symbolizes virtue of eternity, “tranquility” symbolizes virtue of happiness, “Light” symbolizes virtue of purity and true self, respectively. It is a secret store of four virtues and their dwelling place. [They] abide in the secret store in the way of non-abiding. As “underneath” is the deep bottom of dharma nature and the ultimate stage of profound truth, [the sūtra] says “underneath.” Underneath does not belong to here, nor the air belongs to there. Neither here, nor there is none other than the middle way. As [they] emerge

from here, they dwell in the air, neither upside nor underneath. It shows the middle way (T 1718.34.125a1-7).

In sum, the dwelling place of the bodhisattvas of the earth is expressed as Land of Eternally Tranquil Light with four virtues of eternity, happiness, true self and purity and further described as dharma nature, profound truth and the middle way.¹⁵ It shows the high stage of the bodhisattvas of the earth.

2.1.3 The Physical Features of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth-Focusing on Thirty-two Features

It is said that the bodhisattvas of the earth are endowed with the thirty-two features which are those of a great man:

The bodies of these bodhisattvas were all golden in hue, with the thirty-two features and an immeasurable brightness (T 262.9.40a1-2; B. Watson, p. 252).

The thirty-two features are physical characteristics with which Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and wheel-turning sage kings are endowed. As Śākyamuni is sure to be endowed with the thirty-two features as a Buddha, the statement in the Maitreya's second question that the bodhisattvas of the earth are more venerable than Śākyamuni in appearance¹⁶ may be related to "an immeasurable brightness." The description "the bodies of these bodhisattvas were all golden in hue" is the same as the fourteenth feature of "golden body" and light of a fathom's distance around the Buddha's body is regarded as the fifteenth feature of "light of a fathom's distance radiating from the body."¹⁷ The "immeasurable brightness" of the bodhisattvas of the earth may be said to be superior to this ordinary feature of "light of a fathom's distance radiating from the body."

In addition, the fact that bodies of the bodhisattvas of the earth are huge seems to be regarded as their superior characteristic. However, while there is a concrete explanation of the height of the Bodhisattva of Wonderful Sound, there is not such a description about the bodhisattvas of the earth.¹⁸

2.1.4 The Leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth—Four Bodhisattvas

There are four leading bodhisattvas among the bodhisattvas of the earth, namely, Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices and Firmly Established Practices.¹⁹

Among these bodhisattvas were four leaders. The first was called Superior Practices, the second was called Boundless Practices, the third was called Pure Practices, and the fourth was called Firmly Established Practices. These four bodhisattvas were the foremost leaders and guiding teachers among the entire group (T 262.9.40a23-26; B.Watson, p. 254[with minor changes]).

However, there is no explanation given concerning these four bodhisattvas. We can only assume the characteristics of their practices based on their names.

2.1.5 The Religious Abilities and the Past Practices of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth

Bodhisattva Maitreya states about the bodhisattvas of the earth:

[They are] with great supernormal powers, unfathomable in wisdom, firm in their intent and thought, with the power of great perseverance, all the living beings delight to see (T 262.9.40b26-28; B.Watson, p. 256[with minor changes]).

This points out that the bodhisattvas of the earth are excellent in terms of supernormal powers, wisdom,²⁰ and power of perseverance. “The power of great perseverance” might be one of indispensable abilities to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* to sentient beings of the *sahā* world, who are low in religious capacities, as described above. As for “firm in their intent and thought,” there are other similar descriptions, such as “firm in the power of will and concentration” (T 262.9.41b21; B.Watson, p. 260) and “firm in will, in no way timid or immature” (T 262.9.42a16; B.Watson, p. 263). In addition, they are described as possessing authoritative virtues and diligence.²¹

This being the case, in what practices had they engaged since Śākyamuni’s enlightenment in the past so that they could attain such religious abilities? As for this question, Śākyamuni states in his reply to Maitreya’s first question:

These good men take no delight in being in the crowd and indulging in much talk. Their delight is constantly to be in a quiet place, exerting themselves diligently and never resting. Nor do they linger among human or heavenly beings, but constantly delight in profound wisdom, being free from all hindrances. And they constantly delight in the Dharma of the buddhas, diligently and with a single mind pursuing unsur-

passed wisdom (T 262.9.41b6-10; B. Watson, p. 259).

It is said that the bodhisattvas of the earth seek wisdom diligently and their distinctive characteristic is “taking no delight in being in the crowd and indulging in much talk. Their delight is to constantly be in a quiet place.” Also the verses, which correspond to this citation state:

These are my sons, they dwell in this world, constantly carrying out *dhūta* practices, preferring a quiet place, rejecting the fret and confusion of the crowd, taking no delight in much talk. In this manner these sons study and practice my teaching of the way. And in order that day and night with constant diligence they may seek the Buddhist practice, in this *sahā* world they have been dwelling in the empty space in its lower part. Firm in the power of will and concentration, with constant diligence seeking wisdom, they expound various wonderful doctrines and their minds are without fear (T 262.9.41b15-22; B. Watson, p. 260 [with minor changes]).

This citation also refers to “preferring a quiet place, rejecting the fret and confusion of the crowd, taking no delight in much talk” besides *dhūta* practices, diligence, wisdom, the power of will and concentration, and fearlessness, which attracts our attention. The text also states:

They have no wish to remain among the crowd but constantly favor a state of meditation, and in order to seek the Buddha’s enlightenment²² they have been dwelling in the space under the earth (T 262.9.42a21-22; B. Watson, pp. 263-264 [with minor changes]).

If someone likes, in this way, to reside in a quiet place and a state of meditation, the concern may arise that he cannot propagate the sūtra. However, as Maitreya said that he had never seen or heard the bodhisattvas of the earth before their emergence in the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter, the sūtra explains that they have practiced without being seen in quiet places, where there are few people. As their mission is to propagate the sūtra after Śākyamuni’s extinction, the patience shown in “Encouraging Devotion” chapter, the four peaceful practices of the “Peaceful Practices” chapter, and the mental attitude of “room, robe, and seat of the Thus Come One” shown in the “Dharma Preacher” chapter²³ are needed for realizing the mission. Therefore, it seems that the past practices of the bodhisattvas of the earth and positive propagation of the sūtra, which are demanded after Śākyamuni’s extinction, are different

from each other.

In addition, the sūtra points out that they planted good roots and engaged in pure practices:

Since the far distant past, in the dwelling places of immeasurable, boundless numbers of buddhas, they must have planted good roots, carried out the bodhisattva way, and engaged constantly in pure practices (T 262.9.41c10-12; B. Watson p. 261 [with minor changes]).

In the previous quotation above *dhūta* practices are taken up and here pure practices are taken up. Based on these statements, we can understand that the bodhisattvas of the earth are described as renunciant monks, or fully ordained monks.

The sūtra also states:

It has in fact not been long since you attained the enlightenment. But this great multitude of bodhisattvas have already for immeasurable thousands, ten thousands, millions of kalpas applied themselves diligently and earnestly for the sake of the buddha's enlightenment. They have learned to enter into, emerge from, and dwell in immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of samādhis, have acquired great supernormal powers, have over a long period carried out pure practices, and have been able step by step to practice various good doctrines, becoming skilled in questions and answers, a treasure among persons, something seldom known in all the worlds (T 262.9.41c15-20; B. Watson, pp. 261-262 [with minor changes]).

Here, diligence, samādhis, supernormal powers, pure practices, and skillfulness in discussion are taken up.

It is said that the bodhisattvas of the earth are pure beings, which are unsoiled by worldly things, like the lotus flower in the water.²⁴

In addition, the sūtra says:

These bodhisattvas are firm in will, in no way timid or immature. For immeasurable kalpas they have been practicing the bodhisattva way. They are clever at difficult questions and answers, their minds know no fear. They have firmly cultivated persevering minds, upright in dignity and virtue. They are praised by the buddhas of the ten directions as able and adept at preaching distinctions (T 262.9.42a16-20; B. Watson, p. 263).

Here, the sūtra refers to persevering minds and the ability of skillful preaching.

Also the bodhisattvas of the earth are said to recite and understand many sūtras.²⁵

The past practices of the bodhisattvas of the earth, which were considered above, are similar to the six *pāramitās* as constituting the bodhisattva way and are not special. However, as they have carried out such practices for a long time, they are said to have attained superior religious abilities, which are praised by the buddhas of the ten directions.

2.1.6 The Disciples from the Remote Past

As mentioned above, Śākyamuni's reply to Maitreya's first question about the bodhisattvas of the earth is that they are his disciples, whom he has taught since he attained Buddhahood:

After I attained supreme perfect enlightenment in this *sahā* world, I converted and guided these bodhisattvas, trained their minds, and caused them to develop a longing for enlightenment (T 262.9.41b2-4; B.Watson, p. 259 [with minor changes]).

The verses corresponding to this passage also state:

These great bodhisattvas for countless kalpas have practiced the Buddha wisdom. All have been converted by me; I caused them to set their minds on great enlightenment (T 262.9.41b12-14; B.Watson, p. 260 [with minor changes]).²⁶

The sūtra clarifies in this manner that the bodhisattvas of the earth are those who Śākyamuni has taught since the remote past. The following Life Span Chapter will explicate this matter in more detail.

2.1.7 The Stage of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth—Non-retrogression

The bodhisattvas of the earth abide in the stage of non-retrogression and will surely become buddhas:

Now all of them dwell in the stage of non-retrogression, and all in time will be able to become buddhas (T 262.9.41b26; B.Watson, p. 260 [with minor changes]).

As for the “non-retrogression, the verses of the Maitreya's second question state:

So we beg you now to explain. These immeasurable bodhisattvas—how in such a short time did you teach them, cause them to have aspiring minds, and to dwell in the stage of non-retrogression? (T 262.9.42a26-28; B.Watson, p. 264 [with minor changes]).

Even though the *Lotus Sūtra* does not explain which stage of bodhisattvas the stage of “non-retrogression” corresponds to, it should be a rather high stage.

2.2 The Vow of Propagating the Sūtra by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the “Supernormal Powers of the Thus Come One” Chapter

The bodhisattvas of the earth, who appeared in the “Emerging from the Earth” chapter, vow to propagate the sūtra after Śākyamuni’s extinction at the beginning of the “Supernormal Powers of the Thus Come One” chapter as follows:

At that time the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who had emerged from the earth, numerous as the dust particles of a thousand worlds, all in the presence of the Buddha single-mindedly pressed their palms together, gazed up in reverence at the face of the honored one, and said to the Buddha: “World-Honored One, after the Buddha has entered extinction, in the lands where the emanations of the world-honored one are present, and in the place where the Buddha has passed into extinction, we will preach this sūtra far and wide. Why? Because we ourselves wish to gain this great Dharma, true and pure, to accept, uphold, read, recite, explain, preach, transcribe, and offer alms to it” (T 262.9.51c9-14; B.Watson, p. 314 [with minor changes]).

The bodhisattvas of the earth vow to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* after Śākyamuni’s extinction around the *sahā* world, where Śākyamuni carried out his activities. As they are his disciples from the remote past, they carry out activities around the *sahā* world as inheritors of Śākyamuni’s task of saving sentient beings, which is different from the śrāvakas vow to propagate it in lands other than this *sahā* world.²⁷

Śākyamuni gives instructions in response to this offer of the bodhisattvas of the earth:

To put it briefly, all the Dharmas possessed by the thus come one, all the freely exercised supernormal powers of the thus come one, the storehouse of all the secret essentials of the thus come one, all the most profound matters of the thus come one—all these are proclaimed,

revealed, and clearly expounded in this sūtra. “For this reason, after the Thus Come One has entered extinction, you must single-mindedly accept, uphold, read, recite, explain, preach, and transcribe it, and practice it as directed (T 262.9.52a17-21; B.Watson, p. 316 [with minor changes]).

These are the instructions concerning practices for the bodhisattvas of the earth. As Śākyamuni recommends that they carry out acts of the five kinds of dharma preachers and practices as instructed, we can say it shows the entrustment of the *Lotus Sūtra* to them.

Further, Śākyamuni entrusts many bodhisattvas—including the bodhisattvas of the earth—with the *Lotus Sūtra*, explicitly in the “Entrustment” chapter as follows:

At that time Śākyamuni Buddha rose from his Dharma seat and, manifesting his great supernormal powers, with his right hand patted the heads of the immeasurable bodhisattva-mahāsattvas and spoke these words: “For immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of *asaṃkhyā* kalpas I have practiced this hard-to-attain Dharma of supreme perfect enlightenment. Now I entrust it to you. You must single-mindedly propagate this Dharma abroad, causing its benefits to spread far and wide” (T 262.9.52c4-8; B.Watson, p. 319 [with minor changes]).

2.3 Bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their previous vows in the chapter “Dharma Preacher”

Śākyamuni variously expounds the true religious identity of followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the “Dharma Preacher” chapter. As the *Lotus Sūtra* is regarded as the final preaching immediately before Śākyamuni’s death, we can say that “followers of the *Lotus Sūtra*” described in the “Dharma Preacher” chapter actually mean agents of the *Lotus Sūtra* after Śākyamuni’s extinction. In view of the fact that these are none other than the bodhisattvas of the earth, it can be said that explanations of the “Dharma Preacher” chapter have significance that cannot be overlooked in understanding the bodhisattvas of the earth. Since I took up this problem for detailed consideration in a previous paper,²⁸ I will only explain the point briefly as follows.

In fact, followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* are said to be advanced bodhisattvas who have already offered alms to innumerable buddhas and have fulfilled their great vow of becoming enlightened. And though they

could have amply enjoyed their splendid reward, they are born in this evil world out of deep compassion for sentient beings.²⁹ Further, it is emphasized that they should be regarded as great bodhisattvas who have completed Supreme Perfect Enlightenment and as honorable beings who should be offered alms as the Thus Come One would be.³⁰ In addition, it is pointed out that they abandoned the rewards of their pure karma.³¹ In sum, here is indicated the idea of bodhisattvas who can be born not on the basis of their past karma but on the basis of their vows. The idea of bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their vows was seen in the school of the Mahāsāṃghikas in the period of *Nikāya* Buddhism.³² This description is applicable to the bodhisattvas of the earth. And bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their vows, namely, the bodhisattvas of the earth, are regarded as “the envoys of the thus come one”:

Then you should know that these people are the envoys of the thus come one. They have been dispatched by the thus come one and carry out the thus come one’s work (T 262.9.30c27-28; B.Watson, p. 200 [with minor changes]).

Conclusion

The subject of the *Lotus Sūtra* is not salvation by Amitābha Buddha of the West or Bhaiṣajyaguru of the East but salvation of sentient beings of the *sahā* world by the Śākyamuni, who became enlightened in the remote past; This is discovered in the background of the Śākyamuni, who existed in history. Even though Śākyamuni, who became enlightened in the remote past, has an immense life span, he enters nirvāṇa on the basis of a “skillful display of nirvāṇa.” The inheritors of Śākyamuni’s task are none other than the bodhisattvas of the earth, who remain after Śākyamuni’s extinction. If it is so, it might be natural that the bodhisattvas of the earth value this *sahā* world, which is our actual world and society to us, as a place where the task of salvation is accomplished. As śrāvakas, who are conferred with prophecies of future enlightenment in the *Lotus Sūtra*, probably lack “the power of great perseverance,” they vow to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* in other lands giving up on propagating it in the *sahā* world. This story might indicate even more the intimate relationship between the bodhisattvas of the earth and the *sahā* world.

And the idea of valuing the *sahā* world is shown well in the thought of the Life Span Chapter that the Śākyamuni, who became enlightened in the remote past, abides eternally at Vulture Peak. To value the *sahā*

world is identical with valuing this actual world where we live.

In addition, these bodhisattvas of the earth, as envoys of the Tathāgata, dispatched by the Tathāgata, are in charge of saving sentient beings by propagating the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is the task of the Tathāgata. The consciousness with which someone is particularly selected and entrusted to this task by the Buddha can be called the consciousness of the apostle. This apostle-consciousness becomes the ground that supports the activities of saving sentient beings on the basis of propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* in human society, which is filled with hardship. It is shown well in the emphasis on perseverance based on the apostle-consciousness in the “Encouraging Devotion” chapter.

It can be said that Nichiren’s valuing of society shown in his thought and action was stimulated by the thought of valuing human society in the *Lotus Sūtra* and its basic orientation was the salvation of sentient beings by propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* on the basis of the apostle-consciousness as a practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra* and a bodhisattva of the earth. His ideas are thought to have a certain amount of influence on the tendency to value the effort to deal with concrete societal problems seen in new religions related to the *Lotus Sūtra* in contemporary Japanese society.

Note: I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Prof. A. Charles Muller and Prof. Gene Reeves for their expertise in editing the English version of this paper.

Notes

¹ Even though the term “*yongchu pusa* 涌出菩薩” is more common than “*diyong pusa* 地涌菩薩” in China, we can find the term “*diyong pusa*” in the *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 vol. 10A (T 1716.33.801a5) and the *Fahua wenju ji* 法華文句記 vol. 4B (T 1719.34.233b6).

² This book is included in vol. 10 and 11 of Master Taixu’s complete works 太虛大師全書.

³ See Hiroshi Kanno, “The Bodhisattva Way and Valuing the Real World in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 17 (2007), pp. 180–197.

⁴ See Hiroshi Kanno, “The Practice of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging in the *Lotus Sūtra* and Its Reception in China and Japan,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 12 (2002), pp. 104–122.

⁵ Nichiren wrote at the age of 56 in “The Letter of Petition from Yorimoto,” “The reason is that, if what the sūtra states is true, the Sage Nichiren is the envoy of the Thus Come One who attained enlightenment in the remote past, the manifestation of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the votary of the essential teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and the great leader in the fifth five-hundred-year period [following the Buddha’s passing]. In an attempt to have this sage executed, the Honorable Ryokan submitted a letter of

petition to the authorities proposing that he be beheaded; but for some reason the execution was not carried out, and he was instead exiled far away to Sado Island. Was this not the doing of the Honorable Ryokan?" (*Showa teihon Nichiren Shōnin ibun*, p. 1352; *The Writings of Nichiren Daishōnin*, volume I, Tokyo: 1999, p. 807 [with minor changes]). cf. Watanabe Hōyō, "Nichiren no 'Hokkegyōja' ishiki to 'Jiyubosatsu' ninshiki," *Bosatsu-kan* (edited by Nihon bukkyō gakkai, Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1986, pp. 445–458) and Asai Endō, "Jōgyō bosatsu," *Daijō bosatsu no sekai* (Tokyo: Kōsei shuppansha, 1988, pp. 171–181).

In addition, if we view the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra* from a historical perspective, we can infer that the bodhisattvas of the earth represent compilers of the *Lotus Sūtra* and its surrounding followers at the time when it was compiled in India. In China the bodhisattvas of the earth seemed to have not been interpreted as real figures who appear in the historical world after Śākyamuni's death.

⁶ President Josei Toda stated at the second general meeting of men's youth group (at the auditorium of Hoshi Yakka [Pharmacy] College in Tokyo on the 23rd of December in 1953), "The inner realization of Great Sage Nichiren is the Thus Come One endowed with unconstructed three bodies. My inner realization is a pillar of the bodhisattvas of the earth, while my outer behavior is that of the Great Subjugating General" (*Toda Jōsei Zenshū* [Collected Works of Jōsei Toda], Tokyo: Seikyō shinbunsha, 1984, vol. 4, p. 106). This self-realization was based on his religious experience in prison. See Jōsei Toda, *Shōsetsu Ningen kakumei* [Human Revolution: A Novel] (included in *Toda Jōsei Zenshū* [Collected Works of Jōsei Toda], vol. 8, Tokyo: Seikyō shinbunsha, 1988, p. 519).

In addition, Tatsuko Sugiyama (1867–1932), the founder of Hōonji 法音寺 of the Nichiren school, which used to be named Bukkyō kanka kyūsaikai 佛教感化救濟會, had a realization as the reincarnation of Bodhisattva Firmly Established Practices. See Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya, *Shakai sankā Bukkyō* [Engaged Buddhism], Tokyo: Tōshindō, 2005, pp. 132–137.

⁷ As for the term "the three purifying transformation of lands," see the *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義 vol. 6A (T 1716.33.751c10).

⁸ These four peaceful practices are given different names by different exegetes. Here I provisionally rely on the *Fahua wenju* 法華文句 of Zhiyi 智顛 and Guanding 灌頂. As for the names given by Daosheng 道生, Fayun 法雲, Huisi 慧思, and Jizang 吉藏, see Daniel B. Stevenson and Hiroshi Kanno, *The Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra's Course of Ease and Bliss: An Annotated Translation and Study of Nanyue Huisi's (515–577) Fahua jing anlexing yi*, 2006, Bibliotheca Philologia et Philosophica Buddhica, vol. IX, The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, pp. 208–213.

⁹ "Four reliances" means four kinds of bodhisattvas, who people would depend upon after the passing away of the Buddha. The first reliance is the lowest among these four.

¹⁰ For example, see "These monks are greedy for profit and support and therefore they preach non-Buddhist doctrines and fabricate their own scriptures to delude the people of the world. Because they hope to gain fame and renown thereby they explain this sūtra" (T 262.9.36c3-6; B. Watson, *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*, Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2009, p. 233 [with minor changes]).

¹¹ There is a case in which the chapter indicated only a "great number" and did not specifically say "the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers." See, "A multitude of great bodhisattvas such as this—a person might spend a thousand, ten thousand, a million kalpas counting them and never be able to reach the end or discover the limit!" (T

262.9.41c9-10; B. Watson, p. 261 [with minor changes]). Also see, “yet these sons of the Buddha are immeasurable in number!” (T 262.9.42a3; B. Watson, p. 262 [with minor changes]).

¹² The verses, which correspond to prose sentences quoted in the main body of this paper, show this point more clearly. See, “Each one of these bodhisattvas brings with him followers immeasurable in number like the sands of the Ganges River. Some of these great bodhisattvas bring numbers equal to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers. And this great multitude with a single mind seek the buddha way. These great teachers equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers together come to offer alms to the Buddha and to guard and uphold this sūtra. More numerous are those with followers like the sands of fifty thousand Ganges Rivers, those with followers like the sands of forty thousand, thirty thousand, twenty thousand, ten thousand, one thousand, one hundred, or the sands of a single Ganges River, half a Ganges River, one third, one fourth, or only one part in a million ten thousand; those with one thousand, ten thousand *nayutas*, ten thousand, a million disciples, or half a million—they are more numerous still. Those with a hundred thousand or ten thousand followers, a thousand or a hundred, fifty or ten, three, two, or one, or those who come alone without followers, delighting in solitude, all coming to where the Buddha is—they are even more numerous than those described above” (T 262.9.40b29–40c15; B. Watson, pp. 256–257 [with minor changes]).

¹³ This presupposition does not apply to those who are not accompanied by anyone. The reason why they do not have any followers is that they particularly prefer to carry out solitary practices. The *Lotus Sūtra* does not exclude such people. It might show the generosity of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

¹⁴ See note 12.

¹⁵ The second part of the seventh fascicle of the *Fahua xuanyi* states, “With regard to the seventh subtlety of the original retinue, the sūtra states, ‘They had all been dwelling in the world of empty space underneath the *sahā* world. These are my sons and I am their father.’ With regard to ‘underneath,’ the under is named bottom. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra* preaches the samādhi of bottom of all dharmas. The *Dazhidu lun* states, ‘The Buddha understands great way of prajñāpāramitā thoroughly.’ It should be understood that these bodhisattvas understand the bottom of prajñāpāramitā next to the Buddha. ‘Empty space’ is Tranquil Light of complete emptiness of dharma nature. [The bodhisattvas of the earth emerge] into the air of Tranquil Light of the present time from the air of Tranquil Light of the original time. Ones of the air of Tranquil Light of the present time are those who do not know the original time. Because of this, [the sūtra] says, ‘Even though I have journeyed from land to land, there is not one person that I know.’ The bodhisattvas of the earth, who are equal in number to the dust particles of a thousand worlds, are all manifested retinue of the original time” (T 1716.33.768b5-12).

¹⁶ See, “Suppose, for example, that a young man of twenty-five, with ruddy complexion and hair still black, should point to someone who was a hundred years old and say, ‘This is my son!’ or that the hundred-year-old man should point to the youth and say, ‘This is my father, who sired and raised me!’ This would be hard to believe” (T 262.9.41c13-15; B. Watson, p. 261).

¹⁷ For example, see the *Dazhidu lun*, vol. 4, “the fourteenth feature is that of golden body. ----- The fifteenth feature is that of light of a fathom’s distance radiating from the body. The Buddha is the most beautiful in this light” (T 1509.25.90b26-c9). Various

texts give slightly differing sets of thirty-two features and the feature of light radiating from the body seems to be not necessarily common.

¹⁸ See, “Huge body” (T 262.9.40b26). The Bodhisattva of Wonderful Sound comes to the *sahā* world from a world of Adorned with Pure Light where Pure Flower Constellation King Wisdom Buddha lives. That Buddha advised him that he should not look down upon sentient beings of the *sahā* world because he is huge in body and sentient beings of the *sahā* world are small in body. To wit: “At that time the buddha Pure Flower Constellation King Wisdom said to Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound: ‘You must not look with contempt on that land or come to think of it as mean and inferior. Good man, that *sahā* world is uneven, high in places, low in others, and full of dirt, stones, mountains, foulness, and impurity. The Buddha is puny in stature and the numerous bodhisattvas are likewise small in form, whereas your body is forty-two thousand *yojanas* in height and mine is six million eight hundred thousand *yojanas*. Your body is foremost in shapeliness, with hundreds, thousands, ten thousands of blessings and a radiance that is particularly wonderful. Therefore when you journey there, you must not look with contempt on that land or come to think of the Buddha and bodhisattvas or the land itself as mean and inferior!’” (T 262.9.55b8-14; B. Watson, p. 332 [with minor changes]).

¹⁹ As for the Buddhist meanings of the names of the four bodhisattvas, see Yōen Aruga, “*Hokekyō* ‘Jiyū Bosatsu ni tsuite’ part one,” *Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 21-1 (1972), pp. 128–129.

²⁰ As for supernatural powers and wisdom, see, “These bodhisattvas possess supernatural powers and the power of great wisdom” (T 262.9.40c22; B. Watson, p. 257 [with minor changes]). Also see in the verse of the Maitreya’s second question, “yet these sons of the Buddha are immeasurable in number! Already for a long time they have practiced the buddha way, dwelling in supernatural powers and the power of wisdom” (T 262.9.42a3-4; B. Watson, pp. 262–263 [with minor changes]).

²¹ See, “This host of bodhisattvas with authoritative virtues and diligence” (T 262.9.40c18; B. Watson, p. 257 [with minor changes]).

²² I think that the Chinese term *fodao* 佛道 has two main meanings. One is Buddha’s enlightenment. Another is Buddhist practice. I sometimes translate *fodao* 佛道 as Buddha’s enlightenment based on the Sanskrit version and the context, even though Prof. Watson always translate it as “buddha way.”

²³ The “Dharma Preacher” chapter states that after the Thus Come One has entered nirvāṇa, those who wish to expound the *Lotus Sūtra* for the four kinds of followers should enter the Thus Come One’s room, put on the Thus Come One’s robe, sit in the Thus Come One’s seat, and then expound the *Lotus Sūtra*. The “Thus Come One’s room” is nothing less than the state of mind that shows great pity and compassion toward all living beings. The “Thus Come One’s robe” is the very mind that is gentle and forbearing. The “Thus Come One’s seat” is the ultimate emptiness of all phenomena. See T 262.9.31c21-27; B. Watson, p. 205.

²⁴ See, “yet these sons of the Buddha are immeasurable in number! Already for a long time they have practiced the buddha way, dwelling in supernatural powers and the power of wisdom, skillfully learning the bodhisattva way, unsoiled by worldly things like the lotus flower in the water” (T 262.9.42a3-6; B. Watson, pp. 262–263 [with minor changes]).

²⁵ See, “They read, recite, understand the various scriptures, ponder them, analyze them, and keep them correctly in mind” (T 262.9.41b5-6; B. Watson, p. 259 [with minor changes]).

²⁶ See, “Ever since the long distant past I have been teaching and converting this multitude” (T 262.9.41b28; B. Watson, p. 261) and “Since the far distant past, in the dwelling places of immeasurable, boundless numbers of buddhas, they must have planted good roots, carried out the bodhisattva way, and engaged constantly in pure practices” (T 262.9.41c10-12; B. Watson, p. 261 [with minor changes]).

²⁷ See, “At that time the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who had gathered from lands in other directions, greater in number than the sands of eight Ganges Rivers, stood up in the midst of the great assembly, pressed their palms together, bowed in obeisance, and said to the Buddha: ‘World-Honored One, if you will permit us in the age after the Buddha has entered extinction to diligently and earnestly protect, embrace, read, recite, copy, and offer alms to this sūtra in the *sahā* world, we will preach it widely throughout this land!’ At that time the Buddha said to the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas: ‘Leave off, good men! There is no need for you to protect and embrace this sūtra. Why? Because in this *sahā* world of mine there are bodhisattva-mahāsattvas who are as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, and each of these bodhisattvas has followers equal to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers. After I have entered extinction these people will be able to protect, embrace, read, recite, and widely preach this sūtra’” (T 262.9.39c19-28; B. Watson, p. 252 [with minor changes]).

²⁸ See, Hiroshi Kanno, “The Bodhisattva Way and Valuing the Real World in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 17 (2007), pp. 180–197.

²⁹ See, “You should understand that these people have already offered alms to a hundred thousand million buddhas and in the place of the buddhas have fulfilled their great vow, and because they take pity on living beings they have been born in this human world” (T 262.9.30c13-15; B. Watson, p. 200 [with minor changes]).

³⁰ See, “You should understand that these people are great bodhisattvas who have succeeded in attaining supreme perfect enlightenment. Pitying living beings, they have vowed to be born among them where they may broadly expound and analyze the *Lotus Sūtra* of the Wonderful Law” (T 262.9.30c21-23; B. Watson, p. 200 [with minor changes]).

³¹ See, “You should understand that these people voluntarily relinquish the reward due them for their pure deeds and, in the time after I have passed into extinction, because they pity living beings, they are born in this evil world so they may broadly expound this sūtra” (T 262.9.30c24-26; B. Watson, p. 200 [with minor changes]).

³² For example, in the section describing Mahāsāṃghika views, the *Yibu zonglun lun* 異部宗輪論 translated by Xuanzang 玄奘 states, “If the bodhisattva [Śākya] wishes to be born in the evil realm to confer benefits to living beings, he has freedom to do that” (T 2031.49.15c10-11). Another translation by Paramārtha 真諦, the *Bu zhiyi lun* 部執異論, states, “If the bodhisattva [Śākya] wishes to be born in the evil realm, he can rapidly be born there because of the power of vow” (T 2033.49.20c11-12).