

**The commentary on the sixteenth chapter from  
Zhìyǐ's 'Words & Passages of The Lotus Sūtra'**

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**Part #1 - On the eternal nature of the Buddha's spiritual life  
that descends into this world**

## From Volume Nine of Zhìyǐ's 'Words & Passages of The Lotus Sūtra' #1 On the eternal, undying nature of the Buddha's spiritual life

In explaining this chapter generally, we will first bring up some *different understandings*:

The preface to this sūtra composed by the Master Sēngruì (僧叡)<sup>2</sup> said:

"The lifespan of the Buddha's spiritual life (S. dharma kāya, 法身) cannot be sufficiently described as 'an infinite number of ages' (S. apramāṇa kalpaḥ, 無量劫). The number of its divisions into different incarnations (S. kāya vibhakti, 分身)<sup>16</sup> cannot be sufficiently described by calling them 'countless' (S. asaṃkhyeya, 無數). And so it is determined that the measure of this lifespan transcends all numbers and its emanations transcend all of the differences in its individual lives. Chapter twenty-eight 'On the Inspiration of the Bodhisattva said to be Wholly Worthy' (Samantabhadra Utsāhana, 普賢菩薩勸發品)<sup>7</sup> revealed that this life is not something that is acquired or possessed while chapter eleven 'On The Vision of the Treasure Tower' revealed it is not something that is extinguished."

The Master Dàolǎng (道朗)<sup>2</sup> said:

"This sūtra explains that the transcendental nature of the Buddha's spiritual life is inseparable from its manifestations in this world and, in principle, it is the same whether it is coming into existence or going out of it. Chapter eleven 'On the Vision of the Treasure Tower' revealed that this spiritual life is forever abiding (here in this world) while chapter sixteen 'On Measuring the Lifespan of The One Who Has Descended Into This World' revealed that its size is of the same measure as the great void of empty space."

Huìguān (慧觀) of the Dào-cháng Monastery (道場寺)<sup>2</sup> said:

"At first (in chapter two), the vehicle of enlightenment involved understanding the three and returning to the one. Afterwards (in this chapter), there is transcendence of its emanations and revelation of its grace. Through transcending its emanations there is the ceasing of its temporal manifestations while through the purity of its grace there is the revelation of their timeless source, with manifestations being impermanent and source everlasting."

Volume two of Jícáng's (吉藏)<sup>2</sup> 'Discourse on the Depths of The Lotus Sūtra' (法華玄論) says:

"The countless rounds of births & deaths are called the lifespans (āyus, 壽). The cultivation of enlightenment to the limit of these lifespans is called their measure (S. pramāṇa, 量). The Buddha's spiritual life (S. dharma kāya, 法身) is without any specific form or duration, but a great being (S. mahā sattva, 大士) cultivates it step-by-step until there is illumination of its ultimate purpose. The Buddha did not attain enlightenment just because of an event in Gayā<sup>10</sup> or even a full lifetime of service over a hundred years."

The Master Dàoshēng (道生)<sup>2</sup> said:

"The physical life of the Buddha was revealed to be in this world and so it existed, but its transcendental reality is without any definite shape or form. Having established that it is without any definite shape or form, how could it have had any set lifespan? And so the Buddha has taken on a myriad different forms that all ultimately have the same reality. The Buddhas of the past and the present are all really one and the same. That which happened long ago was the same as that which is happening now, and that happening now is the same as that which happened long ago. There is no time that this spiritual life of the Buddha has not existed and there is no place that it has not dwelled. If there was a time that it did not exist, there would be a place it did not dwell. This can be said of the (physical) lives of sentient beings, but not the (spiritual) life of the Buddha. This chapter explains the ultimately long lifespan that was spoken of being at Gayā. It was at Gayā, but the attainment of enlightenment itself did not just dwell at Gayā. With this attainment

of enlightenment not just dwelling at Gayā, how does this eternal life live on its own? Although the eternal may seem to disappear with that which is ephemeral, it really dwells within the ephemeral forever.”

The ideas from the past explained here are about the measureless lifespan that is clarified in this chapter. Many worldly teachers have spoken of the measure of its lifespan. First its ages exceeded the number of sands that are along the Ganges, and later it was more than twice that number. In the end, these numbers approached as close to the infinite as possible. And yet what was being described was only that which is impermanent about it. Those who have been confused have held that this chapter only clarifies the measure of this lifespan and that it was therefore measuring something that was impermanent. How does one create an understanding of that which is eternal? Now this question is answered. This chapter measures the lifespan of the noble path, something that is neither with nor without measure. With this being so, one may understand its impermanence while another understands its permanence. What is wrong in this? Those who argue about it are like the snipe and the clam that tried to kill each other.<sup>75</sup>

*My explanation* of this vehicle of enlightenment is submitted with four understandings:

- a. Its reality is measured, and yet it is said to be without measure. The Sūtra on the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitāyus Sūtra, 阿彌陀經) is like this.
  - b. Its reality is without measure, yet it is said to be measured. This chapter and The Sūtra on the Golden Splendor (Suvarṇa Prabhāsa Uttama Sūtra, 金光明經) are like this.
  - c. Its reality is without measure and therefore it is said to be without measure. As The Sūtra on the Ultimately Great Freedom (Mahā Parinirvāṇa Sūtra, 大般涅槃經) says:  
“Only between the Buddhas is there (a transcendental knowledge of the spiritual) life that is without measure.”
  - d. Its reality is measured and it is said to be measured. This is like the limited aims found in Upāli’s eighty recitations of the monastic code (S. aśīti bhāṇavāra vinaya, 八十誦律).<sup>18</sup>
- The words of this chapter include all of these meanings. How could it just include one of these (aspects of the tetralemma)<sup>29</sup> but not the other three?

### Questions & Answers

Question: If the chapter On Measuring the Lifespan clarifies that which is eternal, how does it differ from the teaching found in The Sūtra on the Ultimately Great Freedom?

Answer: The Lotus Sūtra only briefly touches the idea of eternity whereas The Nirvāṇa Sūtra elaborates on it.

Question: What is the difference between the one universal vehicle taught in The Lotus Sūtra and the one vehicle teaching found in The Sūtra on the Lion’s Roar of the Princess Śrī Mālā (Śrī Mālā Devi Siṃha Nāda Sūtra, 勝鬘師子吼一乘大方便方廣經)?

Answer: The Śrī Mālā Sūtra only explains the existence of the one vehicle while in The Lotus Sūtra there is (first) an understanding of the three and (then) a revelation of the one.

Question: The ‘immediate’ teaching involves skillfulness in the ways & means of realizing enlightenment while the ‘distant’ (long-range) teaching is about a realization of its ultimate transcendental reality. (In terms of this ‘immediate’ teaching), there were discussions of the ways & means involved in Śākyamuni’s realization of the serene transcendence of nirvāṇa realized at the seat of enlightenment (S. bodhi maṇḍa, 道場), as described in The Sūtra on the Great Garland of Universal Enlightenment (Mahā Avataṃsaka Sūtra, 大方廣佛華嚴經) and an explanation of Śākyamuni’s attainment of enlightenment occurring nine kalpas<sup>9</sup> before Maitreya’s<sup>7</sup> in The Sūtra on the Ultimately Great Freedom. These were both about the skillful ways & means employed in realizing enlightenment (in terms of space and time).

With this sixteenth chapter then opening up the teaching about that which is ultimately 'distant' (timeless & eternal), why do chapter twenty of The Lotus Sūtra On the Bodhisattva 'Always Without Disrespect' (Sadāparibhūta, 常不輕菩薩)<sup>7</sup> and later chapters then go back to the 'immediate' teaching (that describes the attainment of enlightenment within the context of the past, present & future)?

Answer: One should understand that The Lotus Sūtra does indeed go back to teaching about the employment of skillfulness in ways & means (after revealing the timeless & eternal nature of enlightenment).

- \* In chapter two, there is the first understanding of 'opening up the three & returning to the one'. In subsequent chapters, there is an elaboration of this understanding.
- \* Through this 'opening up of the three & revealing of the one', it is revealed how the path of all the Buddhas is the same. Then, in this sixteenth chapter, there is an 'opening up of this immediate manifestation of enlightenment (that is here & now) and a revealing of their source that is distant (timeless & eternal)'.

And so it is understood that all the Buddhas are like this, not just Śākyamuni. If it were only so for the Buddha Śākyamuni, it would contradict this chapter's understanding. As the end of chapter five of The Lotus Sūtra 'On The Medicinal Plants' says:

"These are my skillful ways & means.

Those of all of the Buddhas are like this as well."

And (in the seventeenth chapter of this sūtra) the Buddha says that all the bodhisattvas who listened to the chapter on Measuring the Lifespan then raised a vow to also teach in the future that the lifespan of The One Who Has Descended Into This World is like this. This is a reference to the fact that the path of all the Buddhas is the same and it is not partial in speaking about that which is 'immediate' (here & now) in distinction to that which is 'distant' (timeless & eternal). And so:

- \* The ever-abiding spiritual life of the Buddha (S. dharma kāya, 法身) is without a beginning or an end but transcends being 'immediate' (here & now) or 'distant' (timeless & eternal).
- \* The response of a manifestation of this spiritual life (S. nirmāṇa kāya, 應身) has a beginning and an end, and may also be seen as being either 'immediate' or 'distant'. In employing these manifestations, the Buddha dealt with all the different situations found in the sūtras.

However, in the end, these are really inseparable from one another. In understanding the sūtras, it is impossible to know all the different situations their teachers have had to address.

Question: On what specific words in the sūtra is the meaning of 'that which is eternal' based?

Answer: Those who are cognizant of it emphasize the underlying principle above all else.

Those who are in the dark are attached to the words about it. However, in order to fathom the words, one must comprehend this (dialectical) principle. This is the main purpose of the doctrine (that is cast in words). In just hastily holding onto a little of the dregs or chaff, of what benefit is any bridge of questions and answers? And so the different circumstances at hand were the source for all of the different doctrines that have arisen.

- \* Some teachings were to satisfy needs, desires and aspirations.
- \* Some were to take advantage of opportunities for developing virtuous capacities.
- \* Some were to correct errors and heal sicknesses, and
- \* Some directly awakened sentient beings to the dialectical principle.<sup>44</sup>

Upon awakening to it there was the realization of enlightenment. After awakening to it, why would one then go back out on the streets again in search of it? And so it (Zhiyi's) 'Six Sublime Gateways' (六妙門) and volume ten of his 'Profound Meaning of The Lotus

Sūtra' (法華玄義) say:

"Spiritual freedom (S. nirvāṇa, 泥洹) is the genuine treasure of awakening to life's true purpose (S. dharma, 法). Sentient beings enter into it through different gateways."

This is the idea here. And the words on this may be many or few:

- \* The Nirvāṇa Sūtra discusses the logical reasoning about that which is forever abiding into the future. The words in that sūtra about this are many. It does not primarily discuss that which was realized long ago in the past. Its words on this are relatively few. But in only following that on which there are many words but neglecting that on which there are few, there is the teaching of the devil,<sup>47</sup> not the Buddha.
- \* The Lotus Sūtra discusses the logical reasoning about that which was realized long ago in the past. On the number of spheres of life's purpose being comparable to the number of atoms (paramāṇu, 極微)<sup>35</sup> in the universe, its words are many. On that eternally abiding into the future, the words in this sūtra are relatively few. If one neglects that on which there are few words because of that on which there are many, one's head will break into seven pieces like the arjaka branch.<sup>69</sup>

It is like the son of heaven who decreed that, whether people had much or little, they were really no different from one another and treating them differently was immoral.

Chapter two of The Lotus Sūtra 'On Skillfulness in Ways & Means' says:

"(Life's true purpose abides and is defined) //111a

By appearing to always be in this world. //111b

Upon understanding this at the seat of enlightenment<sup>19</sup> //111c

The leaders (of this world) also teach about it through skillful ways & means. //111d

These words are on that which is permanently abiding into the future without perishing.

And this sixteenth chapter 'On Measuring the Lifespan' says:

"I am forever abiding in this world without perishing."

It also says that this life is:

"Always here on Vulture's Peak<sup>19</sup>

As well as many other places."

The Sūtra About Meditation on the Practice of the Bodhisattva (said to be) 'Wholly Worthy'<sup>7</sup>

(S. Samantabhadra Caryā Dhyāna Sūtra, 觀普賢菩薩行法經) says:

"(This Buddha abides in a place called the eternal light of serenity),

A place where there is deliverance of an ever-lasting purpose (S. nitya pāramitā, 常波羅蜜) and a securely established identity of purpose (S. ātma pāramitā, 我波羅蜜)."

Like this, there are words about that which is permanent and eternal, and they are not few.

And so there are various places in the sūtra that explain this spiritual life (S. dharma kāya, 法身) of the Buddha. Is not this life of purpose that which is permanent and everlasting?

Question: Having already explained this spiritual life, can you explain its three virtues

(S. tri guṇa, 三德)?<sup>22</sup>

Answer:

- a. Is not its dual (provisional & transcendental) knowledge endowed with transcendental discernment of life's purpose (S. prajñā, 般若)?
  - b. Is not its manifestation through the past, present & future endowed with emancipation from affliction (S. vimokṣa, 解脫)?
  - c. Is not the transcendental meaning of the mutually dependent aspects<sup>3</sup> found the original ground of life's purposes<sup>23</sup> endowed with its existential nature (S. dharma kāya, 法身)?
- These words describe the three virtues of this spiritual life.