

The Bodhisattva Way and Valuing the Real World in the *Lotus Sūtra*

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The Problem

AS is well known, the *Lotus Sūtra* is one of the exemplary Mahāyāna *Sūtras* in India and we infer that it was compiled between the first century before the common era (hereafter BCE) and the second century after the common era (hereafter CE), even though we do not know its precise date. Altogether there are three complete translations of the text into Chinese: (1) the ten-fascicle *Zhengfa hua jing* 正法華經, translated in 286 CE by Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護) of the Western Jin 西晉 (born around 230; died age 78); (2) the seven- or eight-fascicle *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, translated in 406 by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 of the Yao-Qin 姚秦 (dates variously given as 344–413 and 350–409); and (3) the seven-fascicle *Tianpin miaofa lianhua jing* 添品妙法蓮華經, translated jointly by Jñānagupta (523–605) and Dharmagupta (d. 619) in 601 CE.

Kumārajīva's translation became the most popular in the area of East Asia and all of the Chinese commentaries were based on it. Even though his translation did not include the “Devadatta” chapter, another person translated it into Chinese and it had been incorporated into Kumārajīva's translation before the period of Zhiyi 智顛 (538–598) and Jizang 吉藏 (549–623).¹ In this paper I use the Chinese translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* consisting of 28 chapters which incorporates the “Devadatta” chapter.

This paper considers the Bodhisattva way and valuing the real world in the *Lotus Sūtra*. Nikāya Buddhism, practitioners of which aim to emancipate themselves from the world of rebirth and to enter nirvāṇa by severing all inner earthly desires, regards rebirth and nirvāṇa as two entirely different principles. In an extreme case, it considers “reducing the body to ashes and annihilating consciousness” to be the aim and object. This idea shows that after severing all the earthly desires of threefold world, *śrāvakas* (in Chinese, literally “voice-hearers”) enter the flame *samādhi*, burn both body and consciousness and enter empty and quiescent nirvāṇa. This seems not to be reality and might be just an idea. However, even though it is just an idea, to set up such an aim indi-

cates that *śrāvakas* are very eager to emancipate themselves from the rebirth of threefold world. It is unavoidable that Buddhism is regarded as a pessimistic religion based on this aspect.

However, Mahāyāna Buddhism developed a different idea from Nikāya Buddhism concerning rebirth and nirvāṇa. For example, Nāgārjuna states in the chapter on “Examination of Bondage and Liberation” in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Zhonglun* 中論), “Nirvāṇa is not something special, separate from birth and death. The meaning of thusness being thus, how can there be any distinctions?”² and Piṅgala (青目) comments on the verse, “In the highest sense of the real character of all dharmas, we do not speak of a special nirvāṇa which exists apart from birth and death. As the sūtras say, ‘Nirvāṇa is saṃsāra, saṃsāra is nirvāṇa.’ Within this true character of all dharmas how can you say ‘This is saṃsāra, this is nirvāṇa?’”³ And Nāgārjuna states in the chapter on “Examination of Nirvāṇa,” “Between nirvāṇa and the world, there is not the slightest distinction. Between the world and nirvāṇa, there is not the slightest distinction”⁴ and “The real limit of nirvāṇa and the limit of this world, between these two limits, there is not the least distinction.”⁵ Nāgārjuna advocated a new thought that rebirth and nirvāṇa are not opposed to each other but equal in essence. The world where we experience life and death is a real world for ourselves and is named *sahā-loka* (*suopo shijie* 娑婆世界) in Buddhism and there are lots of sufferings which people must endure as *sahā-loka* is translated into the world of endurance (*kanren shijie* 堪忍世界). The new idea that we consider this real world not to be disliked and abandoned but to have an affirmative evaluation was an epoch-making change. This paper considers the thought of valuing the real world through considering the bodhisattva way proposed by the *Lotus Sūtra* from this point of view.

Viewed from the perspective of the overall structure of the text, the first chapter (“Introduction”) is a preface to the *Lotus Sūtra*. The theme of chapters from two (“Skillful Means”) through nine (“Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts”) is an advocacy of the idea of the “one Buddha vehicle” and prophecies conferred on *śrāvakas* based on it. And the theme of chapters ten (“Dharma Preacher”) through twenty-two (“Entrustment”) is Buddha Śākyamuni’s age-old existence and bodhisattvas emerging from the earth who are in charge of propagating the *Lotus Sūtra* after the Buddha’s death. The last chapters from twenty-three (“Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King”) to twenty-eight (“Encouragements of the Bodhisattva Universally Worthy”), are like an appendix to the previous chapters and are diverse in their contents. They indicate the intimate relationship between bodhisattvas such

as the Bodhisattva Medicine King, the Bodhisattva Wonderful Sound, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds (Avalokiteśvara) and Bodhisattva Universally Worthy and the *Lotus Sūtra*, and preach dhāraṇīs which protect followers of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and tell the story of King Wonderful Adornment, who had indulged in heterodoxy but later took refuge in Buddhism accepting his two sons' teaching.

If we consider the bodhisattva way in the *Lotus Sūtra*, chapters ten ("Dharma Preacher") to twenty-two ("Entrustment") should be regarded as very important. As for this point, Yoshiro Tamura wrote, "the central point of the *Lotus Sūtra* is bodhisattva practice related to entrustment. From this viewpoint, the *Lotus Sūtra* makes a clear distinction between the ninth chapter ("Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts") and the tenth chapter ("Dharma Preacher"), and the chapters from ten to twenty-one ("Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One") or twenty-two ("Entrustment") compose one group. Even though this group was compiled later than the former chapters, this group can be said to be a central part of the *Lotus Sūtra* from the standpoint of the philosophical content."⁶

Therefore, this paper first introduces bodhisattvas who can be born in this world on the basis of their previous vows in the "Dharma Preacher" chapter. They can be interpreted as bodhisattvas who are in charge of upholding the *Lotus Sūtra*, i.e., the bodhisattvas of the earth in the "Emerging from the Earth" chapter. Secondly, how does the *Lotus Sūtra* understand the *sahā* world, where bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their previous vows wish to be born? I introduce the fact that the *sahā* world is described as an especially impure and evil land where religiously inferior living beings live after Śākyamuni's death. Finally, as the "The Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter describes the *sahā* world as a pure land where age-old Śākyamuni permanently abides, I consider its philosophical meaning in the context of practices of the bodhisattvas of the earth.

1. Bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their previous vows in the "Dharma Preacher" chapter

At the beginning of the "Dharma Preacher" chapter, Śākyamuni expounds the merits of believing in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the true identities of followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* to eight thousand bodhisattvas including Bodhisattva Medicine King. I will provisionally divide the sentences of the beginning into eight paragraphs and consider them individually.

(1) At that time the World-Honored One addressed Bodhisattva Medicine King, and through him the eighty thousand great men, saying: “Medicine King, do you see in this great assembly the immeasurable number of heavenly beings, dragon kings, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, mahoragas, human and nonhuman beings, as well as monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, those who seek to become *śrāvakas*, who seek to become pratyekabuddhas, or who seek the Buddha way? Upon these various kinds of beings who in the presence of the Buddha listen to one verse or one phrase of the *Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Law* and for a moment think of it with joy I will bestow on all of them a prophecy that they will attain *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*.” (T no. 262, 9. 30b29–c7; B. Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. pp. 160–161 [with minor changes])

This paragraph explains that if in the presence of the Buddha persons listen to one verse or one phrase of the *Lotus Sūtra* and for a moment think of it with joy, they will receive a prophecy of future enlightenment.

(2) The Buddha said to Medicine King: “In addition, if after the Thus Come One has passed into extinction there should be someone who listens to the *Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Law*, even one verse or one phrase, and for a moment thinks of it with joy, I will likewise bestow on him a prophecy that he will attain *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*.” (T no. 262, 9. 30c7–9; Watson, p. 161 [with minor changes])

This paragraph explains that if after the Buddha’s death persons listen to one verse or one phrase of the *Lotus Sūtra* and for a moment think of it with joy, they will receive a prophecy of future enlightenment. Even though there is a difference in terms of the time both in the presence of the Buddha and after the Buddha’s death, both (1) and (2) are equal in that persons who listen to the *Lotus Sūtra* will be given a prophecy of future enlightenment.

Next, the idea of Bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their previous vows is shown in paragraphs (3) to (5).

(3) Again if there are persons who embrace, read, recite, expound and copy the *Lotus Sūtra* of the Wonderful Law, even only one verse, and look upon this sūtra with the same reverence as they would the Buddha, presenting various offerings of flowers, incense, necklaces, powdered incense, paste incense, incense for burning, silken canopies, streamers and banners, clothing and music, and pressing their palms together in reverence, then, Medicine King, you should understand that such person

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 no. 262, 9. 30c9–15; Watson, p. 161 [with minor changes])

This paragraph explains that persons who embrace, read, recite, expound and copy even one phrase of the *Lotus Sūtra* and look upon this sūtra with the same reverence as they would the Buddha, presenting various offerings such as flowers and incense and pressing their palms together in reverence 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.

(4) “Medicine King, if someone should ask what living beings will be able to attain Buddhahood in a latter-day existence, then you should show him that all these people in a latter-day existence are certain to attain Buddhahood. Why? Because if good men and good women embrace, read, recite, expound and copy the *Lotus Sūtra*, even one phrase of it, offer various kinds of alms to the sūtra, flowers, incense, necklaces, powdered incense, paste incense, incense for burning, silken canopies, streamers and banners, clothing and music, and press their hands together in reverence, then these persons will be looked up to and honored by all the world. Alms will be offered to them such as would be offered to the Thus Come One. You should understand that these persons are great bodhisattvas who succeed in attaining *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*. Pitying living beings, they have vowed to be born among them where they may broadly expound and make distinctions regarding the *Lotus Sūtra of the Wonderful Law*.” (T no. 262, 9. 30c15–23; Watson, p. 161 [with minor changes])

This paragraph explains that persons who embrace, read, recite, expound and copy even one phrase of the *Lotus Sūtra* and look upon this sūtra, presenting various offerings such as flowers and incense and pressing their palms together in reverence, will be looked up to and honored by all the world and will be offered alms as the Thus Come One would be. And it explains that they are great bodhisattvas who are deliberately born in this world and broadly expound the *Lotus Sūtra* because of pity on living beings.

(5) How much more so is this true, then, of those who can embrace the entire sūtra and offer various types of alms to it! “Medicine King, you should understand that these persons voluntarily relinquish the reward

due 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 no. 262, 9. 30c23–26; Watson, pp. 161–162 [with minor changes])

This paragraph explains that as it is so in the case of only one phrase of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is even more so in the case of embracing the *Lotus Sūtra* in its entirety and presenting various offerings to it. And it is explained that these persons abandon the reward of their pure karma and are born in the evil world out of deep compassion for living beings, where they expound broadly the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Paragraph (3) clarifies that persons who practice the *Lotus Sūtra* in a serious manner have already offered alms to innumerable Buddhas and have fulfilled their great vow of becoming enlightened, and though they could have enjoyed their splendid reward sufficiently, they are born in this evil world from great pity on living beings. Paragraph (4) also emphasizes that they are regarded as great bodhisattvas who completed super perfect enlightenment and honorable existence who should be offered alms as the Thus Come One would be. Moreover, paragraph (5) points out that they abandoned the reward of their pure karma. Like as the idea that “they have vowed to be born among them” in paragraph (4) and the idea that “these persons voluntarily relinquish the reward due for their pure deeds” in paragraph (5), these paragraphs indicate the idea of bodhisattvas who can be born not on the basis of their past karma but on the basis of their previous vows.

The idea of bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their previous vows was seen in the school of the Mahāsāṃghikas in the period of *Nikāya* Buddhism. 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 no. 2031, 49. 15c10–11)

According to the idea of karma in the early period of Buddhism, rebirth in this world is a repetition of the deluded existence. And the cause of rebirth is bad karma defiled by earthly desires. However, the idea that bodhisattvas assuming that to save living beings is an obligation are born in this world simply on the basis of past evil karma seems to have been unsuitable for some of Buddhists’ feelings. Then, they paid notice to the power of vow (*praṇidhāna*, 誓願) of saving living beings as the cause of bodhisattvas’ birth in this world. The idea of bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their previous vows seen in the school

of the Mahāsāṃghikas is thought by some scholars to have developed into the idea of the bodhisattva of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In any event, such a thought shown in the “Dharma Preacher” chapter described above can be regarded as one of its typical examples.

It is often pointed out that followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* are practical and active. I think that this indication is related to the thought shown in the paragraph from (3) to (5). In fact, followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* are said to be advanced bodhisattvas who have been born in this evil world out of deep compassion for living beings, relinquishing the reward of their good karma and propagating the *Lotus Sūtra*. According to this idea, it can be interpreted that no matter how someone embracing faith in the *Lotus Sūtra* is left in disadvantaged circumstances, it is so because he daringly abandon his advantaged reward out of deep compassion. Even though this interpretation seems to be self-righteous overconfidence, it can cast a light which can change the worldview of persons who really groan under the weight of suffering. However, even though one may have voluntarily chosen to be born in disadvantaged circumstances, just being content with one’s present circumstances is nothing other than the resigned view of life ruled by fate. In fact, birth on the basis of past karma and birth on the basis of previous vows might be called a “double standard” and cause some confusion, but the fact that one deepens awareness from a perspective of realizing past karmas to one of realizing previous vows (*pūrva-praṇidhāna*, 本願), changes his circumstances, and actively saves other people, brings a fundamental conversion in one’s view of life. If someone hopes to transcend the circumstances of an ordinary person ruled by past karma, it is necessary first that he not ascribe responsibility for his present circumstances to other things or people but rather accept it as his own responsibility. This is self-realization of one’s past karma. However, he does not stop there, but advances in Buddhist practice, aspiring to change and transform himself. The self-realization of the previous vows can be actualized in such a process. This is none other than self-awareness as a bodhisattva.

This conversion from “self-awareness of past karma” to “self-awareness of previous vows” is a characteristic of some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and I would like to call this a “religion of vows.” To explain this standpoint in fuller detail, followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* do not seek to attain enlightenment through their own efforts, nor do they seek to be saved by an absolute savior. They strongly bear in mind their true identity that they have been born into this evil world of their own will to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* for the sake of all living beings, and thus feel satisfied by fulfilling their mission. Herein lies an

extremely interesting religious theory. In fact, there is some faith which hopes to be saved by Buddhas and bodhisattvas, for example, Amitābha Buddha and Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Even though I admit that praying to some great existence exceeding human powers has important significance, I think that the central idea of Mahāyāna sūtras is to realize the conversion from “persons to be saved” to “persons who save” and to actually save other people. I mean this idea by “religion of vows.” As Mahāyāna sūtras are compiled on the basis of hoping to save lots of living beings, it is certain that they emphasize the existence of lots of living beings who should be saved. However, we can infer that there must be persons who vow to save other people behind the existence of “persons to be saved.” Even though many Buddhas and bodhisattvas appear in sūtras as savior, there must have definitely been unknown bodhisattvas who stood in self-awareness as persons who vowed to save. I think that the *Lotus Sūtra*, which advocates that everyone is a bodhisattva, aims at the conversion of each person to someone who vows to save living beings supported by great power.

What, then, is one’s mission in this life? Paragraph (6) answers this question:

(6) If one of these good men or good women in the time after I have passed into extinction is able to expound the *Lotus Sūtra* in private to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One. He has been dispatched by the Thus Come One and carries out the Thus Come One’s work. And how much more so those who in the midst of the great assembly broadly expound the sūtra for others! (T no. 262, 9. 30c26–29; Watson, p. 162 [with minor changes])

This paragraph explains that persons who expound the *Lotus Sūtra* in private to one person after the Buddha’s death are envoys of the Tathāgata, or Buddha, dispatched by the Tathāgata to undertake the task of the Tathāgata and how much more so those who expound the *Lotus Sūtra* in the midst of the great assembly. As such persons of mission are very noble and venerable, an offence of a person who speaks only one evil word to them is more grave than that of a person who speaks evil of the Buddha for such an extraordinary long time as one *kalpa*. Therefore this person should be rather greeted with reverence and alms. The reason why such persons of mission are very noble and venerable is that when they expound the *Lotus Sūtra*, the listeners can immediately become Buddhas. Paragraph (7) and (8) indicate this point:

(7) “Medicine King, if there should be an evil person who, his mind destitute of goodness, should for the space of a kalpa appear in the presence of the Buddha and constantly curse and revile the Buddha, that person’s offense would still be rather light. But if there were a person who spoke only one evil word to curse or defame the lay persons or monks or nuns who read and recite the *Lotus Sūtra*, then his offense would be very grave.” (T no. 262, 9. 30c29–31a3; Watson, p. 162 [with minor changes])

(8) “Medicine King, these persons who read and recite the *Lotus Sūtra*—you should understand that these persons adorn themselves with the adornments of the Buddha; they are borne upon the shoulders of the Thus Come One. Wherever they may go, one should greet them with bows, with palms pressed single-mindedly together, with reverence and alms, with respect and praise, flowers, incense, necklaces, powdered incense, paste incense, incense for burning, silken canopies, streamers and banners, clothing, delicacies and the making of music. The finest alms that can be offered to a person should be offered to them. Heavenly treasures should be scattered over them, the treasure hoards of heaven should be given them as gifts. Why do I say this? Because these persons delight in expounding the Law. And if one listens to them for even a moment, he will immediately attain the ultimate *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*.” (T no. 262, 9. 31a3–11; Watson, p. 162 [with minor changes])

As the *Lotus Sūtra* is considered to be the teaching given immediately before Śākyamuni’s death, it is fair to say that the upholders of the *Lotus Sūtra* referred to at the beginning of the “Dharma Preacher” chapter are actually those who live after the Buddha’s death. Therefore the bodhisattvas described here are none other than the bodhisattvas of the earth who appear in the fourteenth chapter, “Emerging from the Earth.” In summary, bodhisattvas of the earth are great bodhisattvas who voluntarily choose to appear in this *sahā* world. Even though in the narrative of the *Lotus Sūtra*, they appear in the presence of Śākyamuni Buddha, they can be said to be the upholders of the *Lotus Sūtra* who wish to be born in this *sahā* world after the Buddha’s death.⁸

2. The *Sahā* World as an Impure Land in the *Lotus Sūtra*

What is the nature of the *sahā* world where bodhisattvas born on the basis of their previous vows, i.e., bodhisattvas of the earth, wish to be born in the “Dharma Preacher” chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*? The “Skillful

Means” chapter explains that the Buddhas appear in evil worlds of five impurities and do not immediately preach one Buddha vehicle to living beings of inferior spiritual capacity, but preach three vehicles utilizing the power of skillful means in accordance with their spiritual capacity.⁹ The five impurities are impurity of the age, impurity of desire, impurity of living beings, impurity of view, and impurity of life span. Impurity of the age is the condition of war, epidemics, famines, etc. Impurity of desire means being controlled by passion. Impurity of living beings is the situation in which the bodies and minds of living beings become weak and experience many sufferings. Impurity of view is when evil thoughts prevail in the world. Impurity of life span is when living beings have short life-span. These are the characteristics of the evil world. Applying this concept of five impurities to the *sahā* world of Śākyamuni Buddha, it goes without saying that the *sahā* world is regarded as the evil world of five impurities. As in the *Lotus Sūtra* there are many descriptions which correlate the time after Śākyamuni Buddha’s death with the evil world,¹⁰ the *sahā* world after Śākyamuni Buddha’s death is especially regarded as an impure and evil land. Also, the chapter “Simile and Parable” compares the *sahā* world where living beings are reborn to the burning house and depicts its awful situation in detail.¹¹ This is also a description which emphasizes that the *sahā* world is an impure land.¹²

Also in the chapter “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower” Śākyamuni Buddha gathers all the Buddhas who are his emanations from the worlds of the ten directions to open the door of the Many Treasure Tower. After he describes the worlds where Emanation Buddhas abide as pure lands, he purifies the *sahā* world and calls the Emanation Buddhas together. From this narrative, it is obvious that the *sahā* world is originally considered to be an impure land.¹³

The *sahā* world after Śākyamuni Buddha’s death, where bodhisattvas who are born on the basis of their previous vows—i.e., where bodhisattvas of the earth wish to be born—is regarded as an impure and evil world as described above. The chapter “Encouraging Devotion” tells an interesting story which explicitly shows this idea from another perspective. Finally the task to uphold and propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* is entrusted to bodhisattvas who are born on the basis of their previous vows, i.e., bodhisattvas of the earth. In contrast with these bodhisattvas, the chapter “Encouraging Devotion” refers to bodhisattvas who vow to propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* in the *sahā* world but are not permitted to do so and *śrāvakas* who from the beginning refuse to uphold and propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* in the *sahā* world.

As Śākyamuni Buddha states in the chapter “The Emergence of the

Treasure Tower,” “Immediately Śākyamuni Buddha used his transcendental powers to lift the members of the great assembly up into the air. And in a loud voice he addressed all the four kinds of believers, saying, ‘Who is capable of broadly preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* of the Wonderful Law in this *sahā* world? Now is the time to do so, for before long the Thus Come One will enter nirvāṇa. The Buddha wishes to entrust this *Lotus Sūtra* of the Wonderful Law to someone so that it may be preserved.’” (T no. 262, 9. 33c11–15; Watson, p. 176 [with minor changes]), he appeals the audiences to uphold and propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* after his death. In response to this appeal, Bodhisattva Medicine King and Bodhisattva Great Joy of Preaching along with their twenty thousand bodhisattva followers first vow to propagate the sūtra after the Buddha’s death. They state in their vow, “Living beings in the evil age to come will have fewer and fewer good roots. Many will be overbearingly arrogant and greedy for offerings and other forms of gain, increasing the roots that are not good and moving farther away than ever from emancipation. But although it will be difficult to teach and convert them, we will summon up the power of great patience and will read and recite this sūtra, embrace, preach, and copy it, offering it many kinds of alms and never begrudging our bodies or lives.” (T no. 262, 9. 33c11–15; Watson, pp. 190–191 [with minor changes]) According to their statement, it is difficult to cultivate living beings in the evil world after the Buddha’s death because they are inferior in religious capacity, but in spite of this, they vow to become responsible for the *Lotus Sūtra* by “the power of great patience.”

Next, five hundred arhats, who were bestowed a prophecy of the future enlightenment in the chapter “Prophecy of Enlightenment for Five Hundred Disciples,” vow “In lands other than this one we will broadly preach this sūtra.” (T no. 262, 9. 36a7; Watson, p. 191 [with minor changes]) Moreover, eight thousand *śrāvakas*, who were given a prophecy of future enlightenment in the chapter “Prophecies Conferred on Learners and Adepts,” vow that “We too in other lands will broadly preach this sūtra. Why? Because in this *sahā* world the people are given to corruption and evil, beset by overbearing arrogance, shallow in merit, irascible, muddled, fawning and devious, and their hearts are not sincere.” (T no. 262, 9. 36a9–12; Watson, p. 191 [with minor changes]) And nuns, who were given a prophecy of future enlightenment in the chapter “Encouraging Devotion,” vow “We too will be able to go to lands in other regions and broadly propagate this sūtra.” (T no. 262, 9. 36b7–8; Watson, p. 192 [with minor changes])

What these *śrāvakas* have in common is the vow to uphold and propa-

gate the *Lotus Sūtra* in lands other than this *sahā* world. The reason why they avoid the *sahā* world is that living beings are inferior in religious capacity as shown in the vow of eight thousand *śrāvakas*. Even though it is not explicitly stated, they seem to lack “the power of great patience” shown in the vow of Bodhisattva Medicine King described above. However, in the last case even Bodhisattva Medicine King is not permitted by Śākyamuni Buddha to uphold and propagate the *Lotus Sūtra* in the *sahā* world. For needless to say, the task is supposed to be entrusted to bodhisattvas of the earth.

As I have just mentioned, the *sahā* world is understood as an impure and evil world. Concretely speaking, there are religiously inferior living beings and monks in the evil world and their persecution of the followers of *Lotus Sūtra* is described at the end of the chapter “Encouraging Devotion.”¹⁴ However, the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” proposes a new idea completely different from the *sahā* world as an impure and evil world. I will consider this issue in the next section.

3. Śākyamuni Buddha as Enlightened in the Remote Past and the Purification of the *Sahā* World

Starting with Bodhisattva Maitreya’s question about bodhisattvas of the earth in the chapter “Emerging from the Earth,” Śākyamuni Buddha relates in the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” that it is not in this life but in the remote past that he originally attained enlightenment by the parable of “numberless major world-system dust-particle kalpas” and that his future life span will last twice as many as the years from the time of his original enlightenment to the time when he preached the *Lotus Sūtra*. In other words, the *Lotus Sūtra* shows the immensity of his life span as a Buddha. There are three main points in the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One.” The first point is that Śākyamuni Buddha’s life span is immense. The second one is that his entry into nirvāṇa is merely intended as a “skillful display of nirvāṇa” (the idea that the Buddha provisionally shows himself to enter final nirvāṇa merely as a skillful measure to arouse a keen resolution on the part of living beings to seek the way). The third one is that the long-abiding Buddha will appear to persons of deep faith (from the perspective of living beings themselves, this is to grant the possibility that one may “see or meet the Buddha”).

The second point, “skillful display of nirvāṇa” means that Śākyamuni Buddha entered nirvāṇa merely as a skillful measure and in reality does not enter nirvāṇa. For example, the sūtra states, “Originally I practiced

the bodhisattva way, and the life span that I acquired then has yet to come to an end but will last twice the number of years that have already passed. Now, however, although in fact I do not actually enter extinction, I announce that I am going to adopt the course of extinction. This is a skillful means which the Thus Come One uses to teach and convert living beings.” (T no. 262, 9. 42c22–24; Watson, p. 227 [with minor changes]) And it states, “In order to save living beings, as a skillful means I appear to enter nirvāṇa. But in truth I am not passing into extinction. I am constantly here preaching the Law. I am constantly here, but through my transcendental powers. I make it so that living beings in their befuddlement do not see me even when close by.” (T no. 262, 9. 43b16–19; Watson, p. 227 [with minor changes]) In other words, Śākyamuni Buddha enlightened in the remote past continues to abide here and preach the law, and continues to save living beings. Buddhas abiding in different pure lands other than the *sahā* world, e.g., Amitābha Buddha, cannot appear as they are in the *sahā* world since it is an impure land. Therefore, Mahāyāna sūtras expound various stories that bodhisattvas such as Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and Bodhisattva Earth Repository (Kṣitigarbha) and so on save living beings in the *sahā* world instead of the Buddha in the age when the Buddha does not exist. In contrast, Śākyamuni Buddha enlightened in the remote past in truth has not passed into nirvāṇa and is engaged in saving living beings in the *sahā* world. Therefore, I think that it is possible to say Śākyamuni Buddha, though enlightened in the remote past, walks on an eternal “bodhisattva way” playing the role of various bodhisattvas in the *sahā* world. When we consider the bodhisattva way in the *Lotus Sūtra*, we find that Śākyamuni Buddha has an aspect of a bodhisattva in a sense that he is the agent of saving living beings in the *sahā* world, which is a point overlooked easily.¹⁵

This idea of valuing the *sahā* world is also shown in the narrative of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. Whatever people 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, saying a certain set of words. He would say, “I have profound reverence for you. I would never dare treat you with disparaging and arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood.” (T no. 262. 9. 50c19–20; Watson, p. 266) However, certain persons became exceedingly annoyed by Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s bestowals of prophecy of future Buddhahood, since he was not yet a Buddha himself and thus had no recognizable power or authority to make such momentous statements.

Some beat him with sticks and staves, while others pelted him with tiles and stones. But even as he fled he would take up his stance at a distance and continue to call out in a loud voice, “I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!” (T no. 262. 9. 50c29–51a1; Watson, p. 267) Bodhisattva Never Disparaging kept up this practice for his entire life. When he was on the point of death he heard from the sky the verses of the *Lotus Sūtra* that had been previously preached by the Buddha King of Awesome Sound. He was able to retain them in their entirety, whereupon he immediately gained the merits of purification of the six sense faculties. His life span was extended for two hundred tens of thousands of millions of *nayutas* of years, during which time he preached the *Lotus Sūtra* widely for people. Why is the prolongation of his life introduced as a topic? I think that it is for the purpose of expounding the *Lotus Sūtra* heard and memorized by him to people. This can be interpreted as valuing the place where Bodhisattva Never Disparaging lives in order to practice the bodhisattva way, which is to expound the *Lotus Sūtra* in this context. This Bodhisattva Never Disparaging is said to be Śākyamuni Buddha in a prior life.

In relation to the brand new idea of Śākyamuni Buddha having been enlightened in the remote past, a completely new idea of the *sahā* world, which had been considered an impure and evil world, was proposed. In other words, Vulture Peak where Śākyamuni Buddha, who was enlightened in the remote past, now abides is described as a pure land as follows: “This, my land, remains safe and tranquil, constantly filled with heavenly and human beings. The halls and pavilions in its gardens and groves are adorned with various kinds of gems. Jeweled trees abound in flowers and fruit where living beings enjoy themselves at ease. The gods strike heavenly drums, constantly making many kinds of music. Mandārava blossoms rain down, scattering over the Buddha and the great assembly. My pure land is not destroyed.” (T no. 262. 9. 43c7–12; Watson, pp. 230–231) This description of a pure land is opposed to the idea that the *sahā* world is regarded as an impure land. I think that the existence of this pure land is established on the ground of the ongoing activity of saving living beings by Śākyamuni.

This pure land is described not as an aim to be attained but as an existing pure land in the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One.” Even though we say “an existing pure land,” such a pure land exists for Śākyamuni Buddha enlightened in the remote past, but does not exist as a reality for ordinary people sunk in suffering. Thus someone might propose a practice of contemplating the *sahā* world as a pure land in meditation, which he thinks is recommended in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

In the period after Śākyamuni Buddha's death, this pure land should be supported and sustained by the bodhisattva ways of bodhisattvas of the earth who are the legitimate successors of Śākyamuni Buddha. From the viewpoint of ordinary people, this idea shows that the pure land for Śākyamuni Buddha enlightened in the remote past is shared with ordinary people by the bodhisattva practices of the bodhisattvas of the earth. And from the viewpoint of the latter, we can understand that they are bodhisattvas who aim at reforming the impure and evil *sahā* world into a pure land.

In short, the existence of Śākyamuni Buddha who was enlightened in the remote past and the practice of the bodhisattvas of the earth cooperate with one another. From the perspective of Śākyamuni, the aim is the recovery of an original pure land; from the standpoint of the bodhisattvas of the earth and ordinary unenlightened people, it is the actualization of a pure land. Even though this might be a progressive interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, we can say that classics maintain their vitality through such creative interpretation. The original meaning of "pure land" is a land brought about through the fulfillment of vows taken when a Buddha was a bodhisattva. The *sahā* world, where lots of religiously inferior living beings and lots of persecutors of the bodhisattvas of the earth can be found, cannot be a pure land. Thus we can infer that the bodhisattvas of the earth aim at the realization of a pure land where living beings can enjoy themselves at ease through their practice of bodhisattva ways. As I consider the practice of the bodhisattva of the earth to be very important, I interpret the pure land of the "The Life Span of the Thus Come One" chapter neither as an existing pure land nor as a pure land perceived in meditation, but as a pure land which we should aim to achieve.

However, we tend to think of a pure land as completely ideal, as understood for example from the fact that the absence of living beings of the three evil paths (hell, hungry ghosts, and animals) is one characteristic of the Pure Land of Perfect Bliss of Amitābha Buddha.¹⁶ But a pure land is not a place where only Buddhas and bodhisattvas reside, but includes various practitioners of Buddhism as well. Considering the nature of the world where we live, we must admit that part of it is still experiencing sufferings like those of the three evil paths due to war and starvation. Even in materially rich advanced countries, some people are experiencing suffering because of various types of violence, discrimination, bullying, and harassment. Such a world cannot be considered a pure land. Therefore, even though bodhisattvas of the earth purify the *sahā* world, it does not necessarily mean that we can bring about a com-

pletely ideal land. In reality, it is important to be practical, aiming at a society relieved from the sufferings of the three evil paths as a minimum target. To live one's life in a humane manner is often set as a goal in political and economic contexts. I think it is a very natural objective for humanity and we can say that it is also only a very modest objective. Nevertheless, everyone knows that it is actually a difficult problem to solve. Therefore, even though it is difficult to achieve the pure land which bodhisattvas should aim at, it is not simply a pipe dream or the objective only of a specific religion, but a goal which many people can share.

Even though there arose the idea that “the *sahā* world is in itself the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light,” that is, that “this seemingly impure land is in itself a pure land,”¹⁷ it would be pointless were this idea to be taken only as philosophical speculation by aristocrats isolated from the hardships of real life. Needless to say, there was historically an idea of a contemplative pure land, and even though we admit that it played a certain role, I would like to understand the pure land in the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” as that which bodhisattvas of the earth should bring about. In other words, I would like to understand that bodhisattvas of the earth wish to be born in the impure and evil *sahā* world and that their aim is to purify it.

4. Conclusion

First, I have shown that the bodhisattvas of the earth, who are responsible for upholding the *Lotus Sūtra* after Śākyamuni Buddha's death, are described as bodhisattvas who can be born on the basis of their previous vows. Secondly, concerning the concept of vows, I have analyzed the deepening of awareness from realizing past karmas to realizing previous vows, and I have analyzed the transition from being saved by powerful saviors to saving other living beings. Finally, based on the existence of the extremely long-lived Śākyamuni Buddha who is the Teacher of this *sahā* world and the practice of the bodhisattvas of the earth who are the true successors of Śākyamuni Buddha, I have interpreted the *Lotus Sūtra* as saying that people should purify this *sahā* world without fleeing from it as an impure and evil place.

In certain forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the idea of regarding rebirth and nirvāṇa as two entirely different principles was transcended and there appeared the idea of valuing the real world where we live.¹⁸ Such an idea seems to have developed Buddhism into a world religion, and can now serve as the background for proposing an ideal of creating a

new culture.

The teaching found in the *Lotus Sūtra* that the real world is a place where human beings can be happy and at ease should encourage us to reconstruct our own society as such a world. I myself want to learn from the *Lotus Sūtra* a way of living which changes the world from a place where much suffering exists to that where living beings are happy and at ease.

Notes

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¹ Daosheng's (道生 ca. 355?-434) *Miaofa lianhua jing shu* 妙法蓮華經疏 and the Fayun's 法雲 (467-529) *Fahua yiji* 法華義記 did not include annotation on the "Devadatta" chapter because their commentaries were written on the *Lotus Sūtra* consisting of 27 chapters.

² T no. 1564, 30. 21b15-16; Brian Bocking, *Nāgārjuna in China: A translation of the Middle Treatise* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), p. 256 [with minor changes].

³ T no. 1564, 30. 21b17-19; Brian Bocking, *ibid*, p. 256 [with minor changes].

⁴ T no. 1564, 30. 36a4-5; Brian Bocking, *ibid*, pp. 365-366 [with minor changes].

⁵ T no. 1564, 30. 36a10-11; Brian Bocking, *ibid*, p. 366 [with minor changes].

⁶ See Tamura Yoshiro, "The spirit of the bodhisattva in the *Lotus Sūtra*," in *Daijō bosatsudō no kenkyū* (edited by Nishi Giyū, Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1968), p. 236.

⁷ Another translation by Zhendi 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 no. 2031, 49. 20c11-12) See Yamada Ryūjō, *Daijō Bukkyō seiritsu ron josetsu* (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1959), pp. 162-164. Also see Nakamura Hajime, *Genshi Bukkyō kara Daijō Bukkyō e* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1994), pp. 95-96.

⁸ If we view the compilation of the *Lotus Sūtra* from a historical perspective, it seems plausible to me that the bodhisattvas of the earth represent the self-image and self-consciousness of the followers of the *Lotus Sūtra* at the time when it was compiled in India.

⁹ See "The Buddhas appear in evil worlds of five impurities. These are the so-called impurity of the age, impurity of desire, impurity of living beings, impurity of view, and impurity of life span. Śāriputra, when the age is impure and the times are chaotic, then the defilements of living beings are grave, they are greedy and jealous and put down roots that are not good. Because of this, the Buddhas, utilizing the power of skillful means, apply distinctions to the one Buddha vehicle and preach as though it were three." (T no. 262, 9. 7b23-27; Watson, pp. 32-33 [with minor changes])

¹⁰ For example, see "In the evil world following my extinction" (T no. 262, 9. 31a25; Watson, p. 163), "But if after the Buddha has entered extinction, in the time of evil" (T no. 262, 9. 34a22; Watson, p. 179), "But if after the Buddha has passed into extinction, in the time of evil." (T no. 262, 9. 34a27; Watson, p. 179) and so on.

¹¹ Concerning the description, see T no. 262, 9. 13c19-14b14.

¹² As for the viewpoint which takes notice of the evil world of five impurities in the

chapter “Skillful Means” and the description of the burning house in the chapter “Simile and Parable” in relation to the *sahā* world being an impure land, see Suguro Shinjō, *Zōtei hokekyō no seiritsu to shisō*, Tokyo: Daitō shuppansha, 1993 [first edition], 1996 [revised edition], pp. 281–282.

¹³ The narrative of purification of the *sahā* world can be interpreted as a preliminary description of the idea that the *sahā* world is regarded as an pure land in the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One”, but there is a difference between them. While in the chapter “The Emergence of the Treasure Tower” the *sahā* world is purified by the supernatural power of Śākyamuni Buddha, in the chapter “The Life Span of the Thus Come One” the *sahā* world is purified by the collaboration of the extremely long-lived Śākyamuni Buddha and the bodhisattvas of the earth.

¹⁴ See T no. 262, 9. 36b21–37a1.

¹⁵ As for this point, the Sanskrit text corresponding to the passages “Originally I practiced the bodhisattva way, and the life span that I acquired then has yet to come to an end but will last twice the number of years that have already passed. Now, however, although in fact I do not actually enter extinction, I announce that I am going to adopt the course of extinction. This is a skillful means which the Thus Come One uses to teach and convert living beings.” (T no. 262, 9. 42c22–24; Watson, p. 227 [with minor changes]), which was cited in this main text, reads as follows: “And even now, young gentlemen of good family, I have not accomplished my ancient Bodhisattva-course, and the measure of my lifetime is not full.” (*Saddharma-pundarīka or The Lotus of the True Law*, translated by Jan Hendric Kern. Sacred Books of the East, vol. 21. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884, p. 302) The original Sanskrit text reads as follows: “na ca tāvan me kula-putrā adyāpi paurvikī bodhisattva-caryā pariniṣpādit’āyuṣ-pramāṇam apy aparipūrṇam.” (*Saddharmapundarīka*, ed. by H.Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio, p. 319) However, Nakamura Zuiryū pointed out that there is a Sanskrit manuscript corresponding to the Kumārajīva’s translation. See Nakamura Zuiryū, *Gendaigo yaku Kokekyō*, Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1998, p. 237.

¹⁶ See the Larger *Sukhāti-vyūha*, “Even though I become enlightened, if there are hell, hungry spirits, and animals in my pure land, I would not attain Buddhahood.” (T no. 360, 12. 267c17–18)

¹⁷ See Zhanran’s 湛然 *Fahua wenju ji* 法華文句記 vol. 9B, “A sūtra states, ‘my land is not destroyed and I live eternally on Vulture Peak.’ Why should we seek for the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light separately from Buddhagayā? There does not exist a *sahā* world outside the Land of Tranquil Light.” (T no. 1719, 34. 333c2–4)

¹⁸ The idea of “humanistic Buddhism” (人間佛教) proposed by the Chinese monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) shares some common points with the idea of valuing this world as found in the *Lotus Sūtra*.