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LOTUS SŪTRA, LECTURE NO. 1
[Second Lotus Sūtra series in 1968]
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Zen Mountain Center

NOT VERBATIM

This sūtra titled *Saddharma-pundarīka-sūtra* was supposed to be told by Buddha, but actually this sūtra appeared maybe after two or three hundred years after Buddha passed away. So historically we cannot say Buddha spoke this sūtra. If you ask if all the sūtras were spoken by Buddha, the answer may be that only parts of them were spoken by him. And they will not be exactly as he said them. Even the Hīnayāna sūtras were not handed down by Buddha's disciples exactly as he told them. Since even the Hīnayāna sūtras were not told by Buddha, the Mahāyāna sūtras could not have been told by him.

But some aspects of Buddha developed after the historical Buddha passed away. The historical Buddha is not the only Buddha. He is the so-called Nirmānakāya Buddha. We also have the Sambhogakāya Buddha and Dharmakāya Buddha. So Buddha was understood more and more as a perfect one. When Buddha was still alive, this point was not so important because Buddha himself was their friend and teacher and even god. He was a superhuman being even when he was alive. He was their teacher or master, so there was no need for them to have some superhuman being like a god. But after he passed away, because his character was so great, his disciples adored him as a superhuman being. This idea of a superhuman being is a very important element for promoting the understanding of Buddha as the Perfect One.

This sūtra was not told by the Nirmānakāya or historical Buddha, but by the Sambhogakāya Buddha. According to this sūtra, it was told a long, long time before Buddha. And Buddha, knowing that there was this kind of sūtra before him, talked about the sūtra which had been told by the Sambhogakāya Buddha. The sūtra was attributed to Shākyamuni Buddha, but he told this sūtra the way Vairochana Buddha told it a long, long time before.

So it is necessary for us to know first of all what the Nirmānakāya Buddha, the Sambhogakāya Buddha, and the Dharmakāya Buddha are, and how those aspects or understandings of Buddha developed from the historical Buddha. Without this understanding, this sūtra does not mean much. It is just a fable, like a fairy tale which is very interesting, but doesn't have much to do with our life. Accordingly, I have to explain the three aspects of Buddha and how the Buddhism which was told by the Nirmānakāya Buddha developed into the Mahāyāna Buddhism which was told by the Sambhogakāya Buddha.

This may be a difficult thing for you to understand. Do you know of the Nirmānakāya Buddha, Sambhogakāya Buddha, and Dharmakāya Buddha? The Nirmānakāya Buddha is the historical Buddha. But the historical Buddha has two elements. One is a human being, and the other is a superhuman being. These are the two elements of the historical Buddha. Historically, such a character exists. As you know, Buddha was not God Himself, but was a human being. But for his followers, he was a kind of Perfect One. He attained enlightenment and reached to the bottom of our human nature. He was enlightened in human nature, which is universal, true nature. His human nature is universal to everyone and every being. And he subdued all the emotions and the thinking mind. He conquered all of this, and all of the world, and became a World Honored One. He had this confidence when he attained enlightenment, and his followers listened to him as to a teacher who is also the Perfect One.

So the historical Buddha has two elements. The vital element for the idea of Buddha was this superhuman element. If he was just a historical character, or one of the great sages, then Buddhism could not have survived for such a long time. The reason Buddhism could survive for such a long time is this element of superhuman being in the historical Buddha.

This idea of Buddha as a superhuman being was supported by his teaching. One of the most important teachings of Buddha is the teaching of cause and effect, the teaching of causality. If you do something good, naturally you have some good effect. So his disciples wondered how he could have acquired such a lofty character, such a good character. Buddha told them that if you do something good, you will have a good result. If you practice hard, you will acquire good character. Since his character was incredibly high, his former practice must have been an incredibly hard, long one. So, since their adoration for Buddha extended limitlessly, his practice before he attained enlightenment, or Buddhahood, became limitless. It follows that, if Buddha is a limitlessly lofty person, the time he practiced his way must also have been limitlessly long. In this way, the historical Buddha became more and more something like Absolute Being.

It is the same with us. We appeared in this world, but we appeared in this world with a limitless background. We do not appear all of a sudden from nothing. There must be something before we appear in this world. And there must be something before Buddha also. That he was so great means that he had a great practice. This point is very important for the development of the idea of Buddha.

So he was described in various ways as a superhuman being. He had eighteen characteristics and virtues which are completely different

from those of a usual person, and he also had the thirty-two physical marks. They say this is just a "big adjective" for the Buddha. That may be so, but there is some reason why they applied such a "big adjective" to the Buddha, to the extent that these kinds of things were even described in the *Āgamas*, which belong to Hīnayāna Buddhism. This kind of Mahāyānistic idea of Buddha is already included in the Hīnayāna. So it is difficult to say which is the Mahāyāna teaching and which is the Hīnayāna teaching, actually. If you read them closely, even Hīnayāna sūtra s have a Mahāyānistic description of Buddha.

But actually, he was a human being. When he was 80 years old, he passed away. At this point he was not a supernatural or superhuman being anymore. But how should we understand his death as a superhuman being? If he were a superhuman being, there would not be any need to enter nirvāna. Whether to die or to remain alive would have been his choice. For an ordinary person, it is not possible to have this kind of choice. They say that he took Nirvana because he had completely finished giving people a chance to attain enlightenment. He gave a full teaching for helping people to attain enlightenment, so there was no need for him to live any more. That is why he entered Nirvana. They understood his death in this way.

We usual people appear in this world, according to Buddhism, because of karma, and we die because of karma. But Buddha appeared in this world with a vow, the Mahāyāna vow. The first of the four vows we recite is to "save all human beings." He appeared in this world with this vow instead of karma. Karma and vow are actually the same thing, perhaps, but our attitude changes when our understanding changes. Karma changes into a vow. Instead of living by karma, we live with the vow to help people who live in karma. That is Buddha's teaching. This kind of teaching is supported by what Buddha taught when he was alive, you see? So for them, this is not just a story—this is the actual story we see through the example of the Buddha. In this way, Buddhism survived for a long time.

This kind of Buddha, who made a vow to save people, starting from his training as a bodhisattva, and who appeared in this world as a buddha, is called the "incarnated body" or Nirmānakāya Buddha. So far, all of this kind of teaching is called Hīnayāna Buddhism. But if you look closely at those teachings, there is already the Mahāyānistic understanding of the teaching. I said just now "incarnated body." If there is an incarnated body, there must be an "essential body," the mother of the incarnated body. When our understanding reaches this point, the more profound teaching will be understood as Mahāyāna teaching.

Student A: You said that there is some reason why people should apply a "big adjective" to the Buddha. What's the reason?

Suzuki-rōshi: Because when Buddhism was the teaching between Buddha and his followers, there was already a kind of poetry [?]. For us, who actually do not know who Buddha is, he is just a historical character. But for his disciples, he was a greater than historical character. That was the reason.

Q: But should we believe it because they were romantic? It sounds very superstitious to me, Rōshi. You know, flowery and full of things that are not so real.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah, maybe that is your understanding. [Laughter.] Which is realistic? I don't know. You have to think more. We are naturally pretty romantic beings, you know. So perhaps we are too romantic and too emotional. That we don't want to be so romantic and emotional and want to be more realistic, is our desire, but we have romantic and emotional being. That is very true. So I don't argue about whether we are romantic or realistic. But the purpose of religion is to solve this kind of problem.

Q: By giving in to it?

Suzuki-rōshi: No, by knowing that. That is wisdom. [The meaning of next 3 sentences was unclear to me, so I left them unedited—B. F.] You understand if I explain Sambhogakāya Buddha and Dharmakāya Buddha but so far, how Buddhism developed, a kind of history. And as a true teaching. If we want to treat him as a historical character, it is necessary for us to understand what a historical character is. A historical character has a deeper background. There is no character which just appears without any background. So a more realistic understanding is possible if we understand the background of the Nirmānakāya Buddha.

[Meaning of next sentence unclear—B. F.] So if we say this is just the Nirmānakāya Buddha, that means, in one sense, "superficial," because this is Nirmānakāya Buddha. I'm not talking about the Mahāyāna Sambhogakāya Buddha or Nirmānakāya Buddha.

Q: In the meal chant it says "numerous Nirmānakāya buddhas." Is there more than one?

Suzuki-rōshi: There is more than one, you see? A kind of, perhaps, romantic idea created this kind of profound, more realistic Buddha. If you ignore one side of our life, you will not have a good understanding of human life. Nirmānakāya Buddha is the tentative form and color of the true Buddha. Then, "What is the true Buddha?" will be the next question.

[Tape turned here.]

Q: If someone makes a tape recording of a person's words and takes photographs of the person, there is still something left that he hasn't got. How is he going to describe and communicate to the other people this part that he hasn't been able to record? I think that perhaps about the only way to express it is in a symbolic way.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah, very symbolic. But the scriptures include the good and bad parts of human nature. They are very realistic, actually, but the scale is so big that it includes various elements, good and bad, right and wrong. So the scale should be very great and extravagant, or else you cannot accept this kind of teaching which includes the good side and the bad side.

Q: What is the essence of the term "Vairochana"?

Suzuki-rōshi: Vairochana means Dharmakāya Buddha. I'll explain it in the next lecture.

Q: Rōshi, is there a vow of a bodhisattva not wishing to enter nirvāna until all sentient beings have entered nirvāna?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. "Until all sentient beings enter Nirvana, I will not enter Nirvana." Some bodhisattvas take this kind of vow. If you take that vow, at that time, you are Buddha himself.

Q: In what way, Rōshi, was it like that when Shākyamuni Buddha entered nirvāna?

Suzuki-rōshi: Shākyamuni Buddha entered Nirvana. Finishing his task, he became a Perfect Supreme Buddha, which is more than a Nirmānakāya Buddha. Those questions are very important. They will be the key to understanding Mahāyāna Buddhism. So to give an answer to your questions means to give you a chance to better understand Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In the first chapter, in which the scale of this *Lotus Sūtra* is described, you will find many people who described Buddha's way, such as Devadatta, who tried to kill Buddha, or his wife and son as a nun and priest. And there is much spoken of mountains and trees and flowers. This way of describing it is very poetic, but it actually points out many elements of Mahāyāna Buddhism, all the problems we have, all the furniture or ornaments of this sūtra.

Q: When we read this sūtra, are we reading about the historical Buddha and his times, even when we read about the thirty-two marks, or are we reading about our own mind right now, is it all about exis-

tence right now?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. You know, when we say thirty-two marks, you understand that he had beautiful blue eyes, beautiful hair, very crinkled feet, good feet, or things like that, but it also describes how he acquired these kinds of marks. If you read that part, it says it is not at all easy to be a Buddha. That is the teaching. We are not just describing something good. And Buddha's teaching is very strict. Even though they are describing his teaching in a fancy way, it is actually very simple and very strict. In one way, you can describe his teaching, if you understand it, as very simple and very fancy, including many things good and bad. So to exist in this way, like a lotus in muddy water, is not so easy. But without this kind of strict, profound, and rich understanding of life, we cannot be disciples of Buddha.

Do I have ...?

Student: No, that's it.

*[This transcript was checked and edited by Brian Fikes.
The date was established from the text of the next lecture.
No transcript is known to exist for Lectures 6, 9, 11, 12.]*

This transcript is a retyping of the existing City Center transcript by Brian Fikes. It is not verbatim. The City Center transcript was entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. It was reformatted by Bill Redican (7/17/01).