

# *What Is the Meaning of Beginningless?*

Lecture by Teacher Zheng Li: updated edition

“From the beginningless time” is a phrase often seen in Buddhist sutras, but what really is beginningless? Some people outside the Buddhist community questioned, “Doesn’t everything start somewhere? Why does Buddhism use ‘beginningless’ and ‘from the beginningless time’?”

This question involves the concept of time and space. However, due to the constraint of the length of the article, we will focus only on the concept of “beginningless”.

The concept of time is a puzzle to many people. Western philosophers have attempted to answer the question “Is time finite or infinite?”, and they have discovered and concluded that “time is both finite and infinite.” However, how can this be true without being self-contradictory? Lo and behold, not only time, but space as well, have been proven to be both finite and infinite—an antinomy (a contradiction between two statements, both apparently obtained through correct reasoning). This is what we will investigate with the focus on “time” only.

What does it mean to say “time is finite”? Simply put, the fact that we exist in this moment of time and space now, we have obviously travelled and traversed across both to arrive here no matter how long and far it has taken. Since we are already here, time must be finite; if it’s infinite, we could not have travelled across it to get here! This proves that time is finite.

However, is time truly finite? It is not entirely so because if time is finite, then there must be a starting point. When did time come into being? Was time absent prior to that? No smart person or philosopher has ever been able to find out when time has started. If time has a beginning, it should meet certain conditions, such as “When has it started and under what kinds of circumstances?” If there was a condition under which time began, how did the existence of that condition come into being? Consequently, lots of contradictions and problems would follow. Since no condition can be found under which time has begun, time is infinite.

Of course, there are scientists who propose that time and space were both created during the Big Bang. Yet that poses another big problem: “What were the situations like with time and space before the Big Bang?” Scientists cannot answer that because they cannot answer why and how the Big Bang happened. The Big Bang is only a hypothesis since no one was there to witness and observe it. If the Big Bang occurred spontaneously without any cause, then we would have to confront a predicament that it materialized out of thin air! So, the Big Bang theory is only a hypothesis; the occurrence and the conditions under which the Big Bang occurred have yet to be proven.

Because there is no way to establish the conditions under which “time” began, “time” is conceptually categorized as infinite. Since we cannot infer when “time” began, it has its infinite property; on the other hand, since we exist here and now, we should acknowledge that time has its finite property as well. The simultaneous existence of the finite and infinite properties has baffled philosophers, and this co-existence of two contradictory phenomena is referred to as an antinomy.

From Buddhism’s stand point, finite or infinite are just concepts established by human beings. Western philosophers had long discussed the concept of an arrow in flight and the dichotomy of Zeno’s paradoxes. They

argued that after leaving a bow, an arrow is not moving towards anywhere. Why? Because for an arrow to move from point A to point B, it must pass through a midpoint between A and B (the halfway point between A and B). For the arrow to pass through this midpoint, it must pass through another midpoint between A and the first midpoint (the quarter point from A to B). Furthermore, in order to pass the quarter point, it must first pass through the  $1/8$  point, and to pass through the  $1/8$  point, it must pass through the  $1/16$  point, and so on and so forth... It is impossible to find a midpoint because there are infinite midpoints and, therefore, it is impossible for the arrow to fly from point A to B.

This in philosophy is called a Zeno's Paradox. There was eventually a breakthrough after more than a thousand years with the invention of integration—integrating the infinite midpoints to calculate the real distance. Every distance can be divided into countless infinite points but the collection of these infinite points does have a fixed distance. Infinity is, therefore, a human concept. Equally true is the statement “time is both finite as well as infinite”—these are actually concepts established by human beings. With abstract concepts, such as these, there are blind spots. The blind spot in this discourse is that it lacks an original entity (quiddity, the essence or the essential nature). When we ignore the fundamental or primordial existence or being in the dharma realm (realm of reality) and look exclusively at time to determine if it is finite or infinite, we are bound to be baffled because there lacks a referencing coordinate.

In the dharma realm, there is a dharma (phenomenon) that exists primordially. What is this phenomenon that exists primordially? It is the eighth consciousness—tathāgatagarbha—the eighth consciousness of every sentient being. It is immeasurable, boundless and infinite without limit. Because there is a fixed number of sentient beings, each endowed with this immeasurable eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha, in this dharma realm,

there is a fixed number of eight consciousness tathāgatagarbha. Some might ask, “Why is there an eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha?” The Buddha said, “It primordially exists.” Therefore, this eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha, is primordially non-produced (non-created, unborn). (Editor’s note: As in The Lotus Sutra, Chapter II Skillful Means, “The state of the dharma is permanent and unchangeable in this world”)

In other words, the eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha is not a phenomenon that is born, created or produced. It primordially exists. Therefore, “beginningless” is referring to the fact that the concept of “beginningless” can be understood with this phenomenon of primordial existence (the unproduced/unborn) as a coordinate. Without it, such understanding will be impossible.

Unproduced—the phenomenon that primordially exists, is the core of the dharma realm, and produces all phenomena such as time, space and all that exist in the universe. Before the arising of time, space and all dharmas (phenomena), there already existed the eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha, the very own mind of every sentient being. This mind exists primordially since beginningless eons and is not produced or created by other dharmas in the dharma realm—it is the primordial existence in this dharma realm.

Because of the existence of the eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha, the five aggregates and eighteen elements of all sentient beings, the twelve links of dependent arising, and all other dharmas can subsequently be produced and created. Based on the sequential arising and ordering of all these dharmas, the concept of “time” is then established. What is “time”? Time is a construct based on the momentary change between consecutive moments in the mind of sentient beings. In the reality of the dharma realm, there is no “before moment” or “after moment,” just the present moment! That is to say- there

is no past or future, only now because the past has vanished, the future has yet to arrive so there is always only the present moment.

There are movies that portray traveling back to the past or into the future but this shows the lack of understanding on ontology. In other words, the plots in the movies about traveling back to the past or into the future are just imaginations and illusions due to the lack of correct understanding of the eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha. In the dharma realm, it is impossible for one to travel back to the past or into the future, or for an individual to meet himself from the past. If this was possible, then our present quiddity (essential nature, original entity, essence) would be able to co-exist with the future quiddity. How many quiddities would we have? There could be infinite quiddities in each of us!

In the dharma realm, each sentient being has only one original entity, not multiple. This quiddity (tathāgatagarbha) has always existed and, hence, is eternal. Because it is produced by nothing (a non-produced dharma), so it will never cease to exist—it is, therefore, called a dharma that is non-created (non-produced). With this non-produced dharma as coordinate, we can eliminate our delusional thoughts. We can then understand that time exists only in the present. We have past lives because we possess our eighth consciousness, the same reason that we have future lives. When we witness our present life, we can infer that we have a previous life and likewise we know that we will also have a future life. Why? Because of the existence of our eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha that will never cease to exist. When this round of life ends, there will be future lives because the eighth consciousness does not cease to exist. Our own eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha will give rise to our new five aggregates and eighteen elements—a brand new mind and body in the future lives.

We know the existence of our current five aggregates based on the existing verifiable eighth consciousness. Obviously, due to the eternal existence of the tathāgatagarbha, we know that our five aggregates bound to have arisen and existed in our past lives via the functionality of the tathāgatagarbha and we can likewise conclude that we will definitely have future lives and, hence, the existence of our past, present and future lives. Although there are past, present and future lives, there is only one eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha, not three. If there were three tathāgatagarbhas, there could be more. Due to this eternal tathāgatagarbha, past, present and future lives arise. Therefore, inferring from our current cognition of time, we know that there was a past life, one prior to that and all the way till the beginningless eons. But no matter how long it is, there is only one eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha.

In conclusion, every sentient being has its own unique eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha with no exception. All the eighth consciousnesses (tathāgatagarbhas) in the dharma realm exist primordially and are all non-produced. These immeasurable and unbounded number of eighth consciousnesses (tathāgatagarbhas) produce (create) the sentient beings' individual five aggregates and all the inanimate worlds. So, what is the duration of "time"? It is actually incalculable! But if we contemplate this using the eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha as coordinate, we know that time is an establishment (construct) based on the order of series of successions. It is the product of our mind's discernment and comparison of consecutive moments. If we ponder from the perspective of the eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha, we will not fall into the antinomy of time being finite or infinite. We will then be able to arrive at the conclusion that our individual eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha gives rise to the five aggregates of each of us and we can meet because we exist simultaneously in the same space and time. Our individual's eighth consciousness

tathāgatagarbha is not constrained by time and space. It produces all kinds of dharmas and ourselves in different successions. Each eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha has strong dharma nature (intrinsic nature) that is indestructible. The only exception when the tathāgatagarbha will not give rise to the five aggregates is when someone, after following the teachings of the Buddha on the sound-hearer path, enters remainderless nirvana. In that case, the tathāgatagarbha will not produce (give birth to) the five-aggregates and there will not be the difference between the before and after moments. When that happens, the tathāgatagarbha dwells alone in the dharma realm and no one can find and pin-point its existence anywhere.

Therefore, sentient beings' five aggregates are produced by their own eighth consciousnesses tathāgatagarbhas continuously in every single moment, and these sentient beings exist in the same time and space in the dharma realm—such is the reality of the dharma realm. With the rising of the five aggregates, we can perform all kinds of deeds; due to these deeds, we have immeasurable future lives; due to these immeasurable future lives, we have the opportunity to become Buddhas eventually. If we do not follow the Buddha's teachings and trust that there is an eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha in each of us, we will not be able to establish the concept of beginningless and, hence, will not have faith in our ability or opportunity to become Buddhas; consequently, we will not have the incentive to practice the way to attain Buddhahood.

In order to understand the meaning of beginningless, we have to believe and accept the non-arising of the eighth consciousness tathāgatagarbha. Only through believing and accepting that each of our own tathāgatagarbha has existed since the beginningless eon can we rely on this unwavering understanding to gradually establish the understanding of the concept of

beginningless and advance on the path of ultimate liberation—the Path of Attaining Buddhahood.

