

The Succession of the Buddhas: From Linear Succession to Eternal Presence in the Lotus Sūtra

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Introduction

The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra (Lotus Sūtra) is one of the most influential scriptures in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, profoundly shaping Buddhist philosophy, doctrine, and practice throughout East Asia. Distinguished by its comprehensive vision of Buddhahood and universal liberation, the sūtra introduces several doctrinal innovations that significantly depart from earlier Buddhist understandings. Among these innovations, its reinterpretation of the succession of the Buddhas represents one of the most important yet relatively understudied developments in Buddhist thought. While early Buddhist texts generally describe Buddhas as appearing sequentially across vast cosmic ages, the Lotus Sūtra reconceives Buddhahood as an eternal, omnipresent, and universally participatory reality. This transformation fundamentally alters the understanding of enlightenment, spiritual lineage, and the relationship between historical and transcendent Buddhahood.

In the Pāli Canon, particularly in the Mahāpadāna Sutta and the Buddhavaṃsa, the history of Buddhism is presented as a succession of Buddhas who arise one after another over immeasurable periods of time. Each Buddha discovers the Dharma independently, establishes the Buddhist community, teaches sentient beings, and finally enters parinirvāṇa before the next Buddha appears. This model establishes a chronological lineage of awakened beings in which the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, occupies a specific place between the Buddhas of the past and the future Buddha, Maitreya. Although this cosmology emphasizes continuity in the transmission of the Dharma, it simultaneously presupposes that Buddhahood manifests as a series of discrete historical events separated by long intervals of cosmic time.

The Lotus Sūtra preserves this traditional narrative while radically redefining its significance. Rather than denying the existence of previous and future Buddhas, it reframes historical succession as a manifestation of upāya (skillful means), revealing that the appearance and disappearance of Buddhas are pedagogical devices adapted to the spiritual capacities of sentient beings. Consequently, Buddhahood is no longer confined to historical chronology but is understood as an eternal reality continuously active throughout innumerable

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worlds. This reinterpretation transforms the concept of Buddha succession from a linear historical sequence into an expression of the timeless presence of enlightenment itself.

Objectives

This study investigates how the Lotus Sūtra reconstructs the traditional Buddhist understanding of Buddha succession and explores the broader doctrinal implications of this transformation. The principal objective is to demonstrate that the sūtra replaces the earlier model of sequential Buddhas with a dynamic vision of eternal Buddhahood manifested simultaneously across time and space.

To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the Lotus Sūtra reinterpret the traditional conception of successive Buddhas found in early Buddhist literature?
2. In what ways does Chapter Sixteen, "The Life Span of the Tathāgata," redefine the historical identity of Śākyamuni Buddha?
3. What is the doctrinal significance of Prabhūtaratna Buddha and the Jeweled Stūpa in demonstrating the coexistence of multiple Buddhas?
4. How does the doctrine of the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna*) universalize Buddhahood and reshape the meaning of spiritual succession?
5. How did these doctrinal innovations influence later Mahāyāna and East Asian Buddhist understandings of Buddhahood and liberation?

By addressing these questions, the paper argues that the Lotus Sūtra does not merely expand traditional Buddhist cosmology but fundamentally reorients Buddhist soteriology from historical succession toward participatory enlightenment grounded in the eternal Buddha.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative textual methodology to examine the transformation of Buddha succession in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra. The primary source is the Lotus Sūtra, with particular attention given to Chapters 11 ("The Appearance of the Jeweled Stūpa") and 16 (The Life Span of the Tathāgata), which together provide the doctrinal foundation for the sūtra's reconceptualization of Buddhahood. These chapters are analyzed through close textual reading to identify their literary structure, symbolic language, and theological implications.

To contextualize the Lotus Sūtra's innovations, the study compares these passages with relevant texts from the Pāli Canon, especially the *Mahāpadāna Sutta, the Buddhavaṃsa, and other early sources that describe the succession of past, present, and future Buddhas. Selected Mahāyāna scriptures, including the Avataṃsaka Sūtra, the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, and the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, are also considered to highlight both shared developments and the distinctive contribution of the Lotus Sūtra. Secondary scholarship provides historical and doctrinal context while allowing the present study to formulate an original interpretation centered on the concept of Buddha succession.

The analysis is guided by two complementary perspectives. The first is historical, examining how Mahāyāna Buddhism reinterpreted earlier Buddhist traditions rather than simply replacing them. The second is hermeneutical, emphasizing the doctrine of upāya (skillful means) as the interpretive principle through which the Lotus Sūtra reframes previous teachings concerning the Buddha's life, enlightenment, and parinirvāṇa. This approach demonstrates that doctrinal continuity is maintained even as the meaning of Buddhahood undergoes a profound transformation.

Research Limitations

This study is limited to a doctrinal and comparative textual analysis of the concept of Buddha succession in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra (Lotus Sūtra). It focuses primarily on Chapters 2, 3, 11, and 16, which present the doctrines of the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna*), the Eternal Buddha, and the simultaneous presence of multiple Buddhas. While comparisons are made with selected texts from the Pāli Canon, including the Mahāpadāna Sutta, the Buddhavaṃsa, and the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, this research does not attempt a comprehensive examination of all Buddhist traditions or schools. Similarly, although the study considers the influence of the Lotus Sūtra on East Asian Buddhism, it does not provide a detailed historical analysis of its reception in China, Korea, or Japan. The research relies on canonical texts and established scholarly translations rather than philological analysis of Sanskrit, Chinese, or Tibetan manuscripts. Consequently, the findings should be understood as a doctrinal interpretation of Buddha succession rather than a comprehensive historical or textual-critical investigation.

Results

The central argument of this paper is that the Lotus Sūtra replaces a chronological understanding of Buddha succession with an ontological vision of eternal Buddhahood. Rather than presenting Buddhas as isolated historical figures who succeed one another over vast cosmic periods, the sūtra portrays

all Buddhas as manifestations of the same timeless Dharma-body, continuously engaged in the liberation of sentient beings. This transformation unfolds through three closely related doctrinal developments: the revelation of Śākyamuni's eternal lifespan, the appearance of Prabhūtaratna Buddha within the Jeweled Stūpa, and the universalization of Buddhahood through the doctrine of the One Vehicle (Ekayāna).

Conclusion

This study argues that the Lotus Sūtra fundamentally transforms the traditional Buddhist understanding of Buddha succession by replacing a linear, historical model with a multidimensional vision of eternal Buddhahood. Through the doctrines of Śākyamuni's immeasurable lifespan, the simultaneous presence of Prabhūtaratna and the Buddhas of the ten directions, and the universal promise of Ekayāna, the sūtra redefines enlightenment as an ever-present reality rather than a succession of isolated historical events. Buddha succession is therefore reconceived as the continuous manifestation of the eternal Dharma, in which all Buddhas participate and toward which all sentient beings are ultimately directed.

The study contributes to contemporary Buddhist scholarship by identifying Buddha succession as a central interpretive framework that unifies several of the Lotus Sūtra's most influential doctrines. While previous scholarship has often examined the Eternal Buddha, *Ekayāna*, or the symbolism of the Jeweled Stūpa independently, this research demonstrates that these teachings collectively articulate a coherent reconceptualization of Buddhahood and religious history. The findings suggest that the Lotus Sūtra should be understood not merely as expanding earlier Buddhist cosmology but as fundamentally redefining the relationship between time, enlightenment, and liberation.

Finally, this reinterpretation helps explain the enduring influence of the Lotus Sūtra within East Asian Buddhist traditions. By presenting Buddhahood as an eternal and universally accessible reality, the sūtra provided the doctrinal foundation for later developments in Tiantai, Tendai, and Nichiren Buddhism, where faith in the Eternal Buddha and confidence in the universal capacity for enlightenment became central religious ideals. The Lotus Sūtra thus transforms the succession of the Buddhas from a narrative of historical replacement into a living vision of continuous presence, universal participation, and boundless compassion, offering one of the most profound and enduring contributions to Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy.

Keywords- Lotus Sūtra, Buddha Succession, Eternal Buddhahood, Ekayāna, Mahāyāna Soteriology, Comparative Buddhaology

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