

Considerations on the So-called Eternal Buddha

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It is generally admitted that the existence of “the eternal Buddha” 「久遠実成の仏」 is taught in the “Life-span” chapter 「如来寿量品」 of the Lotus Sutra. But, what is the meaning of the adjective “eternal”? Does it mean “beginningless and endless” or simply “endless”? Or, is it possible to consider that the Buddha, although he has an extremely long life after the awakening (*bodhi*), will finally enter into *nirvāṇa* in the future?

Based on the interpretation stated in Vasubandhu’s commentary on the Lotus Sutra, “the eternal Buddha” has been generally considered to be a *sāṃbhogika-kāya* 報身. Therefore many Buddhist thinkers like Chi-tsang 吉藏 (549-623) and Nichiryū 日隆 (1385-1464) have explained that the life-span of “the eternal Buddha” has its beginning 「有始」 when he attained the awakening quite long ago, although some thinkers, like Nichō 日朝 (1422-1500)¹, presumably influenced by *Tathāgatagarbha* thought, have asserted that the Buddha is not only endless but also beginningless 「無始無終」.

I. the place of the awakening

Prior to considering the problems concerning the life-span of “the eternal Buddha,” I would like to identify the place where the Buddha attained the awakening. In this respect, I cannot but express my doubt about the validity of the generally admitted distinction between 「伽耶近成（始成）の仏」 “the Buddha who recently attained the awakening at Gayā” and 「久遠実成の仏」 “the eternal Buddha.”

The words 「久遠実成」 and 「伽耶近成（伽耶始成）」 are found already in the writings of Chan-jan 湛然.² Moreover, in 『法華玄義』 the following passage is found.

[1] 伽耶城寿命及数数示現等、是応仏寿命。阿僧祇寿命無量者、是報仏寿命。常住不滅者、是法仏寿命也。三仏宛然常住義足。（大正 33,802c25-28）

In this passage, it seems evident that the term 「伽耶城寿命」 refers to the life-span of the Buddha called 「伽耶近成」 in the writings of 湛然.

However, I am doubtful about the validity of using the term 「伽耶近成」, because, I think, the place, where “the eternal Buddha” 「久遠実成の仏」 attained the awakening (*bodhi*) quite long ago, is stated to be Gayā in the Lotus Sutra itself. In fact, in the “Welling Up out of the Earth” chapter 「從地涌出品」 of the sutra, it is stated as follows:

1 「サテハ如来成仏ノ初ハ無リケリ。所詮無始無終ノ仏ニテ御座ス也」（『法華草案抄』 8,17 左）

2 Cf. Taisho, 33,921c14, 924c25;34,326b29,333b21 etc.

* This paper was presented at XVIIth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, University of Vienna, August 20, 2014

[2] mayāite ’jita sarve bodhisattvā mahāsattvā asyāṃ sahāyāṃ lokadhātāv

anuttarāṃ samyaksaṃbodhim abhisambudhya samādāpitāḥ samuttejitāḥ
saṃprahaṛṣṭā anuttarāyāṃ samyaksaṃbodhau pariṇāmitāḥ/

(K[Kern ed.],309,4-6)

[3] 皆集忍界、吾始逮無上正真道成正覺時、勸悅斯等、立不退轉、使成大道。

(大正 9,112a22-24) 『正法華』

[4] 〔是諸大菩薩摩訶薩、無量無數阿僧祇、從地涌出、汝等昔所未見者〕、
我於是娑婆世界、得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提已、教化示導是諸菩薩。

(大正 9,41b2-3) 『妙法華』

[5] Ajita, after having attained the supreme, true awakening in this Sahā world, I have encouraged, excited, animated, and developed all these Bodhisattvas Mahāsattvas [welled up out of the Earth] to the supreme, true awakening. (tr. of [2])

In these passages, it is stated that “the eternal Buddha,” who attained the awakening quite long ago, and who, after the awakening, has encouraged the innumerable Bodhisattvas welled up out of the earth to attain the awakening, attained the awakening in the world of Sahā. Then, where in the Sahā world did the Buddha attain the awakening? The answer is given in the following verses of the same chapter.

[6] mayā ca prāpya imam agrabodhiṃ nagare gayāyāṃ drumamūli tatra/
anuttaraṃ vartiya dharmacakraṃ paripācitāḥ sarvi ihāgrabodhau//

(K, 310,9-10,xiv,v.42)

anāsravā bhūta iyaṃ mi vācā śruṇitva sarve mama śraddadhadvam/
evaṃ ciraṃ prāpta mayāgrabodhi paripācitāś caiti mayaiva sarve//

(K, 310,11-12,xiv,v.43)

[7] 吾初逮成、為仏道時、在於城中、若樹無著、則便講演、無上法輪、
勸立其志、於尊仏道。今仏所說、至誠無漏、開仏歎詠、皆當信之、開化發起、

此諸群英、從久曩來、立尊正道。(大正 9,112b15-20) 『正法華』

[8] 我於伽耶城、菩提樹下坐、得成最正覺、轉無上法輪、爾乃教化之、

令初發道心。今皆住不退、悉當得成仏。我今說實語、汝等一心信、

我從久遠來、教化是等衆。(大正 9,41b23-28) 『妙法華』

[9] After having attained this highest awakening at the city of Gayā, at the foot of the tree, and having rolled the supreme wheel of dharma, I have matured all of them to attain this highest awakening.

After hearing this faultless and true word of mine, believe me, all of you: I did attain the highest awakening thus long ago (evaṃ ciraṃ), and [since then] I have matured all of them for thus long time (evaṃ ciraṃ). (tr. of [6])

In these verses, the place where “the eternal Buddha” attained the awakening is clearly stated to be Gayā. Therefore, the validity of using the term「伽耶近成(始成)」 contrasted

with the word 「久遠実成」 is quite doubtful. In other words, it seems evident that the understanding that “the eternal Buddha” did not attain the awakening at Gayā is not correct.

The assertion that “the eternal Buddha” attained the awakening at Gayā might be considered to be novel. However, it seems necessary to understand the significance of the fact that “the eternal Buddha” was called 「久遠実成の釈迦仏」 by Nichiren 日蓮 (1222-1282) in his 『報恩抄』 (大正 84,269c26). Then why was the Buddha called 釈迦仏 (lit.śākya-buddha) by Nichiren? The reason is not other than that “the eternal Buddha” was considered by Nichiren to have been born in śākya country, and, most probably, to have abandoned the life as a prince in the śākya castle, and after that, to have attained the awakening at Gayā.

II. the time of the awakening

Then, what was the origin from which the misunderstanding that “the eternal Buddha” did not attain the awakening at Gayā was produced? I think, the misunderstanding seems to have originated partly from the following passage of Kumārajīva's translation of the Lotus Sutra.

[10] 一切世間天人及阿修羅、皆謂今釈迦牟尼仏、出釈氏宮、去伽耶城不遠、坐於道場、得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。然善男子、我実成仏已來、無量無辺百千万億那由他劫。(大正 9,42b9-13) 『妙法華』]

The phrase 「今釈迦牟尼仏」 is interpreted as 「今の釈迦仏」 by Suguro Shinjo 勝呂信静³ and is translated as “the present śākyamunibuddha” by Leon Hurvitz⁴. The translation by Hurvitz seems correct at least as a translation of the Chinese phrase itself.

However, the original Sanskrit word for 「今」 in the phrase is “*sāṃpratam*,” which is not the adjective meaning “the present” but the adverb meaning “now.” Therefore, the phrase 「今釈迦牟尼仏」 seems to be a mistranslation of the original Sanskrit text, and, I think, the mistranslation has produced a serious misunderstanding of the message of the original Sanskrit text corresponding to Passage [10].

In fact, the original Sanskrit text and Dharmarakṣa's translation which corresponds to it are as follows:

[11] *ayaṃ kulaputrāḥ sadevamānuṣāsuro loka evaṃ saṃjānīte/ sāṃpratam bhagavatā śākyamuninā tathāgatena śakyakulād abhiniṣkramya gayāhvaye mahānagare bodhimaṇḍavarāgragatenānuttarāṃ samyaksambodhim abhisambuddha iti/ naivaṃ draṣṭavyam/ api tu khalu punaḥ kulaputā bahūmi mama kalpakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇy*

3 勝呂信静「法華經における久遠実成の本仏について」『久保田正文博士喜寿記念論文集 宗教社会学とその周辺』日新出版、1973年、p.556.

4 Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, New York, 1976, p.237.

anuttarāṃ samyaksaṃbodhim abhisambuddhasya/ (K,316,1-5)

[12] 諸天龍神阿須倫世間人、各自知之、各自念言。能仁世尊、從釈氏生、棄國捐王、行至江邊、就于道場、坐於樹下、逮得無上正真道、成最正覺。又吾在昔從無數億百千那術姪劫以來、已成至真等正覺矣。

(大正 9,113b1-6) 『正法華』

[13] Young men of good family, this world (*loka*) including gods, men, and demons, thinks that the Bhagavat śākyamuni Tathāgata, after going out from the family of śākya, having arrived at the summit of the terrace of awakening (*bodhi-maṇḍa*), recently (*sāṃpratam*, now) attained the supreme, true awakening at the big city called Gayā. But, young men of good family, you should not consider thus. The truth is that many hundred thousand *kalpakoṭīnayaṭa* have elapsed since I attained the supreme, true awakening. (tr. of [11])

Although the term “*sāṃpratam*” does not seem to have the corresponding word in Passage [12], it is evident that in Passage [11] the term is used as the adverb qualifying the past participle “*abhisambuddha*.” In other words, the phrase “*sāṃpratam* --- *abhisambuddha*” means “[he] has attained the awakening just now [or quite recently].” Therefore Passage [11], as a whole, means briefly that “although ordinary people (*loka*) consider that the śākyamunibuddha has attained the awakening now [or recently], but in reality he attained it quite long ago [literally “*bahūni* --- *kalpakoṭīnanyutaśatasahasrāṇy*” ago].”

Thus that which is asserted in Passage [11] is the distinction of the time-spans since the awakening of the Buddha, expressed by the words “*sāṃpratam*” and “*bahūni* --- *kalpakoṭīnanyutaśatasahasrāṇy*.” Therefore it is not correct to understand that the Buddha is there divided into the two Buddhas, i.e. 「今釈迦牟尼仏」 and 「我」 to use the words of Passage [10].

Needless to say, the term “*sāṃpratam*” does neither mean “just now” nor “quite recently” in the present-day usage of the word, but means “40 years and the rest,” as is indicated by the following passages of the “Welling Up out of the Earth” chapter”.

[14] atha khalu maitreyo bodhisattvo mahāsattvo bhagavantam etad
avocat/ katham idāniṃ bhagavaṃs tathāgatena kumārabhūtena
kapilavastunaḥ śākyanagarān niṣkrāmya gayānagarān nātidūre
bodhimaṇḍavarāgragatenānuttarā samyasaṃbodhir abhisambuddhā/
tasyādyā bhagavan kālasya sātirekāni catvāriṃśadvarṣāni/ / (K,311,1-4)

[15] 〔弥勒大士-----〕、白世尊曰。云何大聖、処迦維羅衛釈氏王宮、為太子時、委國重位衆女之娛、出適道場、坐于樹下、得無上正真道、成最正覺、從來近近、甫四十年。(大正 9,112b22-25) 『正法華』

[16] 〔弥勒菩薩-----〕、即白仏言。世尊、如来為太子時、出於釈宮、

去迦耶城不遠、坐於道場、得成阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。從是已來、始過四十余年。(大正 9,41c3-6) [『妙法華』]

[17] Then the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Maitreya said to the Bhagavat : Oh Bhagavat, the Tathāgata, when he was a royal prince, having left Kapilavastu, the city of śākya, and having arrived at the summit of the terrace of awakening, attained the supreme, true awakening [at the place] not too far from the city of Gayā. Since then till now, 40 years and the rest have elapsed. (tr. of [14])

In these passages also, that which is put in question is not the place where the Buddha attained the awakening but the time-span since he attained it. On this problem, Maitreya, like the ordinary people (*loka*) stated in Passage [11], considers that only “40 years and the rest” (*sa-atirekāṇi catvāriṃśadvārṣāṇi*) have elapsed since the awakening. However, in Passage [11] of the next chapter, this understanding by Maitreya is denied and the time-span since the awakening is stated to be “*bahūni --- kalpakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇy.*” Therefore it seems possible to consider that the time-span since the awakening, expressed as “*sa-atirekāṇi catvāriṃśadvārṣāṇi*” in Passage [14], is expressed as “*sāṃpratam*” in Passage [11].

Thus the following formula can be gained.

sa-atirekāṇi catvāriṃśadvārṣāṇi = sāṃpratam ≠ bahūni kalpakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇy = cira

However, if the message of Passage [10] of Kumārajīva’s translation is accepted at face value without referring to Passage [11] in Sanskrit, it seems difficult to avoid the understanding that the Buddha expressed as 「今釈迦牟尼仏、出釈氏宮、去迦耶城不遠、坐於道場、得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提」 is different from the Buddha expressed as 「我 實成仏已來無量無邊百千萬億那由他劫」, and, based on the understanding, it seems that the distinction between 「伽耶近成の仏」 and 「久遠實成の仏」 has been established.

III. the life-span of the Buddha

In order to understand the interpretations on the life-span of “the eternal Buddha,” it seems indispensable to refer to the following passage of 『法華論』, i.e. Vasubandhu’s commentary on the Lotus Sutra.

[18] 八者示現成大菩提無上故、示現三種仏菩提故。一者、示現応仏菩提、隨所応見、而為示現。如經「皆謂如來出釈氏宮、去迦耶城不遠、坐於道場、

得成阿耨多羅三藐三菩提」故。二者、示現報仏菩提。十地行滿足、得常涅槃証故。如經「善男子、我實成仏已來、無量無邊百千萬億那由他劫」

故。三者、示現法仏菩提。謂、如來藏性淨涅槃常恒清涼不變等義。如經「如來如實知見三界之相」次第乃至「不如三界見於三界」故。

(大正 26,9b10-19)

In this passage the three-bodies (*tri-kāya*) theory of the Yogācāras is used, as is evident from the fact that the terms 「法仏」「報仏」「応仏」 are found here.

Based on the interpretation stated in Passage [18], Chi-tsang states in 『法華義疏』 as follows:

[19] 所言如来寿量者、依法華論、三種如来。一者化身如来、二報身如来、三法身如来。寿量亦有三種。化仏寿量、有始有終。故為二乘人、八相成道、

王宮現生、双林示滅也。二報身仏寿量、有始無終。故下文云、「我本行菩薩道所成寿命、今猶未盡」。以行因滿、初証仏果、是故有始。一証已後、湛然不滅、故無有盡終。三法身仏寿、本自在之、不生不滅、無始無終。(大正 34,603a24-27)

In this passage, Chi-tsang clearly admits that “the eternal Buddha” 「久遠実成の仏」, who attained the awakening quite long ago, and who obtained the long life-span accomplished by practicing Bodhisattva-practice before attaining the awakening, is “*sāmbhogika-kāya*” 「報身」, and, as such, has the beginning 「有始」. Thus Chi-tsang’s understanding can be summarized as follows:

化身 = 有始有終

報身 = 有始無終 = 久遠実成の仏

法身 = 無始無終

Nichiryū 日隆 also asserted that “the eternal Buddha”, being “*sāmbhogika-kāya*,” has the beginning 「有始」, as follows:

[20] 寿量品ニハ「如是我成仏已来、甚大久遠、常住不滅」ト「我本行菩薩道所成寿命、今猶未盡」ト説キ玉フ。因果所成ナレバ、久遠ノ本仏二始メ有ル可シ。(『私新抄』『日蓮宗宗学全書』 8 本門法華宗部、p.184)

[21] 久遠ノ本仏報身二、修行ノ始ヲ論ズ可キ事、顯然也。(同、p.186)

Nevertheless, Nichiryū called the Buddha “eternal” 「常住」 also, as follows:

[22] 所謂有始ニシテ而モ常住本有ナル形、之レ有ル可シ。(『私新抄』 p.187)

The concepts of 「有始」 and 「常住」 seem to be mutually contradictory. Then, why did Nichiryū consider “the eternal Buddha” to be not only 「有始」 “having the beginning” but also 「常住」 “eternal”? The most important reason is, needless to say, the fact that “the eternal Buddha” was stated to be 「常住不滅」 in the passage of Kumārajīva’s translation, quoted in Passage [20] by Nichiryū himself. The passage as well as the corresponding Sanskrit text and Dharmarakṣa’s translation is exactly as follows:

[23] 現這得仏、成平等覺、已来大久、寿命無量、常住不滅度。(大正 9,113c22-23)

[『正法華』]

[24] 如是我成仏已来、甚大久遠、寿命無量阿僧祇劫、常住不滅。(同,42c19-21)

[『妙法華』]

[25] *tāvaccirābhisambuddho ’parimitāyuspramāṇas tathāgataḥ sadā sthitaḥ/ aparinirvṛtas* (K,318,15)

[26] The Tathāgata, who attained the awakening thus long ago (*tācac-cira*), has the innumerable life-span (*āyus-pramāṇa*). [Since the awakening] he has always existed (*sadā sthitaḥ*) and has never entered into *nirvāṇa* (*aparinirvṛtas*).
(tr. of [25])

As is shown by my translation [26] of Passage [25], I understand that the words “*sadā sthitaḥ*” and “*aparinirvṛtas*” refer to the state of existing of the Buddha after the awakening until now when the Lotus sutra is being preached by the Buddha, because both “*sthita*” and “*aparinirvṛta*” are past participles.

In other words, the words do not assure that the Buddha will never enter into *nirvāṇa* in the future. In this sense, I think, the term 「常住」 in Passages [23] and [24] is quite misleading, because it is apt to produce the understanding that the Buddha is “eternal” in the sense that he has neither the beginning nor the end, i.e. *nirvāṇa*.

IV. the crucial passage

However, is the interpretation that “the eternal Buddha,” although he has the beginning, has no end 「有始無終」 correct? In other words, is it definitely right to consider that “the eternal Buddha” 「久遠実成の仏」 has no end 「無終」 in the future? In this respect, the crucial passage for understanding accurately the life-span of the Buddha seems to be the following.

[27]① *na ca tāvan me kulaputrā adyāpi paurvikī bodhisattvacaryāpariniṣ-pāditāyuspramāṇam apy aparipūrṇam/ ② api tu khalu punaḥ kulaputrā adyāpi taddviguṇena me kalpakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇi bhaviṣyanty āyuspramāṇasyā paripūrṇatvāt/* (K,319,2-4)

[28]① 又如来不必如初所説、前過去世時行菩薩法、以為成就寿命限也。

② 亦如来得仏已来、復倍前喻、億百千亥、〔然後乃於泥洹而般泥洹〕。

(大正 9,113c23-26) [『正法華』]

[29]① 諸善男子、我本行菩薩道所成寿命、今猶未盡。② 復倍上数。

(大正 9,42c22-2)

Passage [27] shown here is the text given in the edition by Kern and Nanjio. Passage [27]① was translated by Kern as follows:

[30] 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.

(Kern H., *The Lotus of the True Law*, SBE, 21, Oxford, 1884,p.302)

However, I have some doubts about the text of Passage [27]①. In my understanding, a Buddha is no more a Bodhisattva. In other words, it seems natural to consider that, after having completed the Bodhisattva-practice (*bodhisattva-caryā*), one can become a Buddha. Nevertheless, in Passage [27]①, it is stated that “my Bodhisattva-practice is not yet completed.” If so, does it not follow that the Buddha is still now practicing the Bodhisattva-practice and that the Buddha is still a Bodhisattva? I cannot consider that such an unnatural message was expressed in the original text of Passage [27]①.

Therefore, I would rather like to rely on Kumārajīva's translation [29]①. Moreover, the phrase 「前過去世時行菩薩法、以為成就壽命」 in Dharmarakṣa's translation [28]① seems to accord in meaning with the expression 「我本行菩薩道所成壽命」 of Kumārajīva's translation. And if it is possible to consider that the expression 「我本行菩薩道所成壽命」 reflects correctly the original text of [27]①, it seems that the assumption of the reading "paurvikabodhisattvacaryāpariniṣpāditāyus-pramāṇam" (the life-span accomplished by the previous Bodhisattva-practice) cannot be avoided, although the reading is not found in the Sanskrit manuscripts.

However, even if the reading "paurvikabodhisattvacaryāpariniṣpāditāyus-pramāṇam" is adopted, problems still remain, because, compared with the expression 「[壽命、今猶] 未盡」 in Kumārajīva's translation, one of the two negatives “na” and “a-” in the sentence “na ca tāvan ---- aparipūrṇam” seems to be redundant. To state my pure conjecture which has no basis on the Sanskrit manuscripts, the word “aparipūrṇam” had better be replaced by “paripūrṇam.”

Thus, relying on Passage [29] of Kumārajīva's translation, I assume the following reading for Passage [27]①.

[31] na ca tāvam me kulaputrā adyāpi paurvikabodhisattvacaryā-
pariniṣpāditāyuspramāṇam paripūrṇam/

[32] Young men of good family, my life-span accomplished by the previous
Bodhisattva-practice is still now (*adyāpi*) not yet fulfilled (*paripūrṇa*).

Although the reading is merely a pure conjecture, it seems undeniable that the text of Passage [27]① given by Kern and Nanjio needs some serious emendations.

As for Passage [27]②, its message is crucial for understanding the life-span of “the eternal Buddha”, because it seems evident that the Buddha, after having spent hereafter the life-span which is twice (*dvi-guṇa*) as long as the period from his awakening up to now, will finally enter into *nirvāṇa*. Such an interpretation seems to be evidently supported by the phrase 「然後乃於泥洹而般泥洹」 in Passage [28]②.

Therefore, at least according to the message expressed in Passage [27]②, it seems adequate to consider that “the eternal Buddha” 「久遠実成の仏」 has both the beginning and the end 「有始有終」.

However, such an interpretation, or more exactly Passage [27]② itself, does not seem to have been welcomed by the followers of the Lotus Sutra, because not only the term “*dvi-guṇā*”(twice) but also the message that the Buddha will finally enter into *nirvāṇa* in the future cannot be found in the corresponding verse (XV,v.18) of the Lotus Sutra. Moreover, it is to be noted that Passage [27] ② is, generally or most probably without exception, omitted or ignored when Passage [27] is quoted in order to prove that “the eternal Buddha” has the beginning 「有始」, as can be verified in Passages [20].

It seems that, among modern scholars, only Kariya Sadahiko 荻谷定彦 asserts that the message that “the eternal Buddha” will finally enter into *nirvāṇa* in the future is taught in the “life-span” chapter of the Lotus Sutra⁵. At least on this point, I cannot but approve of his opinion.

5 「それ故に、その寿命の量がいかに長いものであろうとも、その時仏は、まさしく灯明の因（油）が尽きて消えるが如く、完全な滅度即ち灰身滅智をとるのである」（荻谷定彦『法華経一仏乗の思想』東方出版、1983年、p.171）。