

THE MEANING OF INFINITE NUMBERS IN THE LOTUS SUTRA

by

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In the *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* are found several adjectives, nouns under the form of compounds, comparisons and expressions etc., that denote great numbers and are employed in relation to beings and things of diverse kinds.¹⁾ These great numbers are of such a magnitude that in fact they are almost expressive of infinitude. The adjectives expressing great / infinite numbers are very numerous. Among them we have for instance: *agaṇaniya*, *agaṇiya*, *asaṃkhya*, *asaṃkhyeya*, *aparimita*, *apramāṇa*, *aprameya*, *ananta*, *acintiya*. We can indicate as the most representative ones among compounds, comparisons and expressions referring to great / infinite numbers the following ones: (compound): *bahu.....koṭinayutaśatasahasra*; (comparison with the sand of the Gaṅga river): *asītigaṅgānadivālikāsama*; (with atoms): *evāprameyā bahu-kalpakoṭyaḥ parinirvṛtasya sugatasya tasya / paramāṇu sarve na bhavanti lakṣyās tāvad bahu kṣiṇa bhavanti kalpāḥ* (VII, p. 158, v. 5), and (expression): *kalpāna koṭinayutā gaṇenta ekaika no cāntu labheya teṣām* (VII, p. 192, v. 77).³⁾

We do not think that these great / infinite numbers are only examples of the exaggerations proper to an exuberant literary imagination, and that as such no importance is to be attached to them. On the contrary, we consider that these words etc. contribute to the *Sūtra* important elements that enhance its richness of thought. All these words etc., indicative of great / infinite numbers, possess a secondary or implicit meaning besides their mere numeral notions. Frequently the secondary or implicit meaning has more weight than the numeral notion in itself. In this article we shall deal with three of these secondary meanings: 1. In many cases these words etc. serve to extol the persons, things, processes etc. to which they are applied. We can consider them as rhetorical or poetical devices of the *hyperbole* kind. 2. Sometimes these words etc. reflect important Indian and / or Buddhist theories or

teachings with which tight relations are established. 3. Other times the use of these words etc. allows us to see clearly some fundamental changes in the Buddhist Teaching or in some of its doctrinary elements such as *Bodhi* or *Nirvāṇa*.

In this article we shall refer to some examples that illustrate all the mentioned three effects that derive from the words etc. expressive of great / infinite numbers.

Hyperbolic or extolling use of the words etc. expressing great / infinite numbers

In the following paragraphs we indicate some examples of the hyperbolic or extolling use of the words etc. that mean great / infinite numbers. In each case we point out one or two of the secondary or implicit meanings attached to these words etc. Of course other secondary or implicit meanings could be found and taken into account.

1. Retinues of Nāga kings, p. 4 lines 10-11 (*sārdham bahunāgakoṭīśatasahasraparivāraiḥ*), Kinnara kings, p. 4 line 13 (similar expression), Garuḍa kings, p. 5 line 4 (similar expression), Asura kings, p. 5 line 2 (similar expression), Gandharva kings, p. 4 line 15 (similar expression without *koṭī*), present at Rājagṛha Assambly.

2. Beings that attended Buddha's Assambly in Rājagṛha, p. 15 verse 48 (*aham vimāśca bahuprāṇakoṭya iha sthitāḥ*).

The great / infinite number of these retinues and beings indicates the extraordinary magnitude of Buddha's Assambly in Rājagṛha, therefore its importance and the great attraction exercised by Buddha's Teaching in all sorts of beings.

3. Maruts who together with other gods request Buddha to teach his Doctrine, p. 55 verse 115 (*marudgaṇānām ca sahasrakoṭyaḥ*): the importance of the event and the interest of gods in Buddha's preaching of his Doctrine.

4. Gods, Nāgas, Yakṣas, Rakṣasas, who aspire to obtain the Illumination, p. 35 verse 31 (*devāśca nāgāśca sayakṣarākṣasāḥ koṭīśahasrā yathā gaṅgavālikāḥ*): universality of Buddha's Message and the great attraction the goal of the *Bodhi* has in all kinds of beings.

5. Buddha's Disciples, p. 24 verse 68 (*tahi śrāvakāṇām gaṇanā na vidyate te cāpramāṇāḥ sugatasya śrāvakāḥ*); bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs, p. 26 verse 85 (*bhikṣū bahū tatha pi ca bhikṣuṇīyo.....analpakās te yatha gaṅgavālikā*); and Bodhisattvas, p. 10 verse 13 (*bodhisattvā yatha gaṅgavālikāḥ*), p. 20 line 12 (*vimśatibodhisattvakoṭyaḥ*), p. 24 verse 70 (*bahubodhisattvā yatha gaṅgavālikāḥ*). Cf. p. 4 lines 10-11; p. 4 line 13;

p. 4 line 15; p. 5 line 2; p. 5 line 4; p. 15 verse 48. All these followers of Buddha's Teaching are a sign of the wide spreading of Buddhism in all its levels.

6. Beings saved by the Bodhisattvas, p. 3 lines 2-3 (*bodhisattvasahasraiḥ..... bahuprāṇikoṭīnayutaśatasahasrasaṃtārakaiḥ*): the great activity, compassion and efficiency of the Bodhisattvas.

7. Beings that received Buddha's Teaching, p. 9 verse 7 (*buddhāṃśca paśyāmi..... praśāsamānān bahusattvakoṭīh*).

8. Beings brought to their spiritual perfection by the Buddhas, p. 49 verse 73 (*ekasmi yāne pariṣācayanti acintiyā prāṇisahasrakoṭyaḥ*).

These last two instances show the great and efficient activity of the Buddhas and the extraordinary diffusion of Buddhism in space.

9. Buddhas of the future, p. 52 verse 98 (*anāgatā pi bahubuddhakoṭyo acintiyā yeṣu pramāṇu nāsti*).

10. Tathāgatas of the past, p. 49 verse 71 (*ye cāpyabhūvan purimās tathāgatāḥ parinirvṛtā buddhasahasraneke / atitam adhvānam asaṃkhyakalpe teṣaṃ pramāṇaṃ na kadāci vidyate*).

11. Buddhas that have been seen and served by the eight sons of Candrasūrya-pradīpa, p. 22 lines 1-2 (*paścād bahūni buddhakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇi dṛṣṭāni satkṛtāni ca*).

12. Buddhas under whom the Tathāgatas have followed the Career of Bodhisattva, p. 29 lines 4-5 (*bahubuddhakoṭīnayutaśatasahasracirṇacaritāvino*).

13. Beings to whom Buddhahood is predicted, p. 26 verse 82 (*āśvāsayitvā..... prāṇakoṭyo bahavo acintiyāmaḥ.....bhāviṣyatha buddha mamāntareṇa*). Cf. p. 27 verse 93; p. 29 lines 4-5.

The last five instances prove that Śākyamuni is not the only Buddha, that there has been an unlimited number of them, that the possibility to obtain the condition of Buddha is very great, and that in fact many have attained it or will attain it.

14. Stūpas built by believers, p. 14 verse 44 (*stūpāna paśyāmi sahasrakoṭyo analpakā yathariva gaṅgavālikāḥ*).

15. Flags and parasols adorning the Stūpas, p. 14 verse 45 (*chatradvajās teṣu sahasrakoṭyaḥ*): magnificence of the Stūpas.

16. Stūpas in honour of Candrasūryapradīpa's relics, p. 26 verse 84 (*stūpāna koṭīnayutā anantakā*): prestige of Candrasūryapradīpa.

17. Offerings given in honour of the Buddhas, as garments, p. 13 verse 37 (*vastrāṇa koṭīṣata te dadanti sahasrakoṭīṣatamūlya*); as vihāras, p. 13 verse 38 (*vihāra-koṭīṣata*).

The four last instances (besides the secondary or implicit meaning already indicated) show the great diffusion of Buddhist Dharma everywhere in the universe and the profound faith and devotion of the donors.

18. Time dedicated to meditation by the Bodhisattvas, p. 13 verse 35 (*dhyāyanta varṣāṇa sahasrakoṭyā*): importance of the meditative practices and the constancy of the Bodhisattvas in their efforts.

19. Time spent in teaching Buddhist Dharma by Candrasūryapradīpa, p. 25 verse 76 (*prabhāṣate tajjina agradharmān pariṣūrṇa so antarakalpaśaṣṭim*) and by Varaprabha, p. 26 verse 86 (*aṣṭi so antarakalpaṣūrṇā tahi śāsane bhāṣati agradharmā*). Cf. p. 21 lines 17-18 and lines 1-2. Constancy and great compassion of both Tathāgatas.

20. Time necessary for the appearance of a Buddha, p. 25 verse 80 (*sudurlabhā bhonti jinā maharṣayaḥ kalpāna koṭinayutāna atyayāt*): getting Buddhahood is not an easy task.

21. Duration of the Career of Bodhisattva, p. 30 verse 4 (*tasyāṃ cīrṇāya caryāyāṃ kalpakōṭyo acintiyā*). Cf. texts quoted under numbers 11, 12, 18. The Career of Bodhisattva requires a long space of time to be fulfilled.

22. Duration of the Dharma preached by the Tathāgatas, as for instance by Padmaprabha, p. 67 lines 7-8 (*padmaprabhasya tathāgatasya parinirvṛtasya dvātriṃśadantarakalpān saddharmaḥ sthāsyati*); by Rāsmīprabhāsa, p. 146 verse 9 (*saddharma viṃśāntarakalpa sthāsyati*); by Jāmbūnadaprabhāsa, p. 151 lines 11-12 (*viṃśatiṃ cāsyāntarakalpān saddharmaḥ sthāsyati*); by Tamālapatracandanagandha, p. 154 line 2 (*catvāriṃśaccāntarakalpān saddharmaḥ sthāsyati*).

23. The false doctrine, adverse to the True Doctrine taught by Padmaprabha, Rāsmīprabhāsa, Jāmbūnadaprabhāsa, Tamālapatracandanagandha, has the same duration as the True one, p. 67 line 8; p. 146 verse 9; p. 151 line 12; p. 154 lines 2-3 (where we find expressions similar to those recorded in the preceding paragraph).

The great/infinite duration of the preservation of the True Dharma shows its resistance, its capacity to survive thanks to its intrinsic value; the great/infinite duration of the false doctrine, opposite to the True Dharma, indicates how difficult is the appearance of Buddhas who are the only ones that can teach the Truth and that

can put an end to the erroneous comprehension and distortion of the Dharma preached by previous Buddhas.

24. Time during which beings were burnt by suffering before being saved by Buddha, p. 91 verse 97 (*paridahyamānā bahukalpakōṭyas*): the great magnitude of human suffering.

25. Examples and arguments, p. 9 verse 8 (*drṣṭāntahetūnayutāna koṭibhiḥ*); p. 12 verse 27 (*drṣṭāntahetūnayutair anekaiḥ*); p. 14 verse 41 (*drṣṭāntahetūnayutair anekaiḥ*): the great / infinite number of the arguments and examples employed by the Buddhas (p. 9) and Bodhisattvas (p. 12 and p. 14) show their great intellectual and demonstrative strength.

26. Marvels revealed by the ray of light emitted by Buddha, p. 10 verse 12 (*śṛṇomi paśyāmi ca.....īdṛśakāni.....anye viśeṣeṇa sahasrakoṭyaḥ*): they reveal the extraordinary power of Buddha.

Implicit references to other Indian / Buddhist theories

Limitless number of worlds

As we have already said the words, comparisons, expressions etc. that denote great / infinite numbers impliedly establish connections with other well known Indian / Buddhist theories. For instance in VIIth Chapter of the *Sūtra* reference is made several times to the limitless quantity of worlds. In p. 163 lines 5-7 the number of worlds in each region of space is mentioned in a general way: *daśasu dikṣvekaikasyāṃ diśi pañcāśalokadhātukoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇi*, and in the following pages (p. 167 lines 10-11; p. 171 lines 4-5; p. 174 lines 6-8) the same expression is employed to indicate in an individual way the number of worlds in each region of the space. In p. 157 lines 1-2 the infinitude of the worlds is also pointed out: *tat kiṃ manyadhve bhikṣavaḥ śakyam teṣāṃ lokadhātūnām anto vā paryanto vā gaṇanayādhigantum / ta āhuḥ / no hidaṃ bhagavan no hidaṃ sugata*. Cf. p. 6 line 7; p. 8 line 6; p. 9 verse 4; p. 14 verse 44; p. 15 verse 49; p. 16 verses 53, 55 etc. where references to the infinite number of worlds and therefore to the limitlessness of space are found.

It is not necessary to say that the great / infinite numbers of worlds requires a limitless space in which these worlds can be located.

This cosmological conception of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* of a limitless space, where an almost infinite number of worlds is situated, agrees with the general

Hindu / Buddhist conception of space as a limitless entity. The connection thus established between the passages of the *Sūtra* that refer to an infinite number of worlds and the general cosmological Indian theory and its implications, gives to these passages a profound background and enriches their contents.

The great / infinite number of kalpas

To the infinite number of worlds and the limitlessness of the space corresponds the infinite number of *kalpas*, cosmic periods, that have existed in the past. We found in several passages of the *Sūtra* (p. 17 lines 8-9; p. 156 lines 1-2; p. 375 lines 9-10; p. 431 lines 6-7) the following expression (or expressions similar to it): *atīte 'dhvanyasaṃkhyeyaiḥ kalpāir asaṃkhyeyatarair vipulair aprameyair acintyair aparimitair apramāṇais tataḥ pareṇa parataraṃ yadāsīt tena kālena tena samayena*. In p. 484 lines 4-5 we have another expression of the great / infinite number of past *kalpas*: *asaṃkhyeyakalpakoṭīṇayutaśatasahasrasamudānītām anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhim*. Cf. p. 13 verse 35; p. 17 lines 8-9; p. 25 verse 57 and verse 76; p. 26 verse 86; p. 21 lines 1-2 and 17-18.

It is well known that beginninglessness, *anāditva*, is one of the fundamental principles of Indian thought, expressed in many theories and teachings.⁴⁾ The great / infinite number of past *kalpas* requires the existence of a similarly great / limitless extent of time in the past. The *anāditva* principle makes possible the existence of the required extent of time during which so many *kalpas* have followed one another.

As in the previous case of the great / infinite number of worlds and the limitlessness of space, we have also in this case a connection between the idea of a great / infinite number of *kalpas* and another important Indian conception, that of the *anāditva*; and this connection gives to all the passages in which the infinite number of cosmic periods are referred to, a new light, a deeper significance.

References to the great / infinite number of past *kalpas* are very numerous in the *Sūtra*. The same does not happen with the future *kalpas*. The references to these ones are not numerous, although we find some of this kind, as for instance in p. 207 verse 22: *anantakalpasmi anāgate 'dhvani dṛṣṭavāna buddhān bahavo hyanantān*. In p. 52 verse 98, without mention of time, reference is made to the great / infinite number of Buddhas of the future, whose existence seems to require a great / infinite number of *kalpas* where to appear, unless we admit that they were born all together

at the same moment.

Fundamental changes in Buddhist Doctrines

Length of the life of the Tathāgata after obtaining the Bodhi⁶⁾

The most interesting use of the great / infinite numbers in the *Sūtra* is the one related to the length of life (*āyuspramāṇa*) of the Tathāgatas. In this case the use of the great / infinite numbers points out a most fundamental change in an equally fundamental Buddhist doctrine.

Early and Hinayāna Buddhism

For Early and Hinayāna Buddhism the Buddhist who has submitted himself to the intellectual and moral disciplines prescribed by Buddhism will obtain the *Bodhi* and then, on the moment of his death, will reach *Nirvāṇa* without any remaining substratum. This was considered as the liberation from reincarnations or re-existences, and therefore from birth, old age, sickness, and death, and from the suffering inherent to human nature. This was what happened with Śākyamuni according to the first Buddhist texts. It can be said that in this stage of the history of Buddhism to attain *Nirvāṇa* as soon as possible was considered as the final goal of Human effort.

Mahāyāna Buddhism

The position of Buddhist message, according to the definitive form it shows in the *Sūtras* of the Mahāyāna period, is quite different.

After a long and strenuous Career of Bodhisattva which has lasted a great / infinite length of time and in which he has acquired the Supreme Knowledge and has accomplished numerous and heroic acts of Compassion,⁷⁾ the Bodhisattva, becoming a Tathāgata, obtains the *Bodhi* (Enlightenment) and gets a *Buddhakṣetra*, a World of Buddha. These Worlds of Buddha are described in terms of great beauty, are adorned with flowers and gems, brilliant with gold—true and magnificent Paradises. There the new Buddha lives and reigns (so to say), imparting the Dharma to great number of disciples, guiding and inciting them towards *Bodhi*. In this way he accomplishes a task of compassion and beneficence, which is the continuance of the task of compassion and beneficence he has accomplished during his Career of Bodhisattva. The life and (so to say) the reign of the Tathāgata in his *Buddhakṣetra*

last a great / infinite length of time. During this infinite length of time he keeps his individual personality and consciousness, purified and enhanced by the Bodhisattva Career to which he has submitted himself. Only after the great / infinite number of *kalpas* spent in his compassionate activity, the Tathāgata enters in the Supreme *Nirvāṇa*, the blissful extinction, which remains as the final aim of Buddhist effort. This destiny is generously open to anybody who decides to become a Bodhisattva, to live and act as such, and to make *Bodhi* the supreme and unique goal of his existences.

In the *Lotus Sātra* we have the history of several Tathāgatas and in each of these histories we find the same scheme, the same course of life that we have referred to in the foregoing lines, and the same great / infinite length of life. Let us mention among these Tathāgatas, Padmaprabha, pp. 65-66 (p. 66 lines 11-12: *padmaprabhasya tathāgatasya dvādaśāntarakalpā āyuṣṣpramāṇaṃ bhaviṣyati sthāpayitvā kumārabhūtatvam*); Raśmiprabhāsa, pp. 144-145 (p. 144 line 7: same *āyuṣṣpramāṇa*); Śāsiketu, p. 148 (p. 148 line 15: same *āyuṣṣpramāṇa*); Jāmbūnadaprabhāsa, pp. 150-151 (p. 151 line 11: same *āyuṣṣpramāṇa*); Tamālapatracandanagandha, pp. 152-154 (p. 154 line 1: *caturvīṃsatim.....asyāntarakalpānāyuṣṣpramāṇam*).⁸⁾

Position of Nirvāṇa in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Nirvāṇa, so difficult to grasp in its true meaning even by philosophically educated minds, the complete extinction (as that of a flame) with which it is likened, and which naturally produces a feeling of dread and uneasiness in the great majority of persons too much attached to themselves, to life and to the joys and pleasures it offers—*Nirvāṇa*, extinction, is postponed to a so far away future that it seems that it will never arrive, will never be produced. No other religious Master has discovered and offered to his adepts a destiny more magnificent and more in accordance with human aspirations than the one discovered and taught by Śākyamuni in the Mahāyāna Sūtras.

With the Mahāyāna, Buddhism has been transformed from a religion that proclaims extinction as the final goal into a religion that presents as its goal a fully blossomed and blissful quasi-eternal existence under the signs of Knowledge and Compassion. Buddhism has become from a *Nirvāṇa-religion* a *Bodhi-religion*.⁹⁾

The quasi-eternity of the existence of the Tathāgatas after obtaining the *Bodhi*

seems to indicate a fundamental change, a very profound transformation in Buddhist message. This quasi-eternity is one of the important elements that distinguish Hinayāna from Mahāyāna Buddhism. Perhaps it is this change or transformation what allowed the quick acceptance of Buddhism by so diverse Asian peoples, and explains its formidable force of attraction.

The great/infinite numbers applied to the length of the existence of the Tathāgatas after obtaining the *Bodhi* are the clear indicative sign of this fundamental transformation.

**Secondary or implicit effect
of the great/infinite numbers taken as a whole**

In the preceding paragraphs we have dealt with the secondary or implicit meaning of the great/infinite numbers and with their effect in relation to each of the cases in which they are employed. But these same numbers, taken as a whole, considered as a totality, have also a global effect. These numbers provide all the facts narrated in the *Sūtra*, all the personages that appear in it, with a dimension of greatness. Nothing in the *Sūtra* is small, scanty, mediocre; on the contrary all is limitless, incommensurable, of cosmic proportions, magnificent, adequate in this way to the greatness of the Doctrines taught by the *Sūtra*, which are inspired in a spirit of generosity and which constitute a *message of universal character*.

NOTES

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1) Cf. Shiro Yoshioka, *Index to the Saddharma-puṇḍarikasūtra*, Informations No. 3, July 31, 1989, *Gleanings 2: Similes of the Innumerableness / Immeasurableness*, Tokyo, The Society for Studies of the Lotus Sūtra.

2) The compound *koṭinayutaśatasahasra* is equivalent to the following number: 10.000.000 (*koṭi*, ten millions) \times 100.000.000 (*nayuta*, hundred millions) \times 100 (*śata*, hundred) \times 1.000 (*sahasra*, thousand) that makes a total amount of a number 1 followed by 20 zeros. This gives an idea of the enormity of the numbers one finds in the *Lotus Sūtra* and allows us to consider such great numbers as infinite numbers. When this compound is applied to *kalpas* and is to be expressed in years, the number enormously increases since each *kalpa* contains more than one billion years.

- 3) Other examples can be easily found in the *Index of the Saddharmapūṇḍarikasūtra*, mentioned in note 1, edited by Yasunori Ejima and others, Tokyo, The Reiyukai 1985 ff., under the words *agaṇaniya*, *asamkhyeya* etc., and specially *koṭi* and *nayuta*. Moreover almost in every page of the *Sūtra* it is possible to find references to great / infinite numbers. The *Index* also gives the Tibetan and Chinese equivalents of all the above quoted words.
- 4) Cf. W. Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967, pp. 180-181, on the Buddhist cosmological conception in general; F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, "La infinitud en el Pensamiento de la India", in *Hitos* No. 3, Buenos Aires, 1979, pp. 37-39.
- 5) Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, "Anāditva or Beginninglessness in Indian Philosophy", in *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Poona, India, 1980, pp. 1-20.
- 6) Cf. Z. Ito, "A Study on the Meaning of Tathāgata's *āyuṣ-pramāṇa* in the Saddharmapūṇḍarikasūtra", in *Hokke-Bunka Kenkyū* No. 11 and No. 12.
- 7) Cf. *Saddharmapūṇḍarika* I, verses 13-43 and Tsugunari Kubo, *Hokekyō Bosatsu Shisō Kiso*, Tokyo, Shunjū-sha, 1987, pp. 103-141.
- 8) If we consider that an *antarakalpa* lasts 336.000.000 years, the length of the life of the four first mentioned Tathāgatas has been of 4.032.000.000 years and that of Tamālapatracandanagandha of 8.064.000.000 years.
- 9) Cf. Jikido Takasaki, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Tokyo, The Tōhō Gakkai, 1987, pp. 163-167.