

Aoristic Occurrences in the Verses of the Skillful Means Chapter of the Lotus Sūtra and their Soteriological Meanings *

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In the Skillful Means chapter (方便品, Jap. *Hōben-bon*) of the Lotus Sūtra translated by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什, Jap. *Kumarajū*), i.e., 『妙法蓮華經』 (*Miao-fa-lien-houa-kin*; Jap. *Myōhō-rengē-kyō*, Taishō. No. 263), we find a prominent paragraph which has been noted by Zhu Tao-sheng (竺道生, Jap. *Jiku-dō-shō*), a pupil of Kumārajīva, in his *Fa-houa-king-chou* (『法花經疏』). Zhu Tao-sheng refers to it as follows:

“The paragraph spanning 「若有衆生類」 (Taishō., vol. 9, 8.c.11) to 「或有人礼拜」 (ibid., 9.a.19) testifies that all the people who, in the days of past Buddhas, planted the seeds of good deeds or accumulated [some kinds of] meritorious deeds, even if a deed itself was a very small one, actually attained the Buddha Way.”¹

What Tao-sheng says here has been traditionally understood as the so-called idea of *shō-zen-jō-butsu* (小善成佛), “attaining Buddhahood through accumulating small deeds”).

This paragraph (Taishō., vol. 9, 8.c.11 – 9.a.27) is conspicuous, as the same expression 「皆已成佛道」 (“they have all of them reached enlightenment” in Kern’s translation of the Sanskrit text) is persistently repeated in it (ten times in all). This conspicuousness, or persistence, has its reason, of course, in the corresponding paragraph of the Sanskrit text which spans verse 71 to verse 97. This paragraph, composed of twenty-seven verses, is divided provisionally into fourteen passages, and eleven passages of these fourteen have as their last lines respectively the same sentence: *te sarvi bodhīya* (or *bodhāya* in Wogihara and Tsuchida’s edition) *abhūṣi lābhinaḥ* (“all of them became the attainers of enlightenment”). When we newly cognize the fact that the original Sanskrit of the accustomed perfective expression (已成) of Kumārajīva’s translation was the aoristic *abhūṣi*, we are led thereby to a new level of understanding the soteriology not -----

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only of the Skillful Means chapter itself, but also of the whole of the Lotus Sūtra, which is still significant for our own thought which will possibly exert regulatory influences upon our religious or ethical lives today.

For all that, the fact that the original Sanskrit of the perfect tense of Kumārajīva's translation (已成) was the aoristic *abhūṣi* astonishes us because of its exact correspondence with, for example, the following words of Rudolf Bultmann, which we find accidentally in his article, "Eschatology of the Gospel according to John":

"The historical fact of the sending of Jesus is a fact of double meaning (*ein zweideutiges Faktum*). As long as it is a concrete historical fact, it has—as every historical happening has—the possibility to be grasped as a past occurrence existing in the past which is to be brought through recollection to the present. However, it also has the possibility to be present. One can talk about it in aorist, i.e., as a fact of past tense; however he can at the same time talk about it in perfect tense, i.e., as a present fact.

Jesus came, so he is there; but unbelievers make this perfective present (*dies perfektische Präsens*) the fact of the past, i.e., a fact of an old time."²

As Bultmann understands, *Eschaton*, or the perfection of history, was actually (aoristically) realized at the death of Jesus on the Cross and his resurrection thereafter; and this perfect state of the world, or the Kingdom of God realized on earth, has been present since then. However, Bultmann additionally says that this Kingdom of God is not something that is there as "a natural existence (*Physis*)," or as a certain "given situation (*Gegebenheit*)," or a "real state (*Zustand*)," but is that which should be grasped anew by a Christian through his or her decision of faith (*Glaubensentscheidung*) that is to be repeated incessantly.

This understanding by Bultmann, which is called the "existential understanding of eschatology," is, though it leaves some difficulties in some details, to be duly appreciated as hitting rightly the "dialectical" manner of human existence in the world, the essence of which he calls the "dialectics of the eschatological existence of a Christian," which has been actualized since the aoristic occurrence of Jesus Christ.

Once we stand ourselves on this newly attained level of understanding the soteriological meaning of the Lotus Sūtra, we are convinced, daring our own self-seekingness, that Bultmann's understanding of our eschatological situation that was first attained in the European world in the early part of the twentieth century had been, in its essential elements, anticipated in parallel in the paragraph of *shō-zen-jō-butsum*, as is to be proved through our following examinations of the Sanskrit text of the paragraph.

As was mentioned above, this paragraph, the paragraph of *shō-zen-jō-butsum* (小善成佛) composed of twenty-seven verses, is to be divided into the following fourteen

passages: [1] vv. 71-76; [2] v. 77; [3] vv. 78-79; [4] vv. 80-82; [5] v. 83; [6] v. 84; [7] v. 85; [8] v. 86; [9] vv. 87-88; [10] vv. 89-91; [11] vv. 92-93a; [12] vv. 93b-94; [13] vv. 95-96; [14] v. 97. Eleven passages out of these fourteen have the aoristic expression: *te sarvi bodhīya* (or *bodhāya*) *abhūṣi lābhinaḥ* and three passages, i.e., [11], [12], and [13] are exceptionals which perform very important functions in deciding the soteriological meanings of the whole paragraph.

Akira Hirakawa, the most authoritative and influential scholar of Buddhist studies today, very clearly summarizes the contents of the Skillful Means chapter as follows:

“The second chapter, the Skillful Means chapter, of this sūtra gives the instances of the fact that many people in the past times of past Buddhas actually became ‘the attainers of the Buddha way’ through the practices of worshipping *stūpas* of Buddhas, etc. This chapter also tells that it is also the case in the times of future Buddhas and present Buddhas.”³

The paragraph of “*shō-zen-jō-butsu*” we are going to discuss after this corresponds to the instances which aoristically happened in past times; Zhu Tao-sheng’s reference quoted above is to be understood as a case of the times of past Buddhas.

However, these past cases should be applied to our own religious practices to be practiced at present with an aim to their completion in the future; in other words, small deeds shown in the paragraph as a case of Buddhas in the past should be taken as the starting point of our own practice, or as concrete contents of deeds that are to be repeated incessantly or to be accumulated for our own future attainment of the Buddha way.

This future character of “small deeds” is clearly shown, for example, in the following passage of Chapter 93 of the *Ta-tchi-tou-louen* (『大智度論』, Jap. *Dai-chido-ron*, Taishō., No. 1509), which must have preceded Zhu-Tao-sheng’s reference quoted above:

“Next, Subhūti hears the teaching preached in the Lotus Sūtra which goes as follows: A small meritorious deed, such as reciting ‘Homage be to the Buddhas!’ only one time, even frivolously laughing, as long as it is done for the *Idee* of Buddhas, will finally and certainly make one promoted gradually and made one finally become the Buddha ‘if he accumulates it incessantly’.”⁴ (Taishō., vol. 23, 213.b.25f.)

To lead the aoristic instances shown in the paragraph to the meaning of our own practices aiming at future perfection, we at first take up verse 82, which constitutes the last part of passage [4], as it is a typical passage showing the smallness of “small deeds”:

sikatāmayān vā puna kūṭa kṛtvā
ye kecid uddīśya jināna stūpān /
kumālakāḥ krīḍiṣu tatra tatra
te sarvi bodhīya abhūṣi lābhinaḥ //82//

Kern's translation goes as follows:

“The little boys even, who in playing erected here and there heaps of sand with the intention of dedicating them as *stūpas* to the Ginas, they have all of them reached enlightenment.”

It will be a little more understandable if we arrange it as follows:

“The little boys, who even in playing piled pebbles here and there into small heaps and compare them to the *stūpas* to the Buddhas, all of them actually became the attainer of enlightenment.”

With regard to the “small deeds,” Hirakawa says:

“In the Skillful Means chapter, it is said that even a boy piling up pebbles into small heaps and comparing them to *stūpas* to the Buddhas, or even one who happened to come into the presence of a *stūpa* and uttered ‘Homage be to the Buddhas’ only one time became the attainer of the Buddha way (Taishō., vol. 9, 8c-9a). This shows the idea that one can attain Buddhahood by belief (*śraddhā*, 信 *shin*); and this idea is in close connection with the custom of ‘worshipping *stūpas* of the Buddhas’ (仏塔崇拜 □ *buttō sūhai*).”⁵

However, the concept of the “small deeds” shown in this verse 82, as well as the case of uttering “Homage be to the Buddhas,” which is referred to in passage [13] (v. 96), is not cohering with the usual concept of *śraddhā*, the inward, spiritual faith as is meant by Hirakawa here; what is intended here as the essence of the “small deed” is not the inwardness or mental factor of the deed but the pure action, physical or oral.

Another point to be noticed here is the ambiguity of the expression *bodhīya lābhīn śbhū*. This expression itself possibly holds these two meanings: 1) to become one who is going to attain enlightenment in the future and 2) to become one who has already attained enlightenment, in other words, who is actually a Buddha. This ambiguity is dissolved, for the time being, in passage [11]:

sugatāna uddīśya tha pūjanārthaṃ

gītaṃ sugītaṃ maduraṃ manojñaṃ //92//

sarve ca te buddha abhūsi loka

“Those who to celebrate the Sugatas sang a song sweet and lovely (verse 92c,d);

They all of them became the Buddhas actually in this world. (verse 93a).”

By compromising this *buddha abhūsi* to the usual *bodhīya abhūsi lābhīnaḥ*, we obtain a notion of *shō-zen-jō-butsu* (小善成佛) as follows: One who did a small deed of celebrating the Sugatas, even if it was itself very small and even if it was done unintentionally or accidentally, he became, at the very moment or very shortly after it, the “attainer of enlightenment,” i.e., the person who is decided or ordained to be a Buddha in

the future; and after that he, through a course of accumulating merits by repeating the same deed—or another kind of deed—at least repeatable incessantly, became actually a Buddha “in this world” (*loke*).

And here, the expression “in this world” (*loke*) should possibly hold the following two meanings: 1) within the duration of this eon [*loke = asminn eva kalpe*, “at least within this eon”] and 2) within this present life [*loke = asmin loke = asmin janmani* or *ihaiva janmani*, “within his very life”]. Therefore, if we convert this past, so to speak, aoristic situation to that of the future, the notion of *shō-zen-jō-butsu* (小善成佛) should be as follows: If one does a deed of celebrating the Sugatas, even if it is in itself very small or even if he does it unintentionally or accidentally, he becomes, at the very moment or very shortly after the moment, the “attainer of enlightenment” or a person who is decided or ordained to become a Buddha in the future, remote or within his very life. We find the case of attaining enlightenment in remote future eons in passage [12]:

kim alpakaṃ pī sugatāna dhātuṣu
ekaṃ pi vādāpiya vādyabhāṇḍam //93//
puṣpeṇa caikena pi pūjayitvā
ālekhyā bittau sugatāna bimbam /
vikṣiptacittā pi ca pūjayitvā
anupūrva draṅṣyanti ca buddhakoṭyaḥ //94//

Kern’s translation goes as follows:

“By paying various kinds of worship to the relics of the Sugatas, by doing but a little for the relics, by making resound were it but a single musical instrument;

Or by worshipping were it but with a single flower, by drawing on a wall the images of the Sugatas, by doing worship were it even with distracted thoughts, one shall in course of time see *koṭis* of Buddhas.”

This idea of *shō-zen-jō-butsu* (小善成佛) is in itself very understandable, or in itself looks very normally Mahāyānic. However, the position of the Lotus Sūtra must not have stayed at such a normal, usual Mahāyānic position: the unique or unusual position of the Lotus Sūtra is shown, as was expected, in passage [13], v. 96, which is no other than the verse telling of the small deed of reciting “Homage to the Buddhas,” which, referring to Chapter 93 of the *Ta-tchi-tou-louen*, Hirakawa described as the typical example of the small deed. The verse goes as follows:

namo ’stu buddhāna kṛtaikavāraṃ
yehī tadā dhātudhareṣu teṣu /
vikṣiptacittair api ekavāraṃ
te sarvi prāptā imam agrabodhim //96//

Kern translates this verse as follows:

“And who at *Stūpas* containing relics have one single time said: Homage be to Buddha! albeit they did it with distracted thoughts, all have attained superior enlightenment.”

We should translate this verse more literally, especially paying attention to the words *imam agrabodhim*, as follows:

“And by whom at these (presence of *stūpas*) containing relics of the Buddhas uttered one single time: Homage be to the Buddhas! albeit it was done with distracted minds, all of them were at that moment the attainers of the highest enlightenment which is the same as mine (i.e., the highest and perfect enlightenment attained by me myself this time).”

Here, the following thing is meant: at the moment one did a small deed, if it was done only perfunctorily or even if it was done accidentally, as long as the deed itself at least formally or constitutently retains within it the *Idee*, i.e., the *rinen* (理念 in Japanese) of the Buddhas, he aoristically attained the highest enlightenment, which is completely the same with the highest and perfect enlightenment (無上正等覺, Jap. *mujō-shō-tō-gaku*) of the Buddha Śākyamuni, the preacher of the Lotus Sūtra; and after this moment he continues to be a Buddha. Or in other words, we all have been perfect Buddhas since the moment we did, even unconsciously or accidentally, a small deed of the kind at a certain moment of our own lives.

This state of things is truly unusual; what is its ground then? It is, of course, in the mythological constitution of the Lotus Sūtra, the vow (*praṇidhāna*; 誓願 Jap. *seigan*; or 願 Jap. *gan*) of the Buddha Śākyamuni, the preacher of the Sūtra, vowed in the remote past. The paragraph telling about it is as follows:

evaṃ ca cintemy ahu Śāriputra
kathaṃ nu evaṃ bhavi sarvasattvāḥ /
dvātriṃśatīlakṣaṇarūpadhāriṇaḥ
svayaṃprabhā lokavidū svayaṃbhūḥ //60//
yathā ca paśyāmi yathā ca cintaye
yathā ca saṃkalpa mamāsi pūrvam /
paripūrṇam etat praṇidhānu mahyaṃ
buddhā ca bodhiṃ na prakāśayāmi //61//

Kern’s translation goes as follows:

“Then, Sāriputra, I think thus: how will all beings by the thirty-two characteristics mark the self-born Seer, who of his own accord sheds his luster all over the world?

And while I am thinking and pondering, when my wish has been fulfilled and my vow accomplished, I no more reveal Buddha-knowledge.”

We understand what is shown here as follows:

“At that time, O Śāriputra, I wondered how can I make all people be so as they are the perfect Buddhas having the bodies equipped with thirty-two characteristic marks; shedding by themselves luster, the knowers of the world, the self-born (60).

As I saw, as I considered, and as my volition was made at that past time, so was the vow of mine now fulfilled (through the course of accumulating merits for long eons; therefore, they are all actually the perfect Buddhas). However, I had never mentioned (to people until now that they are actually) Buddhas or (they have attained the highest) enlightenment.”

This reading looks forcible as it ignores all the rules of the tense of verbs appeared in this passage; however, it is the only possible reading that brings to us first a coherent understanding of the eschatological plan of the whole Lotus Sūtra.

This understanding of us also shows a remarkable parallelism with the above mentioned constitution of the “*esistenzial*” understanding of eschatology of R. Bultmann. According to Bultmann, all the people in the world are—or have been—saved since the auristic occurrence of Jesus Christ; and this realized state of salvation is to be newly realized at the decision of faith in it by a Christian and is to be kept existing thereafter through the incessant repetition of the deed of the decision of faith.

In the case of the Skillful Means chapter of the Lotus Sūtra, we have been enlightened or we have been complete Buddhas since the historical auristic attainment of enlightenment of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni; and this already realized state of complete enlightenment occurs anew when a person does a “small deed” and is expected to keep existing through his incessant repetition of the same small deed or any other kinds of deed which is repeatable at all.

There exists another parallelism between both Bultmann and the Skillful Means chapter with regard to the notion of the ground of the soteriological plan. Bultmann thinks himself that his own “*esistenzial*” understanding of eschatology is planned in accordance with the plan of “*Entmythologisierung*” (demythologization); however, Bultmann’s plan itself is still grounded on a more fundamental or original mythological constitution. If Bultmann wishes to have his own plan be more persuasive, he should be conscious again about the mythological ground which has been submerged from the rational surface of his theory of “*Entmythologisierung*.”

How about the case of the Skillful Means chapter of the Lotus Sūtra then? The passage (verses 60 and 61) we quoted above testifies that the situation of *shō-zen-jō-but-su* (小善成佛) is grounded on the original vow of the Buddha Śākyamuni; but he is no longer the historical but is already the half-mythologized

Buddha of the “trace teaching (迹門, *shaku-mon*).” This tendency of mythologization becomes real at the idea of the Buddha of the “origin teaching (本門, *hon-mon*)” who is the eternal Buddha of original enlightenment.

In the comment we noted above, Hirakawa touched on faith (*śraddhā*, 信 *shin*); we are now convinced that the faith is to be directed finally to the mythological constitution of the original vow of not the Buddha of the “trace teaching,” i.e., the preacher of the Skillful Means chapter, but of the Buddha of the “origin teaching,” the existence of whom is the main theme of the whole Lotus Sūtra.

NOTES

(1) *Shin-san-Dai-Nippon-Zoku-zōkyō* (*Zokuzō*), vol. 27, 5.b.20 f.

(2) Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, Erster Band, 1966, S.146.

(3) See Shinichi Tsuda, *Gnosis and Esoteric Buddhism; Gnosis, Itan to Gendai*, Iwanami-shoten, 2001.

(3a) *Kōza Daijō-Bukkyō* 4, *Hokke-Shisō*, p.28.

(4) *Taishō*, vol. 25, 713.b.19 f.

(5) *Collected Works of Hirakawa Akira*, vol. 5, p. 317.