

The Mahāyāna Scriptures as Views of Śākyamuni: Reading the Buddha's Words from the Perspective of His Being

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Introduction

The theme of this symposium, “The Buddha's Words and Their Interpretations,” is rich in meaning. This is because the word “Buddha” is multi-layered: it means “one who has awakened” and also refers to the historical person who became awakened. A central part of Buddhist history is people trying to understand the meaning of this “awakened person.” In this context, a question arises as to the basis upon which the Mahāyāna scriptures—which clearly came into existence after the death of the historical Śākyamuni—refer to themselves as “teachings of the Buddha” (Ch. *foshuo*; Jp. *bussetsu* 仏説). Here I will argue from several perspectives that the Mahāyāna sutras tried to elucidate what could be called the supra-historical primordial Buddha or “Dharma” through the existence and words of a historical Śākyamuni who appeared within geographical and spatial time.

1. The Attitude of the Buddha's Disciples After His Death

The historical Śākyamuni died after leaving behind the words, “Take yourself as a lamp, and take the Dharma as a lamp.” Śākyamuni himself taught that the Dharma transcends history. In the *Ekottara Āgama* (Ch. *Zengyi ahanjing*; Jp. *Zōitsu agonkyō* 增一阿含經), he says, “I have just walked the path walked by the ancient sages” and “I did not create the Dharma of Dependent Arising; this law is everlasting regardless of whether the Tathāgata appears in the world.” However, it is also a fact that the Dharma first came alive and functioned after having been realized by Śākyamuni, and it became an actual teaching of this world only after his disciples heard him preach it. Having encountered and taken refuge in the Dharma through Śākyamuni, there is no doubt that, from the perspective of his disciples, the Buddha and the Dharma were inseparable. It is said that at first the ceremony

for entering the saṅgha consisted simply of reciting the Verse of Threefold Refuge three times. However, with Śākyamuni's death, one of the important Three Jewels in which people took refuge was taken away. This must have led to the question of what was Śākyamuni Buddha's essential nature becoming a pressing issue for his disciples.

Ui Hakuju argues that in the end there were two views: one group focused on the human-ness of Śākyamuni, which Ui calls *jitsuzai shugi* 実在主義; another group focused on his teaching and edification of sentient beings (i.e., his great compassion), which Ui calls *risō shugi* 理想主義.¹ Yamada Ryūjō similarly says that there was one lineage that tried to faithfully transmit Śākyamuni's words and another lineage that exalted the Buddha as a teacher.² Basically, the group that saw Śākyamuni Buddha as a single "person" thought that his physical extinction was the extinction of Śākyamuni himself, and those people tried to find the Buddha's eternal nature within his teachings. In contrast, the other group held that the death of a buddha like Śākyamuni, who worked for sentient beings' salvation out of his great compassion, did not mean that he returned to nothingness as a regular human would upon dying. In the end, the second group came to believe that Śākyamuni had a transcendental nature, as well as thirty-two physical marks and eighteen distinctive abilities. Furthermore, they thought that he came into existence based on his own volition—that is, his vow to save sentient beings—rather than based on affliction-rooted karma, as would be the case for ordinary beings. These are not characteristics of the existence of the historical human that was Śākyamuni; they arose out of contemplations on the nature of this deceased buddha. It appears that the reason for or background to Śākyamuni's transcendent nature became a topic of discussion, and *Jātaka* tales came to be preached in a way that matched the law of cause and effect elucidated by him.

2. Śākyamuni as a Bodhisattva in Jātaka Tales

Ui and Hikata Ryūshō have pointed out that *Jātaka* tales are based on stories that existed in India before Śākyamuni.³ When incorporated into Buddhism, they were written down and also made into artistic works such as

¹ See Ui 1965 (originally 1926). While this paper has some problems when viewed today in terms of its usage of terminology and the like, its arguments based on a broad perspective still hold sway today.

² Yamada 1959: 138.

³ Ui 1965: 207; Hikata 1954.

engravings. It is thought that the twenty-eight *Jākata* tales from Bharhut, India, are the oldest extant ones.⁴ Since these tales do not include the concept of “bodhisattva,” it has been argued that *Jākata* tales were not originally stories of Śākyamuni’s past lives. Furthermore, in what appears to be the oldest part of early Buddhism’s scriptures, one finds very few examples of the word “bodhisattva”; in most cases, sentences about Śākyamuni use the term, “The World Honored-One.” Considering these points together, it appears that the concept of “bodhisattva,” which is frequently found in the *Āgama* scriptures to refer to Śākyamuni during his period of practice before enlightenment, indicates that the view of Śākyamuni had been conceptualized to some degree, such that it came to include superhuman aspects. Ui calls this development the “generalization of Śākyamuni” (*shakuson no ippanka* 釈尊の一般化). The Śākyamuni with the aforementioned thirty-two physical marks and eighteen distinctive abilities—which he is said to have acquired based upon the merit he accumulated in past lives, as described in the *Jātaka* tales—is not simply the historical Śākyamuni. In other words, the “Śākyamuni” that we can know through the *Āgama* scriptures is already not the teachings or doings of a single human who existed in history, but rather an idealized and generalized abstract buddha reconstructed in terms of a historical figure. With Śākyamuni having been generalized, it appears that then past buddhas and future buddhas began to be discussed. For the time being, I will use the phrase “previous-lives bodhisattva” to refer to Śākyamuni during his time of practice before enlightenment as discussed in the *Āgamas*, distinguishing it from the idea of “bodhisattva” subsequently found in Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁵

In this way, it appears that with the incorporation of the “previous-lives bodhisattva” into the *Āgamas*, the “generalization” of Śākyamuni progressed. As has been pointed out in previous scholarship, due to this generalization, the concepts of *arhat* (a disciple of the Buddha who has acquired wisdom) and *pratyekabuddha* (similar to the generalized Buddha but lacking great compassion) emerged.

3. From the Previous-Lives Bodhisattva to the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva

As we have seen, Śākyamuni was generalized in the *Āgamas*. This Śākyamuni is, in terms of content, basically no different from the Śākyamuni of the

⁴ Ui 1965: 208; Maeda 1998: 376.

⁵ Excluding twelve examples in later texts, the term “Śākyamuni Bodhisattva” does not appear in the *Āgama* sutras.

Mahāyāna scriptures. Since this Śākyamuni was generalized, one would not expect to find concrete physical events, such as birth and death, associated with him. The fact that these are clearly preached in the Mahāyāna scriptures seems to indicate that the problem of generalization of buddhahood began as a question of how to understand the historical Śākyamuni. Therefore, we can say that the Śākyamuni of the *Āgamas* is based on his human, historical existence while also generalizing him as a practitioner of great compassion and as one who has realized the Dharma, while also recognizing his human aspects.

The group that thought the Buddha returned to nothingness after death saw him as existing within the teachings and rules he preached. This was because they focused on him as a historical figure. This is the viewpoint that subsequently would come to hold that the Buddha exists within the “five-part Dharma body” of morality, concentration, wisdom, liberation and knowledge of liberation. On the other hand, since Śākyamuni said, “I did not create the Dharma of Dependent Arising; this law is everlasting regardless of whether the Tathāgata appears in the world,” naturally an exploration of the nature of this everlasting Dharma arose. Let us next consider early Mahāyāna Buddhism from this perspective.

The meaning of “bodhisattva” is clearly more generalized in the Mahāyāna scriptures than the “previous-lives bodhisattva” of the *Āgamas*, in that it is not limited to Śākyamuni alone. The concept, which is of course the centerpiece of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is developed in a variety of ways in the early Mahāyāna sutras. In the following, I will discuss how this concept is presented in the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, *Perfection of Wisdom sutras*, the *Flower Ornament Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*.

The *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* focuses on a bodhisattva’s vows, the completion of the vows and sentient beings’ birth in a buddha land. In other words, it focuses on showing that buddhas are born from vows. The *Āgamas* describe the causes of enlightenment from the perspective of its result, describing the bodhisattva practices that led to Śākyamuni’s becoming a buddha. Thus, we can see that the relationship between buddhas and bodhisattvas in the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* is the opposite of the relationship found between the Śākyamuni *Āgamas* and the bodhisattva the *Jātaka* tales, in that the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* begins with Dharmākara’s vows and practice, while the *Āgamas* begin with Śākyamuni.

The *Perfection of Wisdom sutras* are centered on the non-attaining of all dharmas, their ungraspable nature, as well as the bodhisattva practice of the six perfections. Kajiyoshi Kōun has pointed out that a scripture that is found in the ancient translation, *Sutra on the Collection of the Six Perfections* (*Liuduji jing* 六度集經; Wu period, tr. Kang Senghui 康僧會), which categorizes *Jātaka* tales based on the six perfections, is related to early Perfection

of Wisdom sutras.⁶ In addition, the four-stage program of bodhisattva practice found in the *Smaller Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (initial arousal of the intention for enlightenment, sustained intention for enlightenment, non-retrogression and being bound to one more birth) is based on Śākyamuni *Jātaka* tales.⁷ Thus, Kajiyoshi argues, “The essential form of the *Perfection of Wisdom sutras* that served as their basis developed from the previous lives tales of Śākyamuni.”⁸ From this perspective, seeing the *Perfection of Wisdom sutras* as the path of practice for bodhisattvas would mean that sentient beings practice to become like the generalized Śākyamuni of the *Jātakas*. Thus, it is said that the practice of bodhisattvas requires “three incalculably long spans of one hundred eons” (*san asengqi baijie* 三阿僧祇百劫). In this way, we can clearly see that the meaning of “bodhisattva” in the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* and *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* are completely different. While the former are symbolic representations of compassionate action, the latter are realistic members of the sangha.

Next, let us shift to the *Flower Ornament Sutra* (Chapter on the Ten Grounds and Chapter on Entry into the Dharma Realm) and the *Lotus Sutra*, which are part of the next generation of early Mahāyāna sutras. Since the *Record of the Search for the Profundities* (*Tanxuan ji* 探玄記) was written in seventh-century China by Fazang 法藏, the *Flower Ornament Sutra* has been seen as teaching the bodhisattva path for us human beings to practice (consisting of the ten abodes, ten practices, ten dedications of merit and ten grounds). It appears, however, that this view needs to be reevaluated from the perspective of this sutra’s understanding of Śākyamuni, especially since it is preached in the midst of his attaining enlightenment. It is generally thought that the core of the *Flower Ornament Sutra* is the Chapter on the Ten Grounds (*Shidi pin* 十地品) and the Chapter on Entry into the Dharma-realm (*Rufajie pin* 入法界品), but I believe that the Chapter on the Ten Abodes (*Shizhu pin* 十住品) should also be included as central. The Chapter on the Ten Grounds (which is the equivalent of the *Sutra on the Ten Grounds*) clearly draws on the *Perfection of Wisdom sutras*, since it describes the ten grounds of attainment in relation to the ten *pāramitās*. Also, one translation of the Chapter on the Ten Abodes states that the ten abodes refer to the virtues of Śākyamuni in his previous lives.⁹ Further, I have recently discovered scriptural passages

⁶ Hikata 1954: 105.

⁷ Kajiyoshi 1956: 243; Yamada 1959: 213.

⁸ Kajiyoshi 1956: 243.

⁹ *Pusa shizhu xingdao pin* 菩薩十住行道品 (tr. Dharmarakṣa / Zhu Fahu 竺法護, T 283). Regarding this point, see Oda 2013: 39.

that indicate that the story of the youth Sudhana seeking the Buddhist path in the Chapter on Entry into the Dharma-realm is the development of a *Jātaka* tale.¹⁰ Based on these points, I believe that it is necessary to reconsider the significance of the *Flower Ornament Sutra* from the perspective of its understanding of Śākyamuni.

The *Lotus Sutra* clearly articulates a Mahāyāna view of Śākyamuni. The center of the sutra's first half (later called its "derivative aspect"; Ch. *jimen*, Jp. *Shakumon* 迹門) is the Chapter on Expedient Means. It begins with the statement, "The Buddha has closely attended innumerable hundreds of thousands of myriads of *koṭis* of other buddhas. He has exhaustively carried out practices with courage and persistence under uncountable numbers of buddhas."¹¹ This passage describes the causal stage (the period of practice before enlightenment) of the Śākyamuni who is presently preaching on Vulture Peak. The central message of the various teachings in the Chapter on Expedient Means is that the Three Vehicles are expedient means for the One Vehicle of truth. Taking into account that, as previously described, these Three Vehicles arose from the generalization of Śākyamuni, I believe we can say that the One Buddha Vehicle refers to the original generalized Śākyamuni (buddha vehicle). The centerpiece of the second half of the sutra is the Chapter on the Longevity of the Tathāgata, which describes the eternally abiding nature of Śākyamuni as the Dharma, an issue that is addressed beginning in the Chapter of the Vision of the Jeweled Pagoda. In other words, when seen in light of the development of views of Śākyamuni, the *Lotus Sutra* is a scripture that in the first half makes clear the true meaning of his teachings and the second half shows that he and the eternally abiding Dharma are one. This sutra can be read as presenting a full articulation of the nature of Śākyamuni from a Mahāyāna perspective.

The above considerations show that these early Mahāyāna scriptures resulted from the attempts of Śākyamuni's disciples to answer the questions occasioned by the death of the Buddha: "What is the Buddha?" and "What is the Dharma?"

¹⁰ In 2015, I gave a presentation on this topic entitled "Ramagakyō kara mita Kegenkyō nyūhokkai bon no shudai nitsuite" 『羅摩伽經』からみた『華嚴經』入法界品の主題について (On the Subject of the *Huayan jing*'s Chapter on Entry into the Dharma-Realm as Seen From the *Luomojie jing*). See Oda 2019.

¹¹ T 262.9: 5b27-29. 佛曾親近百千萬億無數諸佛 盡行諸佛無量道法 勇猛精進. Translation from Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 23 (modified).

4. The Turn in Buddhism's View of History: From Geographical-Spatial Time to Primordial-Essential Time

At first glance Mahāyāna scriptures appear to be discussing a variety of completely disparate issues. However, in fact there is a consistent concern that can be seen as centering around a more and more profound understanding of Śākyamuni. The difference between the times that the *Āgamas* and Mahāyāna sutras were created is not that great at all. The generalized Śākyamuni presented in the *Āgamas* and the Śākyamuni found in the Mahāyāna sutras are not that different in terms of content. Perhaps it would be most appropriate to say they are created of the same material. However, the former begins with the historical Śākyamuni (the result) to investigate his great merit (the cause) while not leaving behind the historical Śākyamuni. In contrast, the latter hold that a buddha comes about based on a cause (the bodhisattva) and preach about the multiple bodhisattvas and buddhas of the past, present and future. The meanings of “the stage of bodhisattva practices before the enlightenment of the Buddha” and of “the stage of bodhisattva practices before enlightenment that are still being or will be undertaken” are completely different: while the former logically has no uncertain elements, for the latter the future is undecided. Thus, for those who engage in bodhisattva practices in the present or future, what is assured? Nāgārjuna's *Daśabhūmika-vibhāṣā* investigated this issue, making clear the path of non-retrogression and beings who are determined to attain enlightenment (Sk. *niyata-rāsi*, Ch. *zhengding ju* 正定聚). This is probably the result of Nāgārjuna's engagement with the question of the relationship between Śākyamuni's practices before enlightenment and his own practice of the bodhisattva path, but a detailed analysis of this must wait for another day.

Abbreviations

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, eds. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡辺海旭. 85 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932.

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