

The Thus Come One's Life Span

Chapter 16

At that time the Buddha spoke to the Bodhisattvas and the entire great assembly, saying, “Good men, you should believe and understand the sincere and truthful words of the Thus Come One.” Once again he told the great assembly, “You should believe and understand the sincere and truthful words of the Thus Come One.” He again told the great assembly, “You should believe and understand the sincere and truthful words of the Thus Come One.”

Then the great assembly of Bodhisattvas, headed by Maitreya, placed their palms together and spoke to the Buddha, saying, “World Honored One we only pray that you will speak it. We shall believe and accept the Buddha’s words.” They repeated this three times.

They again said, “We only pray that you will speak. We shall believe and accept the Buddha’s words.”

At that time the World Honored One, knowing that the Bodhisattvas would not stop with three requests, spoke to them, saying, “You should listen attentively.”

“The Thus Come One’s power of spiritual penetrations is acknowledged by all gods, humans, and asuras in the world. They say that Shakyamuni Buddha now, having left the palace of the Shakyan clan and having gone to a place not far from the city of Gaya to sit in the Bodhimanda, has now attained

Anuttarasamyaksambodhi.”

“However, good men, I actually realized Buddhahood limitless, boundless, hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of nayutas of eons ago.”

“Suppose a person were to grind into fine motes of dust five hundred thousand myriads of kotis of nayutas of asamkhyeyas of three thousand great thousand world systems. Then, suppose he traveled to the east across five hundred thousand myriads of kotis of nayutas of asamkhyeyas of lands, and there he deposited one mote of dust. Suppose he continued in this way, traveling to the east, until all the motes of dust were gone.”

“Good men, what do you think? Could the number of worlds he passed through be reckoned or counted?”

Maitreya Bodhisattva and the others all said to the Buddha, “World Honored One, those world systems would be limitless, boundless, beyond calculation, and beyond the power of the mind to know. All the Hearers and Pratyekabuddhas, using their non-outflow wisdom, could not conceive of them or know their limit or number.”

“We now dwell on the ground of avaivartika, but we cannot comprehend this matter, World Honored One, and so such world systems would be limitless and boundless.”

At that time the Buddha spoke to the great hosts of Bodhisattvas, saying, “Good men, I shall now explain this clearly for you. If all these world systems—whether a dust mote were deposited in

them or not—were reduced to dust motes, and if each dust mote were an eon, the time that has passed since I became a Buddha would exceed even that by hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of nayutas of asamkhyeyas of eons.”

“From that time on, I have always remained in the Saha world, speaking the Dharma to teach and transform beings. Also, in other places, in hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of nayutas of asamkhyeyas of lands, I have guided and benefited living beings.”

“Good men, in that interval, I spoke of the Buddha Dipankara and others, and I further spoke of them as entering Nirvana. But those were just discriminations made expediently.”

“Good men, if a living being comes before me, I observe with my Buddha eye his faith and other qualities, as well as the keenness or dullness of his faculties, and take him across in an appropriate manner.”

“In all places, although the names by which I refer to myself are different and my age may be older or younger, I also appear and announce that I am about to enter Nirvana. I also employ various expedient devices, speaking the subtle and wonderful Dharma and enabling living beings to bring forth happiness in their minds.”

“Good men, the Thus Come One, seeing living beings delighting in lesser dharmas, beings of scanty virtue and heavy with defilement, speaks for these people, saying, ‘When young, I left the home-life and attained Anuttarasamyak-sambodhi.’ In truth, however, I became a Buddha a long time before that. I speak in this way merely as an expedient to teach and transform

living beings and to cause them to enter the Buddha-Way.”

“Good men, the Sutras proclaimed by the Thus Come One are all for the purpose of saving and liberating living beings. He may speak of his own body, or he may speak of someone else’s body. He may manifest his own body, or he may manifest in someone else’s body. He may manifest his own affairs, or he may manifest the affairs of others. But all that he says is true and not false.”

“What is the reason? The Thus Come One knows and sees the triple realm as it really is. There is no birth or death, no retreating or advancing, no existence in the world or passage into quiescence. There is no reality or unreality, no likenesses or differences. He views the triple realm as not being the triple realm. Matters such as these, the Thus Come One clearly sees, without mistake or error.”

“Living beings have various natures, various desires, various modes of conduct, and various ideas, thoughts, and discriminations. Wishing to lead them to produce the roots of goodness, he employs divers causes and conditions, analogies, and expressions to explain the various dharmas, carrying out the Buddha’s work without respite.”

“Thus since I realized Buddhahood in the very remote past, my life span has been limitless asamkhyeyas of eons, eternal and never extinguished. Good men, the life span I realized when formerly practicing the Bodhisattva path has not yet been exhausted and is twice that of the above number.”

“As I now proclaim that I am about to enter the quiescence, I am not really passing into the quiescence. The Thus Come One uses this passing only as an expedient to teach and transform living beings.”

“What is the reason? If the Buddha were to stay in the world a long time, those of scanty virtue who do not plant good roots, who are poor and lowly, who covet to objects of the five desires, and who are caught in the net of schemes and false views, seeing the Thus Come One constantly present and not entering stillness, would become arrogant, lax, and indifferent. They would not consider how difficult it is to encounter him, nor would their hearts be reverent.”

“For these reasons, the Thus Come One expediently says, ‘Bhikshus, you should know that it is difficult to meet with a Buddha appearing in the world.’ What is the reason? Those of scant virtue may pass through limitless hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of eons, during which time they may or may not see a Buddha. Because of that, I tell them, ‘Bhikshus, the Thus Come One is difficult to get to see.’ These living beings, hearing such words, will necessarily realize how difficult it is to get to encounter the Buddha and will cherish a longing for him. They will then plant good roots. That is why the Thus Come One, although he does not enter stillness, speaks of quiescence.”

Further, Good Men, the Dharma of all the Buddhas, Thus Come Ones, is like this and used to save living beings. It is entirely true and not false.”

“It is as if there were a good physician, wise and well-versed in the medical arts and intelligent, who is skillful at healing the multitude of sicknesses.

The man also has many sons—ten, twenty or even a hundred. Then, called away on business, he travels to a far-off country.”

“Meanwhile, the children drink some poison, which causes them to roll on the ground in delirium.”

“Just then their father returns home. Because they drank the poison, some of the sons have lost their senses, while others have not. Seeing their father at a distance, they are all greatly happy. They bow to him, kneel, and inquire after him. ‘Welcome back in peace and safety. In our foolishness, we took some poison by mistake. We pray that you will rescue and heal us, and will restore our lives to us.’”

“Seeing his children in such agony, the father consults his medical texts and then searches for fine herbs of good color, aroma, and flavor. He then grinds, sifts, and mixes them together, and gives the compound to his sons to take ”

“He says to them, ‘This is an excellent medicine of good color, aroma, and flavor. Take it. Your agony will be relieved, and you will suffer no further torment.’”

“Some among the children have not lost their senses. Seeing the fine medicine with its good color and aroma they immediately take it, and their sickness is completely cured.”

“Although the others who have lost their senses rejoice in their father’s arrival, have inquired after his well-being, and have sought to be cured of their illnesses, they refuse to take the medicine. What is the reason? The poisonous vapors have entered them so deeply that they have lost their senses, and so they say that the medicine of good color and aroma is not good.”

“The father then thinks, ‘How pitiful these children are. The poison has confused their minds . Although they rejoice to see me and ask me to rescue and cure them, still they refuse such good medicine as this. I should now set up an expedient device to induce them to take this medicine.’”

“Immediately he says, ‘You should know that I am now old and weak, and my time of death has arrived. I will now leave this good medicine here for you to take. Have no worries about not recovering.’ Having instructed them in this way, he then returns to the far-off country and sends a messenger back to announce, ‘Your father is dead.’”

“When the children hear that their father is dead, their hearts are struck with grief, and they think, ‘If our father was here, he would be compassionate and pity us, and we would have a savior and protector. Now he has forsaken us to die in another country, leaving us orphaned with no one to rely upon.’ Constantly grieving, their minds then become awakened. They understand that the medicine has good color, aroma, and flavor. They take it immediately, and their poisonous sickness is completely cured.”

“The father, hearing that his sons have been completely cured, then comes back, and they all see him.”

“Good men, what do you think, could anyone say that this good physician has committed the offense of false speech?”

“No, World Honored One.”

The Buddha said, “I, too, am like that. I realized Buddhahood limitless, boundless, hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of nayutas of asamkhyeyas of eons ago. For the sake of living beings, I employ the power of expedients and say that I am about to enter quiescence. There is no one who can rightly say that I have committed the offense of false speech.”

At that time the World Honored One, wishing to restate this meaning, spoke verses, saying,

“From the time I attained Buddhahood,
The eons that have passed
Are limitless hundreds of thousands of myriads
Of kotis of asamkhyeyas in number.
I always speak the Dharma to teach and transform
Countless millions of living beings,

So they enter the Buddha-Way.

And throughout these limitless eons,
In order to save living beings,
I expediently manifest Nirvana.
But in truth I do not pass into quiescence.
I remain here always speaking the Dharma.

I always stay right here,
And using the power of spiritual penetrations,
I cause inverted living beings,
Although near me, not to see me.

The multitudes see me as passing into quiescence.
They extensively make offerings to my sharira.
All cherish ardent longing for me,
And their hearts look up to me in thirst.

Living beings, then faithful and subdued,
Straightforward, with compliant minds,
Single-mindedly wish to see the Buddha,
Caring not for their very lives.

At that time I and the Sangha assembly
All appear together on Magic Vulture Mountain,
Where I say to living beings
That I am always here and never cease to be.

But using the power of expedient devices
I manifest "ceasing" and "not-ceasing" to be.
For living beings in other lands,
Reverent, faithful, and aspiring,
I speak the Unsurpassed Dharma;
But you who do not hear this
Think that I have passed into quiescence.

I see living beings
Sunk in misery, and yet

I refrain from manifesting for them.
In order to cause them to look up in thirst,

Then, when their minds are filled with longing,
I emerge and speak the Dharma.

With such powerful spiritual penetrations,
Throughout asamkhyeyas of eons,
I remain always on Magic Vulture Mountain
And also dwell in other places.

When beings see the eon ending
And ravaged by the great fire,
My land is peaceful and secure,
Always filled with gods and humans,
Gardens and groves, halls and pavilions,
And various precious adornments.
There are jeweled trees with many flowers and fruits
Where living beings roam in delight.

The gods play celestial drums,
Always making various kinds of music,
And mandarava flowers
Are scattered on the Buddha and the great assembly.
My Pure Land is not destroyed,
But the multitudes see it being burned entirely.
Worried, terrified, and miserable,
Such ones are everywhere.

All these beings with offenses,
Because of their evil karmic causes and conditions,
Pass through asamkhyeyas of eons,
Without hearing the name of the Triple Jewel.

All who have cultivated merit and virtue,
Who are compliant, agreeable, and honest—
They all see me
Here, speaking the Dharma.
Sometimes for this assembly,

I speak of the Buddha's life span as limitless.

To those who see the Buddha only after long intervals,
I speak of the Buddha as being difficult to meet.
The power of my wisdom—
The unlimited illumination of my wisdom—
Is such that my life span is one of countless eons
Attained through long cultivation and work.

Those of you with wisdom,
Should not have doubts about this.
Cut them off entirely, and forever,
For the Buddha's words are real, not false.

They are like the clever expedients of the physician
Who, to cure his insane children,
Is actually alive, yet says he is dead,
And none can say that he speaks falsely.

I, too, am like a father to the world,
Saving all from suffering and woe.
But to living beings, inverted as they are,
I speak of cessation, although I actually remain.

Otherwise, because they often see me,
They would grow arrogant and lax.
Unruly and attached to the five desires,
They would tumble into the evil paths.

I am ever aware of living beings—
Those who practice the Way and those who do not.
I speak various Dharmas for their sakes
To save them in an appropriate manner.
I am always thinking,
'How can I cause living beings
To enter the unsurpassed Way
And to quickly perfect the body of a Buddha?'"