

The Three Meanings of Life and Measure

What the Buddha’s “Eternal Lifespan” Actually Claims

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This is Chapter Two of The Eternal Lifespan, Volume Four of The Lotus Sutra for the Modern Reader. It is reproduced complete and unaltered, with its citations intact. Sources are given to the Taishō canon so that every claim can be checked against the text it comes from.

To the modern mind, “life” is a biological event that has a start date and an end date. “Measure” is the tool we use to track the dwindling time between those two points. We measure our lives in years, our projects in months, and our distractions in minutes. We live under the weight of the “countdown.” We treat our existence as a finite bank account that we are constantly drawing from, with no way to make a deposit.

But in the sixteenth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, the Buddha shatters this linear arithmetic. He reveals that his “Measure” is incalculable and his “Life” is eternal. To understand how this is possible without falling into mere mythological inflation, we must look through the eyes of the sixth-century Tiantai master **Zhiyi**.

Zhiyi recognized that the “Lifespan” chapter is not just about the length of time the Buddha has been around. It is a technical deconstruction of the structure of existence itself. He begins his commentary in the *Fǎhuá Wénjù* (法華文句, *Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, T1718)¹ by refuting earlier scholars who forced a one-sided view on the Buddha, mistakenly arguing that the Buddha’s lifespan was strictly finite (impermanent) or strictly infinite (static). Some scholars of his day insisted that the Buddha was a historical human whose 80 years were the whole story. Others, influenced by certain Mahāyāna currents, argued that the Buddha was an eternal cosmic principle who merely “appeared” to die. Zhiyi’s breakthrough was to show that the Buddha’s life effortlessly encompasses both and transcends both.

¹ Zhiyi, *Fǎhuá Wénjù* (法華文句, T1718.34.145c–147a), commentary on *Lotus Sutra* Ch. 16. Zhiyi refutes scholars who argued the Buddha’s lifespan was strictly finite or strictly infinite, demonstrating that it transcends both categories.

The Technical Definitions: Life as Receptacle, Measure as Gauge

In his *Fǎhuá Wénjù* (法華文句, T1718)² commentary on the *Lotus Sutra*'s sixteenth chapter, Zhiyi begins by stripping these words of their mundane biological associations and returning them to their philological and meditative roots. This is characteristic of his method: he does not dismiss language, but he refuses to let conventional usage dictate theological truth. He treats Chinese characters as **portals** rather than labels.

Life (壽 - *shou*) as “To Receive” (受 - *shou*)

Zhiyi defines “Life” as “**to receive or accept.**”

In this technical register, life is not a duration; it is a **receptacle**. It is the capacity of a sentient being to receive, hold, and manifest the truth of the universe. To have “eternal life” is not to live forever in a physical body; it is to have an infinite capacity to receive the Dharma. Life is the “subjective” side of the equation: the practitioner’s ability to be a “node” for the truth. When we say the Buddha’s life is eternal, we are saying his capacity to hold the total reality of the cosmos is absolute and unshakeable.

This philological move is profound. The character 壽 (life, longevity) and the character 受 (to receive, to accept) share the same pronunciation (*shou*) and are etymologically related in Zhiyi’s exegetical system. Zhiyi is not playing word games. He is pointing to a **structural feature of existence**: to be alive is to be a receiver. A dead thing is a closed system. A living thing is an open system, receiving light, receiving nutrients, receiving information, receiving the Dharma. The “length” of a life is not how many years it lasts. It is **how much it can receive**.

Think of it this way: a small cup and a vast ocean both “exist,” but their capacity to hold water is radically different. The Buddha’s “life” is not the cup that runs dry. It is the ocean that cannot be exhausted. And here is the crucial point: Zhiyi says this ocean is not “out there.” It is **your own nature**, when fully realized.

Measure (量 - *liang*) as “To Evaluate” (詮量 - *quan-liang*)

Zhiyi defines “Measure” as “**to interpret or evaluate.**”

Measure is the cognitive and evaluative tool used to determine the depth, reach, and impact of that truth. If “Life” is the receptacle, “Measure” is the gauge that tells us how much the truth has permeated the field. Measure is the “objective” side of the equation: the external validation of the internal realization. The Buddha’s “Measure” is immeasurable because the impact of his awakening is infinite in scope.

But Zhiyi adds a twist: measure is not just “how much” but “**how deeply.**” The same teaching, received by two different practitioners, will produce different measures of transformation. One

² Zhiyi, *Fǎhuá Wénjù* (法華文句, T1718.34.145c–147a), commentary on *Lotus Sutra* Ch. 16. Zhiyi refutes scholars who argued the Buddha’s lifespan was strictly finite or strictly infinite, demonstrating that it transcends both categories.

practitioner hears the *Lotus Sutra* and is mildly inspired. Another hears it and their entire life reorients. The difference is not in the teaching. The difference is in the **measuring instrument**: the depth and openness of the receiver.

This is why the *Lotus Sutra* says the Buddha's measure is "immeasurable, boundless." It is not that the Buddha has "more" than others in a quantitative sense. It is that the Buddha's receptacle is so perfectly attuned to the Dharma that the distinction between "inside" and "outside" collapses. The ocean does not "contain" water. The ocean **is** water.

By redefining these terms, Zhiyi moves the conversation from biology to **ontology**. He argues that the Buddha does not have a single, static lifespan. Instead, the Buddha's life functions across three distinct dimensions, known as the **Three Bodies** (*Trikaya*).

The Trikaya Framework: The Three Layers of Reality

Zhiyi systematically evaluates the eternity and impermanence of the Buddha across these three registers, providing the "structural map" for the Eternal Lifespan. His method is not to choose one register as "true" and dismiss the others as "provisional." His method is to show how all three are **simultaneously operative**, like three frequencies of the same broadcast.

1. The Dharmakaya (法身): The Life of Principle

The **Dharmakaya** is the "Body of Truth" or the "Body of Principle." Zhiyi calls its lifespan the **"life of principle"** (*ru-li-ming*).

This is the absolute ground of reality: the laws of physics, the structure of emptiness, the inherent potential for awakening that exists in every atom of the universe. This body's nature and characteristics exist eternally, regardless of whether a Buddha appears in the world or not. It is the "Original" in its most fundamental, unmanifested form. It is not "created" by the Buddha. It is **discovered** by the Buddha, as it is by every practitioner who follows the same path of recognition.

Is it eternal? Zhiyi's answer is characteristically non-dual: it is **"neither eternal nor impermanent"** (*fei-chang-fei-wu-chang*). This is the most technical point in his exegesis. To call the Dharmakaya "eternal" would be to treat it as a "thing" that lasts a long time. But the Dharmakaya is not a thing; it is the *field* in which time itself occurs. It is like the ocean: the individual waves (the Traces) appear and disappear, but the water (the Root) is neither "appearing" nor "disappearing." It is the ultimate extreme of principle (雙非理極) that completely shatters the delusions of both ordinary beings (who fear the end of the wave) and sages (who seek the end of the wave in a void).³

Zhiyi's formulation here draws on the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* of Nāgārjuna,⁴ the foundational text of the Madhyamaka tradition. Nāgārjuna demonstrated that all dharmas are "empty" of inherent existence—neither existent nor non-existent, neither eternal nor impermanent. Zhiyi

³ Zhiyi, *Fǎhuá Xuányì* (法華玄義, T1716.33.764c): the Dharmakaya lifespan is designated 雙非理極 (the ultimate principle that transcends both poles). See also *Fǎhuá Wénjù*, T1718.34.146a.

takes this Madhyamaka logic and **applies it specifically to the Buddha's lifespan**, showing that the Dharmakaya is the “empty” nature of reality itself. It is not “something” that persists. It is the **persistence of the structure** that allows all somethings to arise and pass.

For the practitioner, this means that the most fundamental layer of your life is **unborn and undying**. It is not “yours” in the sense of personal property. It is the structural integrity of the cosmos, expressing itself through your particular form. When you die, this layer does not die. It does not “survive” either. It simply **continues being what it always was**: the field in which all births and deaths occur.

2. The Sambhogakaya (報身): The Life of Wisdom

The **Sambhogakaya** is the “Reward Body” or the “Body of Wisdom.” Zhiyi defines its lifespan as the **“life of wisdom” (zhi-hui-ming)**.

This body is generated when ultimate, perfected wisdom perfectly unites with the ultimate objective realm. It is the “Body of Bliss” that results from eons of dedicated practice and the accumulation of merit. It is the “Original” life as an active, conscious force. Unlike the Dharmakaya, which is unmanifested principle, the Sambhogakaya is **awakened awareness**: the knowing that knows itself.

Is it eternal? Its “measure” changes based on spiritual progression. Before a practitioner reaches the ultimate **“diamond-like mind”** (the final stage of bodhisattva practice, in which the last subtle delusions are shattered), this wisdom appears finite and measurable. It is still being built. The practitioner can feel their wisdom growing, deepening, expanding. There is a sense of “not yet,” a recognition that the full measure has not been attained.

But once the diamond mind is surpassed, and the union of wisdom and reality is complete, it becomes entirely **immeasurable and eternal**. In his fourfold analysis, Zhiyi designates the

Sambhogakaya strictly as **“eternal” (常)**.⁵ It is light that does not cast a shadow; it is a realization that, once attained, can never be lost or diminished. This is not because the practitioner has “grabbed” something and refuses to let go. It is because the realization is **structurally irreversible**. Once you have seen that the wave is water, you cannot unsee it. The knowledge does not “wear off.”

The Sambhogakaya is the bridge between the absolute and the relative. It is where the **principle becomes personal**. The Dharmakaya is the same for all Buddhas. The Sambhogakaya is the unique wisdom-flavor of each Buddha's awakening, the particular way infinite wisdom

⁴ Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (中論, T1564.30.1a–36c), Ch. 15: 不一亦不異，不常亦不斷 (neither one nor different, neither eternal nor annihilated). The Madhyamaka logic of the “Middle Way” between all dichotomies is the philosophical foundation for Zhiyi's non-dual analysis of the Buddha's lifespan.

⁵ Zhiyi, *Fāhuá Wénjù* (法華文句, T1718.34.146b): the Sambhogakaya lifespan is designated 常 (eternal), “immeasurable and eternal” (無量無邊) once the diamond mind is attained.

expresses itself through a particular history of practice. It is the “reward” not of compensation but of **completion**.

3. The Nirmanakaya (應身): The Life of Response

The **Nirmanakaya** is the “Manifestation Body” or “Response Body”: the physical, historical form we see, like the Śākyamuni who walked the earth in India. Zhiyi defines its lifespan as the **“life of responding to conditions”** (*tong-yuan-ming*).

Is it eternal? This is where the Buddha’s lifespan appears impermanent. Its measurement depends entirely on the situational needs of the beings it is saving: “if conditions are long, it is long; if conditions are short, it is short” (隨緣則有量). This is the “Trace.” The Buddha manifests as a human who ages and dies to prevent us from becoming complacent. If the Buddha remained eternally visible in a single form, we would take his presence for granted. We would never develop the Seeking Heart. We would remain spiritual infants, forever dependent on the Father’s physical presence.

However, Zhiyi adds a vital caveat: because the Buddha’s compassionate application of this body never ceases, because he is *always* manifesting somewhere, in some form, to save someone, it is simultaneously **immeasurable** (應用不斷則無量). Therefore, he designates this body as **“both eternal and impermanent”** (*yi-chang-yi-wu-chang*). It is “eternal” in its constant availability, but “impermanent” in its specific, localized appearances. The Buddha is like a master actor who “dies” on stage every night, only to return for the next performance.⁶

This is the body we know best. It is the body that suffers, eats, teaches, and dies. It is the body that makes the Dharma **accessible** to beings trapped in biological existence. Without the Nirmanakaya, the Dharmakaya would be too abstract to touch us, and the Sambhogakaya would be too vast to recognize us. The Nirmanakaya is the **hand of the infinite reaching into the finite**.

Zhiyi’s genius was to show that while these three are distinct in their function, they are **“inconceivably one”** (本迹雖殊不思議一也). The historical traces could not exist without the eternal root to project them, and the eternal root could not save beings without manifesting as historical traces. This is not a paradox to be solved. It is a reality to be inhabited. The wave is not “partly” water and “partly” wave. It is **fully** water and **fully** wave. The Buddha is fully Dharmakaya, fully Sambhogakaya, and fully Nirmanakaya; these three “fullnesses” are not three separate things. They are **one fullness, perceived from three angles**.

⁶ Zhiyi, *Fǎhuá Wénjù* (法華文句, T1718.34.146c): the Nirmanakaya lifespan is 無常 in specific manifestation but 常 in availability—“eternal in responding, impermanent in form” (應常形無常).

The Three Meanings as a Practice Map

Zhiyi's Three Meanings are not just theology. They are a **diagnostic tool** for the practitioner. When you feel trapped in Finitude Panic, you can ask yourself: "Which body am I identifying with right now?"

- If you feel like a specimen running out of time, you are **over-identifying with the Nirmanakaya**. You have forgotten that your physical form is a response to conditions, not the boundary of your existence.
- If you feel spiritually superior, detached from the world's suffering, you are **over-identifying with the Dharmakaya**. You have mistaken the principle for the practice. You are trying to live as the ocean while ignoring the waves.
- If you feel that your practice is pointless because you will "never get there," you are **misunderstanding the Sambhogakaya**. You think wisdom is a destination rather than a deepening. You do not yet trust that the "diamond mind" is not a trophy to be won but a **natural state** to be uncovered.

The healthy practitioner moves fluidly between all three identifications, like a musician moving between instruments. In meditation, you rest in the Dharmakaya. In study, you cultivate the Sambhogakaya. In service, you manifest the Nirmanakaya. The goal is not to "choose" one body. The goal is to **recognize that all three are always already operative**.

Annen's Maximum Extension: The Four Unities

The ninth-century Tendai scholar-monk **Annen** (841–?)⁷ took Zhiyi's Trikaya framework and pushed it to its logical extreme. In his treatises on the Essential Teaching (*honmon*), Annen formulated what became known as the "**Four Unities**" (*ichibutsu, ichiji, issho, ikkyō*): the doctrine that all Buddhas, across all times and spaces, are ultimately **one Buddha, one time, one place, and one teaching**.

Annen was writing in a period of intense doctrinal synthesis. Japanese Tendai was absorbing influences from Chinese Tiantai, esoteric Buddhism, and Pure Land thought. Annen's Four Unities were his way of **cutting through the complexity** to the essential unity beneath. He saw that Zhiyi's Trikaya had opened the door to a non-dual understanding of the Buddha's life, but that most practitioners were still compartmentalizing, treating the Dharmakaya as "philosophy,"

⁷ Annen (安然), *Shingonshū kyōjigi* (真言宗教時義, T2396, Taishō vol. 75): within his fivefold (*gokyō*) classification—set above the standard Tendai fourfold (*shikyō*)—Annen posits **one Buddha, one time, one place, one teaching** (一仏・一時・一処・一教), by which all Buddhism of the three times and ten directions is subsumed through Dainichi (Mahāvairocana). (I use "Four Unities" for Annen's set to avoid collision with Zhiyi's 四一, the "Four Ones" of the One Vehicle—one teaching (教一), one practice (行一), one person (人一), one principle (理一) [Soothill–Hodous]; Annen's is a distinct, esoteric set.) [Citation corrected 2026-06-03.]

the Sambhogakaya as “mysticism,” and the Nirmanakaya as “history.” Annen’s Four Unities say: **no compartments. One field.**

The Four Unities Explained

1. **One Buddha (一仏 *ichibutsu*):** There is a single cosmic Buddha. The Buddhas of the ten directions—Amida, Yakushi, even the historical Śākyamuni—are not separate beings but expressions of the one Dharma-body Buddha, Mahāvairocana (*Dainichi*). For Annen’s Taimitsu (Tendai esotericism), this is the esoteric reading of the *Lotus*’s own revelation: the eternal Śākyamuni disclosed in Ch. 16 is none other than Dainichi, the cosmic Buddha whose body is the universe. The “Original” Buddha is singular and all-encompassing; Amida is not “another” Buddha but that one Buddha appearing as infinite light for beings who need that frequency.
2. **One Time (一時 *ichi-ji*):** All teaching occurs in one time—the **eternal now**. For Annen this is the unity of the *time of preaching* (説法の時): the sermon at Vulture Peak, the awakening in the remote past, and your present-moment reading of this sentence are not strung along a line but occur in a single, non-dual moment of the one Buddha’s preaching. Time is not a line. It is a **depth**.
3. **One Place (一処 *issho*):** All teaching occurs in one place—for Annen, the unity of the *place of preaching* (説法の処), the cosmic Dharma-realm without center or boundary (*issaisho*). *Extending this beyond Annen’s literal claim* (the synthesis we develop in Ch. 6 as *shaba soku jakkōdo*): if the locus of all teaching is one, then all Buddha-lands—the Pure Land of Amida, the Medicine Buddha’s Lapis Lazuli World, the Sahā world of our daily experience—are that same place, the **Land of Ever-Tranquil Light** (*Jakkō-do*), perceived at different frequencies.
4. **One Teaching (一教 *ikkyō*):** All teachings are one teaching. The countless doctrines the Buddhas expound—provisional and ultimate, exoteric and esoteric—reduce to a single, all-encompassing vehicle. For Annen, this One Teaching is the esoteric absolute in which even the *Lotus*’s One Vehicle (*ekayāna*) is taken up: there are not many competing Dharmas but one teaching, adapting its surface to every capacity while remaining, at root, the self-expression of the one Buddha.

Annen’s Four Unities describe the *field*, not yet your motion within it—but the field has a direct consequence for practice. If there is one Buddha, one time, one place, one teaching, then your own practice is not a private effort straining toward a distant goal; it is participation in a field that is already whole. This is the bridge to the *Lotus*’s One Vehicle: the many skillful means are one teaching, and that one teaching is enacted as your practice. Whether you chant, meditate, study, or serve, you are not adding to the field—you are the field, recognizing itself.

Annen’s Radical Inclusion

Annen’s “Four Unities” represents the **maximum extension** of the Trikaya doctrine. Where Zhiyi provided the technical architecture, Annen declared its universal implications: **there is**

nothing outside the Buddha's lifespan. Every being, every place, every time, and every practice is already encompassed by the Eternal Lifespan.

For the modern practitioner, this means: * You are not practicing *to become* a Buddha. You are practicing *as* the Buddha that Annen says you already are. * Your environment is not a defiled land waiting to be purified. It is the Land of Ever-Tranquil Light waiting to be recognized. * Your practice is not one option among many. It is the one field enacting itself through your particular conditions. * Your enemies are not outside the field. They are the One Buddha, suffering from the delusion of separation, just as you once did.

Annen's doctrine is the philosophical foundation for the **Sacred Ecology** we will explore in Ch. 6. If all places are "One Place," then the tree outside your window is not separate from Vulture Peak. If all times are "One Time," then the assembly has never dispersed.

Connection to the Ongoing Assembly (Vol I)

Annen's "Four Unities" directly connects to the "**Ongoing Assembly**" thesis of Volume I, which Volume I, Ch. 9 ("The eternal assembly") develops most explicitly. The assembly that has "not yet dispersed" is not a historical memory; it is the present-moment reality of the One Time, One Place, One Buddha. When you recite the sutra, you are not recalling a past event. You are **entering the eternal ceremony** that Annen says is always already happening.

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth (Vol I, Ch. 7) are not a distant army waiting to be summoned. They are the One Teaching enacted as practice, manifesting through countless forms, including yours. This is why the sutra says that anyone who undertakes the Five Practices is *already* a Bodhisattva of the Earth. The "recruitment" happened in the remote past; you are already enlisted. You just haven't recognized your uniform.

Modern Benefit: Dimensional Sovereignty

This technical framework is the "intellectual infrastructure" for a modern benefit I call **Dimensional Sovereignty**. It is the ability to choose which layer of your life you are identifying with in any given moment.

Most of our "Finitude Panic" comes from identifying solely with our **Nirmanakaya**, our physical, aging, responding body. We see our physical decline as the "End" of our "Life" because we assume our life is only what is "measured" by the clock. We are specimen-bound. When the doctor gives us a diagnosis, when we see wrinkles in the mirror, when we feel the first aches of aging, we experience them as threats to our **existence** rather than changes in our **form**.

Zhiyi's and Annen's exegesis allows us to perform a **Cognitive Re-Scaling**:

1. **Acknowledge the Nirmanakaya:** Yes, your physical body is responding to conditions. It is subject to aging, illness, and eventual change. This is your "Trace" in the world. It is a vital but temporary vehicle. Do not ignore it (take your medicine, do your work, care for your health), but do not be limited by its duration. The Nirmanakaya is not a prison. It is a **stage**.
2. **Cultivate the Sambhogakaya:** Recognize that your growing wisdom, your internal vow, and your capacity for compassion are **Eternal**. They are the "Original" wealth you have

been carrying. Every time you make a compassionate choice or deepen your understanding, you are “depositing” into a life that becomes immeasurable. This is the part of you that does not “run out.” Your wisdom cannot be taxed, seized, or erased by death. It is the **inheritance** that accumulates across lifetimes.

3. **Rest in the Dharmakaya:** Realize that the fundamental principle of your existence, the fact that you *are* a manifestation of the Law, is **Beyond Time**. You are a node in the field. The structural integrity of your true nature is “neither eternal nor impermanent.” It just **is**. You do not need to “maintain” it. You do not need to “protect” it. It is not yours to lose. It is the **ground** from which you arise.

When we see our life through all three layers simultaneously, we move from being a “specimen” trapped in a dwindling line to being a “proprietor” aware of the **Eternal Field**. We realize that our current physical limitations are merely “skillful manifestations” that allow us to interact with a finite world while remaining anchored in an infinite reality.

Annen’s “Four Unities” takes this further: you are not just a proprietor of your own field. You are a **co-proprietor of the entire cosmos**. The tree, the mountain, the deceased loved one, the stranger on the street: all are manifestations of the One Buddha, enacting the One Teaching, in the One Time, on the One Place.

A Practice: The Three-Body Scan

You can use the Trikaya as a daily meditation:

1. **Nirmanakaya Scan:** Bring attention to your physical body. Feel its weight, its temperature, its aches and pleasures. Acknowledge that this body is responding to conditions. It is temporary, precious, and not the whole story.
2. **Sambhogakaya Scan:** Bring attention to your wisdom, your vow, your compassion. What have you learned? What do you hold sacred? Acknowledge that this wisdom is growing, deepening, and **cannot be lost**.
3. **Dharmakaya Scan:** Rest in awareness itself. Do not focus on any object. Simply be the knowing that knows. Acknowledge that this awareness is not “yours.” It is the **field**, recognizing itself through you.

We have now established the architecture of the field. In the next chapter, we will use the logic of “**Neither Suchness nor Difference**” to see how this architecture provides the logical protection needed to dismantle the finality of death.

Where This Came From

This chapter is drawn from *The Eternal Lifespan*, Volume Four of *The Lotus Sutra for the Modern Reader*. The book is about Chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sutra*, the chapter most readers skip: what it means to say the Buddha's lifespan is immeasurable, and what follows for anyone living under a countdown. It is scheduled for publication in **December 2026**.

If this chapter was useful to you, two books in the same series are available sooner.

The Awakened State: What Buddhist Enlightenment Actually Means is available now. It is the foundational companion to the series: a synthesis of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra, the Lotus Sūtra, Tiantai, Zen, and the esoteric body doctrines, on the single question of what awakening actually is.

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B003R0G4LO>

The Ongoing Assembly: How the Lotus Sutra Holds Those Who Hold It is Volume One of the series, published **August 4, 2026**. It asks who the students of the Lotus Sutra actually are, and finds that the sutra makes the dharma master and the ordinary reader the same category.

New writing appears first at **dwaltig.wordpress.com**, including the essays these books grew out of.

About the Author

William Altig is a Buddhist practitioner, writer, and translator whose work bridges classical Buddhist scholarship and contemporary practice. He trained in the Shambhala tradition under the lineage of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, from whom he received a Bodhisattva name, before making his home in the Tiantai school of Chinese Buddhism. His translations of Zhiyi's *Fahua Xuanyi* and the first volume of the *Mohe Zhiguan* bring two of the foundational Tiantai texts into accessible English for the first time.

He lives and practices in the United States. He reads one chapter of the Lotus Sutra every day.