

Togetherness of Past, Present and Future in the Dharma Flower Sutra

Gene Reeves

The Lotus Sutra treats time in interesting ways, in effect showing virtually no interest in clock time in order to treat time as existential, relative, flexible, meaningful and sacred. Often for example, it paradoxically affirms the virtually infinite repetition of the entirely new and unprecedented. Shakyamuni became the Buddha in this world in our time, yet has been the Buddha for countless eons and will continue to be for countless more.

While it has been said that Buddhism trivializes time, this is definitely not the case for the Dharma Flower (or Lotus) Sutra. The two Buddhas, Shakyamuni and Abundant Treasures, sitting together in the stupa of Abundant Treasures Buddha vividly symbolize the coming together in the present of the past and the present. In a very different way, precisely because the future is different from the past, assurance of becoming a buddha functions to affirm the presence of the future in the present. Such a relationship can also be seen in the parable of the poor son which has as one of its foci the fact that the inheritance of the son, his future reward, has already been his from his birth. While the Sutra may not affirm this directly, it can be inferred that it affirms the importance of the reality, albeit very different kinds of reality, of both the past and future in and for the present. That they are not only in the present but also for the present is an indication of the religious or existential purpose of the Sutra.

I suppose it should go without saying that this Sutra is not much interested in philosophical ideas as such. But it does play with very general, even metaphysical, ideas and make use of them. Among the important ideas which this Sutra plays with and uses is time. No where does it explicitly affirm what I am here calling “the togetherness of past, present, and future,” but it does, with images and stories, dramatize the presence of both the past and the future in the present. And, since the past and the future are very different, their manner of being in the present is also different.

The Presence of the Past in the Present

Already in the first chapter of the Sutra Manjushri Bodhisattva tells Maitreya Bodhisattva a story about a time innumerable aeons ago when he was known as Wonderful Light and Maitreya was known as Fame Seeker. The purpose of the story is

to explain something in the present, in this case it is to explain why Shakyamuni Buddha has emitted a beam of light from between his eyebrows illuminating the whole cosmos. Basically, Manjushri affirms, Shakyamuni emits such a light because this is what has been done many times before whenever a buddha wanted to get people's attention for the teaching of the Dharma Flower Sutra. Manjushri says, "Whenever I've seen this omen from any previous buddha, after emitting such a beam of light they have always taught the great dharma. So you can be sure that this buddha, having displayed this light, similarly intends to lead all beings to hear and understand the dharma which everyone in the world finds so hard to believe." Thus, while it is "unprecedented," the Buddha's action is a re-inaction of what has been done by many other buddhas in the past.

A more dramatic example of the presence of the past in the present is found in Chapter 11, when without warning of any kind the magnificent stupa of Abundant Treasures Buddha springs up from the earth and rises into the air before Shakyamuni Buddha and the assembly gathered to hear him. From within the stupa comes a voice praising Shakyamuni Buddha for teaching the Dharma Flower Sutra. With everyone more or less in shock and experiencing both joy and wonder, a Bodhisattva named Great Delight in Preaching asks how this can be explained. And the Buddha replies that a very long time ago, even before Abundant Treasures had become a buddha, he made a great vow that after his own extinction if anyone taught the Dharma Flower Sutra he would go to that place in his stupa with his whole body in order to hear the Dharma and praise the one teaching it. Since a stupa is supposed to contain only crematory remains, everyone is eager to see the whole body of Abundant Treasures. And Shakyamuni explains that the vow of Abundant Treasures included a provision that if anyone wanted to see his whole body it would be necessary for the buddha of the present to assemble all of the buddhas from all of the lands throughout the universe.

With all of the buddhas of the universe and their attendant bodhisattvas assembled in this world, Shakyamuni rose up into the air, opened the door of the stupa and, invited by Abundant Treasures Buddha to do so, took half of the seat, thereby providing future artists with this image of these two buddhas sitting side by side in the stupa of Abundant Treasures, an image of the past together with the present.

This buddha and his stupa remain more or less in the background of the next eleven chapters of the Sutra. Though long ago "extinct," Abundant Treasures is present in his stupa in the present. This, of course, radically relativizes the notion of extinction. Much earlier in the text, the Buddha had told shravakas that the extinction they had experienced is not real extinction, but here we learn that real extinction apparently is not extinction either. Here the past not only influences the present, it is present in the present,

alive and active in the present. This World-honored One, who “passed away countless aeons ago,” and is “long extinct, sits in his treasure stupa, and comes here for the sake of the dharma.” When he comes to this world in his magnificent stupa what we have is not merely something in the past influencing present events. Though extinct and not the Buddha of this present world, Abundant Treasures Buddha is alive in the present. Since he comes to the present in order to praise one who is preaching the Dharma Flower Sutra, we can say that his presence from the past gives special importance to the present.

How is the future present in the present? There are several ways.

One of these ways might be called the future as promise. In what has sometimes been called “prediction” or “prophesy” of buddhahood, in this Sutra the Buddha successively assures various individuals and groups that they will at some distant time in the future become buddhas. This series begins in Chapter Three with Shariputra, in this text the highest of the shravakas. “Shariputra,” says the Buddha, “in a future life, after innumerable, unlimited and inconceivable eons, when you have served some ten million billion buddhas, maintained the true dharma, and perfected the way of bodhisattva practice, you will be able to become a buddha whose name will be Flower Light Tathagata. ...” And the Buddha goes on to describe the land, time, life-span, and the length of the periods of the true and merely formal dharma of Flower Light Buddha.

This is not a prophecy, at least not in the sense that prophecy is used in the Old Testament, where it involves a prophet speaking for God, typically threatening punishment to those who have gone astray in some way. Neither is this a prediction, at least not in the sense in which the weather or the outcome of a horse race is predicted. The Buddha is not calculating odds in order to make an informed guess about an outcome. Nor is he displaying some sort of supernatural power to see into the future. While a kind of foreseeing, a kind of anticipation of future events, is involved, such promises of becoming a buddha are not primarily about the Buddha; they are about the person being addressed by the Buddha. They are an assurance, clearly intended to encourage someone along the long and arduous way of becoming a buddha. Thus, though the future is not yet, through anticipation of the future, assurance and encouragement is provided in the present. In this way the future has an impact on, serves purposes in and is alive in the present.

The parable of the rich father and poor son involves another interesting interaction between the future and the present. The purpose of the parable is not to discuss the relation of the past, present and future. It’s about skillful means; it’s one of several explanations of why shravakas have not followed the bodhisattva path; it’s about obtaining what you didn’t know you already had; it’s about perpetuating the

dharma; and it's about responsibility for oneself and one's inheritance. But it is also interestingly about the past and the future.

For those unfamiliar with this story, most simply it is a story about man who had left home many years ago and remained very poor, wandering around from place to place trying to stay alive. Meanwhile, his father had become very wealthy and had moved to a palatial home where he conducted a large trading business. One day the son accidentally arrives before his father's house and, not knowing whose house it is, runs away. The father, however, recognizes his son and sends servants to persuade him into coming to work for him. Gradually, over many years, the father encourages the son, who has a very low opinion of himself, to take on more and more responsibility for the household and business, finally announcing to everyone important that the poor man was his real son and the inheritor of all of his wealth.

What's interesting about this story for our purposes is the matter of inheritance. It is the nature of an inheritance that it belongs to the son from birth. It can be lost or dissipated, but there is a strong sense in which it has belonged to the son from birth, that is, from the past. It always was his birthright. Yet there is also a sense in which his inheritance is not his until he knows it is his and takes responsibility for it. As we say in contemporary American parlance, he has to "own" it. So here we have a story in which both the past and the future are active in the present, giving shape and importance to the present.

Another place in which we might see the future active in the present is the part of Chapter 16 in which the Buddha declares that this world, the present world, is a pure land for those who can truly see, that is for "those who do good, who are gentle and honest."

When the living witness the end of an eon,
When everything is consumed in a great fire,
This land of mine remains safe and tranquil,
Always filled with human and heavenly beings.

Its gardens and groves, halls and pavilions,
Are adorned with all kinds of gems.
Jeweled trees are full of flowers and fruit,
And living beings freely enjoy themselves.

Gods beat on heavenly drums,
Always making various kinds of music.

Mandarava blossoms rain down
And are scattered over the Buddha and the great assembly.

My Pure Land will never be destroyed,
Yet the multitude see it as being consumed in fire,
Everywhere filled with grief and fear
And all kinds of suffering.

Of course this passage can be interpreted in several ways. Among them would be one in which this present pure land is at once both from the indefinite past and a kind of anticipation of a future which perhaps will never be. What makes it especially interesting to me is that the anticipation, the presence of the future in the present, is not in some mental vision but in deeds: those who do good, who are gentle and honest, will see this pure land in the present.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about Chapter 15. In Chapter 11 buddhas and bodhisattvas from all over the universe have been assembled by Shakyamuni Buddha to see Abundant Treasures Buddha in his stupa. Now the time to return home is approaching. Some of the bodhisattvas approach Shakyamuni Buddha volunteer to stay behind in this world to help him with his difficult assignment in this saha world by embracing and protecting the Sutra after he has gone. But he tells them, in effect, “thanks, but no thanks.” “We don’t need your help as we already have a multitude of bodhisattvas here.” Then there emerges from the earth an enormous host, perhaps an infinite number, of bodhisattvas. This naturally causes amazement and consternation. Maitreya and others want to know where these bodhisattvas have come from and who taught all of them. And the Buddha responds that he did. To which Maitreya responds that this is impossible to believe, given the length of the Buddha’s teaching career. Since you attained supreme awakening, he says, “only a little over forty years have passed. World-honored One, in so short a time how could you have done so much work of a buddha? . . . World-honored One, the world will find it hard to believe a thing such as this.”

The story is a kind of lead-in to Chapter 16 in which the focus is on the extremely long, or “eternal,” life of the Buddha. But are these bodhisattvas no more than an excuse for declaring that the Buddha’s life is extremely long? Perhaps the text is not as explicit as one might like, but tradition has it that these bodhisattvas who emerge from the earth are bodhisattvas of the future, bodhisattvas who will emerge in this saha world, emerge, that is, from life on earth. By doing his work, teaching his dharma, they will in effect keep the Buddha alive. They are what will make the Buddha’s life an

extremely long one. They are what any one of us can be and, willy-nilly, will be, sometimes. This is so just because to be a bodhisattva is to do good, to embody the Buddha and the dharma by doing good in whatever ways are appropriate. Thus these bodhisattvas are the future present in every present.

Conclusion

The togetherness of the past and the future in the present is, I maintain, one way in which the Dharma Flower Sutra takes time seriously. There are other ways. It can rightly be claimed I think that the doctrine of causation, the idea of karma, and even use of explanation through stories of previous lives are ways of taking time seriously. So too the idea of the path of the bodhisattva which leads to becoming a buddha would make little sense without taking time seriously, that is without taking time as an important dimension of our existence and lives.

Still there is something quite special about the togetherness of the past and the future as alive in the present, a sense in which time is made more dynamic, more alive, than causation or karma might imply. This is consistent with the Sutra's dynamic sense of reality, a reality in which life abounds, as it can be found not only in the past and future, but in a huge variety of beings, real and mythical, and in all the worlds in every direction.

The togetherness of the past and the future in the present allows them to be for the present. Not only for the present of course, as that would trivialize time, but as a way of affirming the religious and existential purpose of the Sutra--which is to invite readers and hearers of Buddha-dharma to become just like the Buddha. "I am always thinking," the Buddha says at the end of Chapter 16, "How can I lead all the living to enter the unexcelled way and quickly perfect their Buddha-bodies?" Since it has happened in the past and will happen in the future, it can happen now.

* This paper was presented at the panel "Recovering Anew the Lotus Sutra's Originality as a Religio-Philosophical System" in the XVth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies held at Emory University, in Atlanta, U.S.A. (Jun. 28, 2008)
この論文は、平成20年6月28日エモリー大学（アトランタ）に於ける第15回国際仏教学会学術大会でのパネル "Recovering Anew the Lotus Sutra's Originality as a Religio-Philosophical System" で発表されたものである。