

爾時佛告長老舍利弗。從是西方過十萬億
 佛土。有世界名曰極樂。其土有佛。號阿彌陀。
 今現在說法。舍利弗。彼土何故名為極樂。其
 國眾生。無有眾苦。但受諸樂。故名極樂。又舍
 利弗。極樂國土。七重欄楯。七重羅網。七重行
 樹。皆是四寶。周匝圍繞。是故彼國名曰極樂。
 又舍利弗。極樂國土。有七寶池。八功德水。充
 滿其中。池底純以金沙布地。四邊階道。金銀
 琉璃。頗梨合成。上有樓閣。亦以金銀琉璃。頗
 梨車磔。赤珠馬瑙。

At that time, the Buddha told the Elder Sariputra, “West of here, passing beyond tens of thousands of millions of Buddha Lands, there is a world called ‘Utmost Bliss.’ In that land there is a buddha named ‘Amitabha’ who has now manifested there to teach the Dharma.”

“Sariputra, why is that land called ‘Utmost Bliss’? The sentient beings in that land are without any kind of suffering, and only enjoy every kind of pleasure, therefore it is called Utmost Bliss.”

“Furthermore, Sariputra, completely encircling the Land of Utmost Bliss are seven tiers of railings, seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees which are all made of the four treasures. For this reason that land is called Utmost Bliss.”

“Furthermore, Sariputra, in the Land of Utmost Bliss there is a pool of seven treasures which is filled with the waters of eight merits, and the ground on the bottom of the pool is covered solely by gold sand. On the four sides there are stairways composed of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal. Above, there are towered pavilions which have gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, nacre, red pearls, and carnelian...

而嚴飾之。池中蓮花大如車輪。青色青光。黃色黃光。赤色赤光。白色白光。微妙香潔。舍利弗。極樂國土。成就如是功德莊嚴。又舍利弗。彼佛國土。常作天樂。黃金為地。晝夜六時。天雨曼陀羅華。其國眾生。常以清旦。各以衣祴。盛眾妙華。供養他方十萬億佛。即以食時。還到本國。飯食經行。舍利弗。極樂國土。成就如是功德莊嚴。復次舍利弗。彼國常有種種奇妙雜色之鳥。白鵠孔雀。鸚鵡。舍利迦陵頻伽。共命之鳥。

...magnificently adorning them. In the pool there are lotus flowers as large as carriage wheels which are blue colored with a blue sheen, yellow colored with a yellow sheen, red colored with a red sheen, and white colored with a white sheen. They are fine, wondrous, fragrant and pure. Sariputra, the Land of Utmost Bliss is complete with meritorious adornments like these.”

“Furthermore, Sariputra, in that Buddha Land heavenly music is constantly played, and the ground is made of yellow gold. Throughout the six periods of day and night the heavens rain down *mandarava* flowers. Early in the morning, the sentient beings in that land always fill the hem of their robes with many wondrous flowers and make offerings to the tens of thousands of millions of buddhas in the other directions, and return by mealtime to eat their food and take their stroll. Sariputra, the Land of Utmost Bliss is complete with meritorious adornments like these.”

“Moreover, Sariputra, in that land there are always various kinds of rare multicolored birds, such as snow geese, peacocks, parrots, *saris*, *kalavinkas*, and birds that are conjoined.”

是諸眾鳥。晝夜六時。出和雅音。其音演暢。五
 根五力。七菩提分。八聖道分。如是等法。其土
 眾生。聞是音已。皆悉念佛。念法。念僧。舍利弗。
 汝勿謂此鳥。實是罪報所生。所以者何。彼佛
 國土。無三惡趣。舍利弗。其佛國土。尚無三惡
 道之名。何況有實。是諸眾鳥。皆是阿彌陀佛。
 欲令法音宣流。變化所作。舍利弗。彼佛國土。
 微風吹動。諸寶行樹。及寶羅網。出微妙音。譬
 如百千種樂。同時俱作。聞是音者。

“Throughout the six periods of day and night all of these various birds sing out in harmonious and elegant voices. Their voices proclaim the five roots, the five powers, the seven aspects of *bodhi*, the eightfold noble path and other Dharma like these. After hearing these voices, all of the sentient beings in that land will be fully mindful of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.”

“Sariputra, you should not claim that these birds are actually reborn as retribution for their offenses. Why is this? Because that Buddha Land is without the three evil realms. Sariputra, that Buddha Land is even without the *names* of the three evil paths, how much more so their real existence. All of these birds are transformationally produced through Amitabha Buddha’s intention to cause the sounds of the Dharma to be widely circulated. Sariputra, when breezes begin to blow in that Buddha Land all of the rows of jeweled trees and jeweled nets will let out a subtle, wondrous sound that is similar to hundreds of thousands of types of music playing simultaneously. When anyone hears the sounds produced...

皆自然生念佛念法念僧之心舍利弗其佛
 國土成就如是功德莊嚴
 舍利弗於汝意云何彼佛何故號阿彌陀舍
 利弗彼佛光明無量照十方國無所障礙是
 故號為阿彌陀又舍利弗彼佛壽命及其人
 民無量無邊阿僧祇劫故名阿彌陀舍利弗
 阿彌陀佛成佛已來於今十劫
 又舍利弗彼佛有無量無邊聲聞弟子皆阿
 羅漢非是算數之所能知諸菩薩亦復如是
 舍利弗彼佛國土成就如是功德莊嚴

...they will spontaneously give rise to a mind that is mindful of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Sariputra, that Buddha Land is complete with meritorious adornments like these.” ❀

“Sariputra, what does your mind have to say? Why is that buddha named ‘Amitabha’?”

“Sariputra, that buddha’s brilliant radiance is immeasurable and illuminates the lands of the ten directions without any obstruction, therefore he is named ‘Amitabha’.”

“Furthermore, Sariputra, the life-span of that buddha and his people last for immeasurable, illimitable *asamkhya kalpas*. Therefore, he is called ‘Amitayus’.”

“Sariputra, it has been ten *kalpas* since Amitabha Buddha attained Buddhahood.” ❀

“Furthermore, Sariputra, that buddha has immeasurable, illimitable *sravaka* disciples all who are *arhats*, whose numbers are not able to be known. All of the bodhisattvas are also like this. Sariputra, that Buddha Land is complete with meritorious adornments like these.”

又舍利弗。極樂國土。眾生
 生者。皆是阿鞞跋致。其中
 多有一生補處。其數甚多。
 非是算數所能知之。但可
 以無量無邊阿僧祇說。舍利
 弗。眾生聞者。應當發願。願
 生彼國。舍利弗。不可以少善
 根福德因緣。得生彼國。舍
 利弗。若有善男子。善女人。聞
 說阿彌陀佛。執持名號。若一
 日。若七日。若二日。若三日。
 若四日。若五日。若六日。若
 七日。一心不亂。其人臨命終
 時。阿彌陀佛與諸聖眾。現在
 其前。

“Furthermore, Sariputra, the sentient beings who are born in the Land of Utmost Bliss are all *avaivartikas*, and among them there are many who will become buddhas in one more rebirth. Their numbers are extremely vast, and no calculation is able to know them. One could only speak of them in terms of immeasurable, illimitable *asamkhyas*.” ❀

“Sariputra, sentient beings who hear this should set forth a vow to wish to be reborn in that land. Why is this? Because they will be able to meet with all of the utmost virtuous people like these in a single place.”

“Sariputra, it is not possible to obtain rebirth in that land with few virtuous roots or meritorious causes and conditions. Sariputra, if virtuous men and women hear Amitabha Buddha mentioned and hold firmly to his name for one day, two days, three, four, five, six or seven days, whole-heartedly without distraction, then when these people near the end of their life Amitabha Buddha will appear in front of them with a host of sages.”

是人終時心不顛倒即得往生阿彌陀佛極
 樂國土舍利弗我見是利故說此言若有眾
 生聞是說者應當發願生彼國土
 舍利弗如我今者讚歎阿彌陀佛不可思議
 功德東方亦有阿閼鞞佛須彌相佛大須彌
 佛須彌光佛妙音佛如是等恒河沙數諸佛
 各於其國出廣長舌相遍覆三千大千世界
 說誠實言汝等眾生當信是稱讚不可思議
 功德一切諸佛所護念經舍利弗南方世界
 有日月燈佛名聞光佛大焰肩佛

“In the final moments, if the minds of these people are not distorted, then they will be able to be reborn in Amitabha Buddha’s Land of Utmost Bliss.”

“Sariputra, I recognize these benefits, therefore I proclaim these words: ‘If there are sentient beings who hear this spoken they should set forth a vow to be reborn in that land.’” ❀

“Sariputra, similar to me now, there are also those in the eastern region who praise the inconceivable merits of Amitabha Buddha, such as Aksobya Buddha, Emblem of Sumeru Buddha, Great Sumeru Buddha, Sumeru Brilliance Buddha, Wondrous Voice Buddha, and other buddhas like these who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. From their own lands, they each extend their characteristic long, broad tongues completely covering the *trichiliocosm*. They then speak these sincere and true words: ‘Sentient beings, you should believe in the *Sutra on Praising the Inconceivable Merits Which All Buddhas Protect and Keep in Mind*.’”

“Sariputra, in the southern region there is Solar and Lunar Lamp Buddha, Renowned Brilliance Buddha, Shoulders of Great Flame Buddha...

須彌燈佛無量精進佛如是等恒河沙數諸
 佛各於其國出廣長舌相遍覆三千大千世
 界說誠實言汝等眾生當信是稱讚不可思
 議功德一切諸佛所護念經舍利弗西方世
 界有無量壽佛無量相佛如是等恒河沙數諸
 大光明寶相佛淨光佛如是等恒河沙數諸
 佛各於其國出廣長舌相遍覆三千大千世
 界說誠實言汝等眾生當信是稱讚不可思
 議功德一切諸佛所護念經舍利弗北方世
 界有焰肩佛

...Beacon of Sumeru Buddha, Immeasurable Vigor Buddha, and other buddhas like these who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. From their own lands, they each extend their characteristic long, broad tongues completely covering the *trichiliocosm*. They then speak these sincere and true words: ‘Sentient beings, you should believe in the *Sutra on Praising the Inconceivable Merits Which All Buddhas Protect and Keep in Mind.*’”

“Sariputra, in the western region there is Immeasurable Life Buddha, Immeasurable Emblem Buddha, Immeasurable Banner Buddha, Great Brilliance Buddha, Great Radiance Buddha, Treasure Emblem Buddha, Pure Brilliance Buddha, and other buddhas like these who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. From their own lands, they each extend their characteristic long, broad tongues completely covering the *trichiliocosm*. They then speak these sincere and true words: ‘Sentient beings, you should believe in the *Sutra on Praising the Inconceivable Merits Which All Buddhas Protect and Keep in Mind.*’”

“Sariputra, in the northern region there is Flaming Shoulders Buddha...

最勝音佛。難沮佛。日生佛。網明佛。如是等恒
 河沙數諸佛。各於其國。出廣長舌相。遍覆三
 千大千世界。說誠實言。汝等眾生。當信是稱
 讚不可思議功德。一切諸佛所護念經。舍利
 弗。下方世界。有師子佛。名聞佛。名光佛。達摩
 佛。法幢佛。持法佛。如是等恒河沙數諸佛。各
 於其國。出廣長舌相。遍覆三千大千世界。說
 誠實言。汝等眾生。當信是稱讚不可思議功
 德。一切諸佛所護念經。舍利弗。上方世界。有
 梵音佛。宿王佛。

...Insurmountable Voice Buddha, Unconquerable Buddha, Sunrise Buddha, Net Radiance Buddha, and other buddhas like these who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. From their own lands, they each extend their characteristic long, broad tongues completely covering the *trichiliocosm*. They then speak these sincere and true words: ‘Sentient beings, you should believe in the *Sutra on Praising the Inconceivable Merits Which All Buddhas Protect and Keep in Mind*.’”

“Sariputra, in the lower region there is Lion Buddha, Renowned Buddha, Acclaimed Brilliance Buddha, Dharma Buddha, Dharma Banner Buddha, Upholding the Dharma Buddha, and other buddhas like these who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. From their own lands, they each extend their characteristic long, broad tongues completely covering the *trichiliocosm*. They then speak these sincere and true words: ‘Sentient beings, you should believe in the *Sutra on Praising the Inconceivable Merits Which All Buddhas Protect and Keep in Mind*.’”

“Sariputra, in the upper region there is Brahma Voice Buddha, Constellation King Buddha...

香上佛。香光佛。大焰肩佛。雜色寶華嚴身佛。
娑羅樹王佛。寶華德佛。見一切義佛。如須彌
山佛。如是等恒河沙數諸佛。各於其國。出廣
長舌相。遍覆三千大千世界。說誠實言。汝等
眾生。當信是稱讚不可思議功德。一切諸佛
所護念經。✽
舍利弗。於汝意云何。何故名為一切諸佛所
護念經。舍利弗。若有善男子善女人。聞是經
受持者。及聞諸佛名者。是諸善男子善女人。
皆為一切諸佛共所護念。

...Foremost Fragrance Buddha, Fragrant Brilliance Buddha, Shoulders of Great Flame Buddha, Multicolored Jeweled Flower Adornment Body Buddha, King of the Sala Tree Buddha, Jeweled Flower Virtue Buddha, Discerning All Meanings Buddha, Sumeru-like Buddha, and other buddhas like these who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River. From their own lands, they each extend their characteristic long, broad tongues completely covering the *trichiliocosm*. They then speak these sincere and true words: ‘Sentient beings, you should believe in the *Sutra on Praising the Inconceivable Merits Which All Buddhas Protect and Keep in Mind.*’ ✽

“Sariputra, what does your mind have to say? Why is it called *The Sutra Which All Buddhas Protect and Keep in Mind?*”

“Sariputra, if there are those virtuous men and women who hear this sutra and receive and retain it, and hear of the name of all the buddhas, then all of these virtuous men and women are protected and kept in mind by all buddhas.”

皆得不退轉於阿耨多羅三藐三菩提是故
 舍利弗。汝等皆當信受我語及諸佛所說舍
 利弗。若有人已發願。今發願。當發願。欲生阿
 彌陀佛國者。是諸人等。皆得不退轉於阿耨
 多羅三藐三菩提。於彼國土。若已生。若今生。
 若當生。是故舍利弗。諸善男子。善女人。若有
 信者。應當發願。生彼國土。舍利弗。如我今者。
 稱讚諸佛不可思議功德。彼諸佛等亦稱說
 我不可思議功德。而作是言。釋迦牟尼佛能
 為甚難希有之事。

“All of them will attain non-retrogression from *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*. For this reason, Sariputra, all of you should believe and receive my words, and those of all buddhas.”

“Sariputra, if there are those who have already set forth a vow, or who are presently setting forth a vow, or who will set forth a vow wanting to be reborn in the land of Amitabha Buddha, then all of these people will attain non-retrogression from *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*, whether they are already born, presently being born, or will be born in that land.”

“For this reason, Sariputra, if there are those virtuous men and women who have belief, they should set forth a vow to be reborn in that land.”

“Sariputra, just as I now praise the inconceivable merits of all buddhas, those buddhas also commend my inconceivable merits, proclaiming these words: ‘Sakyamuni Buddha is able to accomplish extremely difficult and rare feats.

阿彌陀經

能於娑婆國土五濁惡世劫濁見濁煩惱濁
 眾生濁命濁中得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提為
 諸眾生說是一切世間難信之法舍利弗當
 知我於五濁惡世行此難事得阿耨多羅三
 藐三菩提為一切世間說此難信之法是為
 甚難。佛說此經已舍利弗及諸比丘一切世間天
 人阿修羅等聞佛所說歡喜信受作禮而去。

He is able in the Saha land amid the evil period of the five degenerations – the decay of the *kalpa*, the deterioration of views, the delusion of the *klesas*, the decline of sentient beings, and the diminishing of life-spans – to attain *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*. For all sentient beings he teaches in every world this Dharma that is hard to believe.”

“Sariputra, you should know, I practiced these difficult feats during the evil period of five degenerations, attaining *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*, and in every world taught this Dharma that is hard to believe. This is extremely difficult.”

After the Buddha spoke this sutra, Sariputra and all of the *bhiksus*, and *devas*, humans, and *asuras* of all worldly realms heard and rejoiced in what the Buddha said, faithfully accepted it. Having made obeisance they then departed.

Amitabha Sutra



SUTRA INTRODUCTION



AMITABHA SUTRA

The *Amitābha Sutra* occupies one of the most prominent positions among Buddhist devotional scriptures in East Asia today.¹ It is commonly considered one of a core group of texts that elaborate on the paradisiacal nature of the land watched over by Amitābha Buddha and describe the means for the faithful to be reborn there. Such elaborations have long captured the imagination of Buddhist practitioners, as descriptions of bounty and beauty coincide with discussions of the delightful ease with which people might learn the profound teachings of the Buddha. Due to this allure, depictions of this paradise and its caretaker are found in abundance in the Buddhist arts of East Asia. Also, in terms of its linguistic virtues, the popularity can also be traced to the elegance

¹ The Chinese version translated here was adapted from the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter abbreviated as T), ed. Takakusu Junjirō, Watanabe Kaigyoku, and Ono Gemmyō, 100 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924~1935); vol 12, no. 366.

offered by the Chinese text itself and the brevity in which the narrative unfolds, allowing the entire sutra to be chanted aloud – or read to one’s self – in less than twenty minutes. The far ranging impact this sutra has had on East Asian Buddhist philosophy, religious practice, and material culture cannot be underestimated.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the popularity of Amitābha in East Asia is counterbalanced by his relative obscurity and questionable origins in India, the originary matrix of the historical Buddha and his teachings. Scholarly debates over the last century and a half have questioned whether endemic Indian Buddhist beliefs could have provided satisfactory antecedents for the forging of Amitābha’s identity. Earlier scholarship tends to hypothesize that religious beliefs native to Persia (modern day Iran) travelling along the Silk Road might have played a role in establishing ideological foundations that gave rise to belief in Amitābha.²

² For an example of 19th century scholarship see: Eitel, Ernest J. *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism Being a Sanskrit-Chinese Dictionary*. 2nd ed. rev and enl. (London: Trübner &

Tentative connections have been made between Amitābha, whose name literally means “immeasurable light,” and Zoroastrian beliefs in Ahura Mazda who was associated with light and fire. Also, the soteriological beliefs in being transported to a land of paradise after death, as we find in the *Amitābha Sutra*, have been claimed to have more in common with doctrines originating on Persian soil than in India. These arguments notwithstanding, the evidence remains little more than circumstantial, and modern scholarship tends to argue that the precursors of Amitābha can be equally and satisfactorily explained with reference to native Indian conceptions.³ Perhaps a multicultural synthesis is preferable as the strong Persian and Hellenistic influences found in northern India during the first century CE indicate

Co., 1888), pp. 7-9.

³ For an example of 21st century scholarship see: Hartmann, Jens-Uwe. “Buddhism in Central Asia,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (MacMillan Reference Books, 2005), p. 1147. A general overview can be found in Kōtatsu, Fujita. “Pure Land Buddhism in India,” in *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development*, eds. James Foard, Michael Solomon, Richard K. Payne. (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies, 1996), pp. 1-42.



the possibility that Amitābha was an amalgam of differing cultural beliefs, and not the product of a singular cultural sphere.

Considering the popularity of Amitābha in East Asia it is perhaps surprising to find a lack of evidence for widespread devotional worship of Amitābha in northern India. Apart from a donative rock inscription found in Mathurā, which can perhaps be dated to 153 CE, and a later inscription from Sāñcī datable to the late seventh century, there is no other explicit reference to Amitābha Buddha in epigraphical remains thus found in India.⁴ This is all the more surprising since there are dozens of inscriptions all over India by the fifth century firmly establishing the presence of Mahayana Buddhism, the overarching Buddhist movement under which Amitābha is characteristically subsumed. Furthermore, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Faxian 法顯 and Xuanzang 玄奘, who traveled to India in the early

⁴ Schopen, Gregory. “The Inscription on the Kusān Image of Amitābha and the Character of the Early Mahayana in India,” in *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005).



fifth and mid-seventh century respectively, make no remarks regarding worship of Amitābha in India.⁵ It seems, judging from the evidence available to us for the moment, that while Amitābha Buddha casts a great presence in East Asian Buddhism, he had little discernable impact on the development of Buddhism in India.

While Amitābha might have been on the cultural periphery in India, central themes in the texts which bear his name were almost certainly connected to Indian Mahayana thinkers. In the *Amitābha Sutra* we find that bodhisattvas like Mañjuśrī, who symbolizes the embodiment of wisdom, are present in the assembly which has gathered to hear the discourse of the Buddha, and countless numbers of bodhisattvas are also found dwelling in the land of Amitābha. The presence of these characters, along with the constant encouragement for sentient beings to strive for *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*, the complete and perfect enlightenment of the

⁵ A Song Dynasty biography of Huiri 慧日 (d. 748) claims however that he heard praise of Amitābha's Land of Utmost Bliss when he traveled to India in the beginning of the eighth century. See T50: 2061.890b10.

Buddha, imply the abandonment of older notions of the ideal path to enlightenment, embodied by the *arhats*, and are some of the hallmarks of Mahayana thought.

Furthermore, the cosmology posited by pre-Mahayana Buddhists was constituted by only a single world, the one in which we lived. And while multiple buddhas may have existed in the temporal sequence of history, there was never more than one buddha that existed at any given period of time. With the evolution of Mahayana, the Buddhist cosmos was greatly expanded to include an indefinite number of worlds beyond ours (more appropriately termed “Buddha Lands” here), giving an equally indefinite number of buddhas a place of residence. Indeed in our text there are no less than thirty-eight other buddhas hailing from Buddha Lands in the six regions of space (north, south, east, west, zenith, and nadir) mentioned besides Śākyamuni Buddha residing in our Sahā world (see Appendix).

Themes like these assume the reader is already familiar with Mahayana doctrines, and the

Amitābha Sutra makes no attempt to explain their existence or presence and accepts them as doctrinal truths. Most of the explanation and description in this text is centered around the magnificence of Amitābha and his paradise, which is followed by praise offered by seemingly countless other buddhas. Because of the exalted status of this land, sentient beings are encouraged by the Buddha to put forth vows to be reborn there. However, the extended worship of Amitābha and correlate practices leading to rebirth in his land apparently do not appear on a widespread level until Amitābha moves beyond the boundaries of India.

The textual transmission of Amitābha from his cultural confines in India and Central Asia into China followed the well-established trade route known as the Silk Road, spanning from northwestern India, into the oasis kingdoms of the Tarim Basin, and finally entering the ancient Chinese metropolises. If we consider only the translations that are presumably authentic (and still existent), one of the earliest and most important records of Amitābha in China is through the

translation of the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra* by Lokakṣema 支婁迦讖 who was active in Luoyang in the latter half of the second century CE.⁶ The *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra* offers particular concentration practices that enable devotees to visualize Amitābha Buddha, but it in no way contains the in-depth description and praise of Amitābha's paradise that are present in the *Amitābha Sutra*.

Lokakṣema, interestingly, also translated a sutra praising Akṣobhya Buddha, the counterpart of Amitābha who resided in the east and tended to a magnificent paradise there.⁷ Akṣobhya is also mentioned in Lokakṣema's translation of the

⁶ The *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra* 般舟三昧經 can be found at T nos. 416 – 419. For further information on this text see Harrison, Paul. *The Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra*. (Berkeley: Numata Center, 1998). Lokakṣema is traditionally believed to have translated a text based on the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sutra* (see 無量清淨平等覺經; T no. 361), however, the authenticity of this attribution to has been called into question and the text is generally believed to have been translated after the middle of the third century CE.

⁷ *Akṣobhya-tathāgatasya-vyūha Sutra* 阿閼佛國經; T no. 313.

Eight Thousand Line Prajñāpāramitā Sutra.⁸ Due to these factors it has been suggested that the paradise of Amitābha Buddha was originally not as popular as Akṣobhya's paradise, especially in the Kushan Empire in northwestern India, where Lokakṣema was native.⁹ It is plausible, of course, that Lokakṣema simply never encountered a sutra particularly praising Amitābha before relocating to China, or was simply more devoted to Akṣobhya. In spite of this early introduction into China, Akṣobhya never captured the popular imagination of the Chinese like Amitābha did. Thus it was the fate of Amitābha to forever change the landscape of Buddhism in China and East Asia.

Almost exactly 250 years after Lokakṣema traveled to China the renowned translator Kumārajīva 鳩

8 *Astasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sutra* 道行般若經; T no. 224.

9 For a discussion of these various paradises and their apparently non-distinct and generalized nature in early Mahayana texts see Schopen, Gregory, "Sukhāvati as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature," in *Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

摩羅什 entered the Chinese capital of Chang'an in 401CE and by the following year had produced the translation of the *Amitābha Sutra* that is presented here. Through this translation, countless practitioners of Buddhism, both lay and monastic, past and present, have come into contact with Amitābha and his idyllic paradise and subsequently vowed to be reborn there. The original source text(s) was further translated into Chinese two more times, once by Gunabhadra 求那跋陀羅 in the middle of the fifth century CE (which was lost by 730 CE) and once by Xuanzang in the middle of the seventh century.¹⁰ The versions by Kumārajīva and Xuanzang are similar in doctrinal exposition, although the translation of Xuanzang is longer with more precise description and preserves more Sanskrit transliterations than Kumārajīva's version does. Yet due to the relative age, succinctness, and elegance in prose, it would prove to be the

10 For the version by Xuanzang see the Translation Catalogue. Gunabhadra's translation is listed in Sengyu's (僧祐) catalogue (出三藏記集) which was compiled in approximately 515 CE. See T2145:55.14a23. Zhisheng's (智昇) later catalogue (開元釋教錄) published in 730 CE, lists Gunabhadra's text as lost. See T55: 2154.595b10.

translation of Kumārajīva that would provide a fertile basis for the worship of Amitābha in China.

The title fashioned by Kumārajīva does not match the existent Sanskrit versions. Kumārajīva titled the sutra after the name of the buddha, Amitābha, while the Sanskrit versions were titled after the land he governs, Sukhāvātī (rendered as the “Land of Utmost Bliss” in Chinese). In Sanskrit the full title reads *Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sutra*, literally the “Sutra which Magnificently Displays the Land of Bliss,” and is also known in the West as the *Smaller Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sutra* due to its relative length compared to a longer Sanskrit text also praising Amitābha (which consequently is called the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sutra*).

Furthermore, the Chinese rendering of this buddha’s name may also be seen as slightly curious. Many scholars have weighed in as to whether the Chinese name *Amituo* 阿彌陀 simply transliterates *Amita*, a Sanskrit word literally meaning “immeasurable,” or is a contracted version of the full Sanskrit name. All existent Sanskrit sources attest to

either Amitābha (“Immeasurable Light”) or Amitāyus (“Immeasurable Life”) as the name for the buddha who resides in the Land of Utmost Bliss, yet Chinese sources seem to allow for just the adjectival epithet, *amita*, since the *-bha* or *-yus* endings do not appear to be captured by the transliteration into Chinese.¹¹

Whatever the case might be, the name *Amituo* 阿彌陀 can be seen as representing either Amitābha Buddha or Amitayus Buddha in Kumārajīva’s version of the Chinese text, as is evidenced by two consecutive passages in the sutra which seem to focus on the two defining aspects of his nature, that of light and of life.¹² This convention of transliteration was not universally practiced in China however. For example, the translation done

11 For a discussion on Lokakṣema’s use of *Amituo* as a transliteration of Amitābha see Nattier, Jan. “The Names of Amitābha/Amitāyus in Early Chinese Buddhist Translation,” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology*, Vol. IX, March 2006, pp.183-199.

12 The use of the name *Amituo* was first used by Lokakṣema, and it seems likely that Kumārajīva was following the tradition of transliteration established by him.

by Xuanzang uses the translation of Amitāyus Buddha, *Wuliangshoufo* 無量壽佛 (which in Chinese means “Immeasurable Life Buddha”) to designate this buddha, as does the reputed title of Guṇabhadra’s translation (無量壽經). Regardless, all of the names refer to the same figure, but each separately signifies praise of one of his particular attributes.

The name of Amitābha Buddha, particularly the form that was also used in Kumārajīva’s text, became very significant in the devotional practices used in China and Japan. The most characteristic practice of devotional worship of Amitābha in East Asia today revolves around the continuous repetition and praise of his name in the formula of *Namo Amitufofo* 南無阿彌陀佛 (perhaps more popular in its Japanese pronunciation *Namu Amida Butsu*), a transliteration of the Sanskrit sounds which literally mean “Homage to Amitābha Buddha.” Practitioners would either chant this phrase aloud or mentally recite it to themselves to invoke a purity and concentration of mind or to attain rebirth in the Land of Utmost Bliss,

depending on their doctrinal affiliation. This recitation practice is called *nianfo* 念佛 (Jap. *nembutsu*), and had particular importance to the development of Buddhism in Japan where some considered it the sole practice that was truly effective in attaining enlightenment.

It should not be assumed, however, that devotional practices such as *nianfo* have remained unaltered for fifteen hundred years. Tradition holds that it was not until Huiyuan 慧遠, a contemporary of Kumārajīva who lived in southern China on Mt. Lu 廬山, gathered with 123 other monks and layman to make vows in front of an image of Amitābha Buddha, that devotional practices toward Amitābha “officially” began in China. It seems, however, the *nianfo* practice advocated by Huiyuan was quite different than the modern interpretation that relies on the recitation of Amitābha’s name for salvation.

We are afforded some insight as to how *nianfo* practice was envisioned in these times through correspondence written between Kumārajīva and Huiyuan. In one of the letters, Huiyuan questions

Kumārajīva about *nianfo* in regards to the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra*.¹³ Both monks treat *nianfo* as a concentration technique that allows a practitioner to have visions of a buddha, whereby they can then pose questions to that buddha, thus resolving any doctrinal dilemmas. This description, not surprisingly, follows the practice outlined in the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra*, showing that this sutra had some influence on devotional practice a few hundred years after it was first translated by Lokakṣema (it even continued to exert influence hundreds of years later in Japan). It also appears that Huiyuan did not urge his followers to aspire to be reborn in Amitābha’s paradise (although some expressed considerable interest later on), but rather encouraged them to collectively practice and cultivate a concentrated awareness that could directly lead them to enlightenment.¹⁴

While the words “*nianfo*” do appear in the

¹³ *Jiumoluoshe fashi dayi* 鳩摩羅什法師大義 ; T45: 1856.134b4 – 135a11.

¹⁴ Tsukamoto, Zenryū. *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism: From Its Introduction to the Death of Huiyuan*, trans. Leon Hurvitz. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985), pp. 845-6.

Amitābha Sutra, they do not seem to entail such an elevated concentration practice. It appears that Kumārajīva used them more conventionally to mean “keep the Buddha in mind.” He also used *nian* 念 in conjunction with the Dharma 法 and Sangha 僧, which shows that all Three Jewels were equally valued objects to be “kept in mind.” However, the text does make it clear that through the repeated recitation of Amitābha’s name, devotees could be lead to the Land of Utmost Bliss from their deathbed by Amitābha Buddha himself. Kumārajīva makes no clear assertions as to how this practice is to be fulfilled though.

By the middle of the sixth century CE, Amitābha Buddha and his paradise started to become intimately associated with what is known today as the Pure Land (*chingtu* 淨土).¹⁵ While Kumārajīva

¹⁵ The term “pure land” as a distinct buddhological concept was first introduced by Tan Luan 曇鸞 (476-542 or 488-554) in a commentary dating to approximately 540 CE. See Tanaka, Kenneth K. *The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine: Ching-ying Hui-yüan’s Commentary on the Visualization Sutra*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 2.

is known to have used the compound *chingtu* in his translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sutra*, it is completely absent from his *Amitābha Sutra*. It was not until the middle of the seventh century in China that *chingtu* became a standardized technical term which denoted a specific religious goal of a paradisiacal (and pure) land. This movement toward a more specified understanding is exemplified by Xuanzang's usage in his version of the *Amitābha Sutra* where the term is used throughout the text and is even found in the title of his work (see Translation Catalogue). Although this specific terminology is a Chinese innovation, the notion that a Buddha Land (Skt. *buddha-kṣetra*) could become purified can be traced to Sanskrit sources.¹⁶ This purification process includes the eradication of all suffering from a Buddha Land through the acts of the buddha residing there. Even though Pure Land practice can be understood to include devotion to any purified Buddha Land, including Aksobhya's, it is practically synonymous

¹⁶ See Tanaka, *Dawn of Chinese Pure Land*, p. 205n.4; See also Gomez, Luis O. *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), p. 318.

with Amitābha and his Land of Utmost Bliss.

Eventually, Kumārajīva's translation of the *Amitābha Sutra* was collected together with Saṃghavarman's 康僧鎧 translation of the *Larger Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sutra*, and Kālayaśas' 曇良耶舍 *Sutra on Contemplating the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* to form a canonical base for the devotion and worship of Pure Land Buddhism.¹⁷ Centuries after Huiyuan's death, when monks were attempting to legitimize their claims to authority, Huiyuan was established as the founder of the mass movement that celebrated Amitābha Buddha. Huiyuan, while clearly devoted to Amitābha, certainly had no notion as being the head of a lineage, nor could he have foreseen the impact his community on Mt. Lu would have on the future of Buddhism. Similarly, it would have been impossible for Kumārajīva to dream that his

¹⁷ *Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sutra* 無量壽經; T no. 360, and **Amitāyur-dhyāna Sutra* 觀無量壽佛經; T no 365, respectively. Both of these authorial attributions are traditional, and modern scholarship does not consider either text to have been genuine works of these translators, with the latter text also considered to be an indigenous Chinese composition.

translation of the *Amitābha Sutra* would become so central to such a pervasive style of Buddhism that would flourish in East Asia.

Undoubtedly, the development of Amitābha Buddha and his paradise is a complicated phenomenon which spans centuries and the borders of multiple nations. Regardless of its origins or transmission, devotional practices to Amitābha and worship of his Pure Land are mainstays in many Buddhist temples around the world today. While Amitābha Buddha may have arisen from relative obscurity, his promise of hope and salvation has certainly proven to be integral in the lives of countless numbers of Buddhist practitioners, making him one of the most popular Buddhist figures of all time.



TRANSLATION CATALOGUE



The following is a list of books and/or journals that contain versions of the *Amitābha Sutra* in Chinese or in English translation.

CHINESE VERSIONS

Taishō no. 366. *Discourse by the Buddha on the Amitābha Sūtra* 佛說阿彌陀經. Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什, 402 CE.

T no. 367. *Sūtra Praising the Selections by Buddha of the Pure Land* 稱讚淨土佛攝受經. Xuanzang 玄奘, 650 CE.

ENGLISH VERSIONS

Translations from Chinese:

Beal, Rev. Samuel. "Brief Prefatory Remarks to the Translation of the Amitābha Sūtra from the Chinese." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s., II, (1866), pp. 136-44.

Chan, Wing-tsit and others, eds. *The Great Asian Religions: An Anthology*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.

Chinese Buddhist Society of Australia. *The Smaller Sukhavativyuha; The Sutra of Visualizing the Buddha of Immeasurable Length of Life*. Buddhist Publications Series I. Sydney, 1975.

Hai-Quang, Thich, ed. *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Buddha Sutra: Pureland Buddhism, The Way of Practice*, trans. William B. Nguyen. Tucson, AZ: Dharma Flower Temple, 1998.

Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii. *The Shinshu Seiten: the Holy Scripture of Shinshu*. Honolulu: Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, 1955.

Hsuan Hua. *A General Explanation of The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra*, trans. I Kuo-jung. San Francisco: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 1974.

Inagaki, Hisao. *Three Pure Land Sutras*. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995.

Kao, Kuan-ju. "Amitâyus Sûtra." *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. I, no. 3, (1964), pp. 470-2.

Kimura, H. *The Smaller Sukhāvātī-vyūha*. Collateral Buddhist Texts Series I. Kyoto: Ryūkoku University, 1948.

Landis, E. B. "The *Amitâyus Sûtra* Translated from the Korean." *Journal of the Buddhist Text Society of India*, vol. II, no.3, (1894), pp. 1-6.

Lee, Pi-Cheng. *The Two Buddhist Books in Mahayana*. Hong Kong: Rumford Printing Press, 1936.

Sie, Hiao-yuan. *O-mi-t'o-king; The Amitabha (Vyuha) Sutra, Written in the Garden of Piety*. Changsha: Commercial Press, 1941.

Utsuki, Nishū. *Buddha-Bhâshita-Amitayûsûtra (The Smaller Sukhāvātī-Vyūha)*. Translated

from the Chinese Version of Kumārajīva with Chinese Original Text and Notes and Collations with Sanskrit and Tibetan Versions. Kyoto: The Educational Department of the West Hongwanji, 1924.

Wong, Mow-Lam. *Buddhabhashitamitayus Sutra (The Smaller Sukhāvātī-vyūha)*. Shanghai, 1932.

Translations from Sanskrit:

Müller, F. Max. “On Sanskrit Texts Discovered in Japan.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s., 12, (1880), pp. 153-88. Reprinted in: *Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts*. Sacred Books of the East, vol. XLIX. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894.

Translations from both Chinese and Sanskrit:

Gomez, Luis O. *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996.



GLOSSARY



The entries in this glossary fall under two categories: 1) foreign terms and technical concepts that appear in the body of the text and 2) generalized topics that are inferred in the text and which have thematic importance to the reading of the sutra.

All entries that are covered by the first category are parenthetically followed by their commonly Romanized Sanskrit form, with diacritical marks if necessary, and by the correlating Chinese character(s) as they are exactly found in the text. The Sanskrit term provided is the most typical equivalent of the Chinese word, and not necessarily based on comparative examples found in extant manuscripts.

Entries which are topical and not discussed in the text directly, or are indigenous Chinese concepts or innovations, are not included with a Sanskrit equivalent.

When possible we have also provided other common translations of terms at the end of some entries.

Amitabha (Amitābha 阿彌陀): The name of the buddha who resides in the Land of Utmost Bliss teaching the Dharma. *Amita* literally means “immeasurable” or “boundless” and is the qualifying adjective found in the names Amitabha (Amitābha; *amita-ābha*, literally “immeasurable light”) and Amitayus (Amitāyus; *amita-āyus*, literally “immeasurable life”). All names refer to the same buddha.

Amitayus: See **Amitabha**.

anuttara-samyak-sambodhi (*anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi* 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提): A term that refers to the complete enlightenment of a buddha. It is considered to be the greatest class of awakening and is characterized by the possession of omniscience and the ten powers. Other translations: “supreme correct enlightenment” or “unexcelled perfect enlightenment.”

arhat (*arhat* 阿羅漢): Literally meaning “worthy one,” it is a name for one who has eradicated all of their defilements and has become enlightened. They are distinguished from buddhas by the fact

that buddhas attain enlightenment solely through their own efforts, while an *arhat* practices the teachings of a buddha. Other translations: “Saint.”

asamkhya (*asamkhya* 阿僧祇): A term generally used to represent an indefinitely large number. In some sources it has been defined as equaling 10^{59} . Other translations: “incalculable.”

asura (*asura* 阿修羅): A semi-divine being who resides just below the *devas* on the slopes of Mt. Sumeru. They are often characterized as jealous demigods in constant conflict with the heavenly *devas*. Other translations: “titan,” “demon.”

avaivartika (*avaivartika* 阿鞞跋致): A person with a firm mind set on attaining enlightenment who will never backslide or regress to a lower state of spiritual attainment. Other translations: “non-backslider.”

bhikṣu (*bhikṣu* 比丘): A fully ordained male member of the Buddhist monastic community. Other translations: “monk,” “mendicant.”

bodhisattva (*bodhisattva* 菩薩): A title given to a being who compassionately vows to liberate all sentient beings from suffering and help free them from the cycle of rebirth. Originally this term was exclusively used to describe the Buddha in his previous lives before his enlightenment, but in the Mahayana tradition this term denotes anyone who aspires to attain buddhahood. The term “bodhisattva” is traditionally glossed as meaning “enlightenment being.”

buddha (*buddha* 佛): A title meaning “Awakened One” used for a being who has perceived the true nature of all phenomena, has overcome all suffering, and who compassionately teaches these insights to others. It is one of the ten titles of a fully enlightened being. When capitalized and preceded by definite article “the” the term refers to the historical figure Siddhartha Gautama, and when it is pluralized or not capitalized or it refers to anyone in the general class of fully enlightened beings. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha comprise the Three Jewels.

Buddha Land (*buddha-kṣetra* 佛土; 佛國土): A

world in which a buddha has resolved to liberate sentient beings through his teachings. In Mahayana cosmologies there are infinite numbers of Buddha Lands which vary in their degrees of perfection or purity. Other translations: “Buddha field,” “Buddhaverse.”

deva (*deva* 天): An inhabitant of the heavens that are located on or above Mt. Sumeru. Any sentient being with the requisite amount of merit can be reborn as a *deva*. Life in the heavenly realms is generally considered to be utopian, however it is also transient, as all *devas* are mortal and subject to rebirth. Other translations: “god,” “deity.”

Dharma (*dharma* 法): The Dharma refers to the body of Buddhist teachings. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha comprise the Three Jewels. Other translations: “Truth,” “Law.”

eightfold noble path (*ārya-mārga* 八聖道分): The last of the Four Noble Truths which leads one to the cessation of suffering and to the attainment of enlightenment. It includes right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right

livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. They are the seventh section of a larger list called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment.

five powers (*bala* 五力): A higher development of the five roots which overcome their opposing and negative tendency whereby faith overcomes false views, determination overcomes laziness, mindfulness overcomes forgetfulness, concentration overcomes distraction, and wisdom overcomes ignorance. They are the fifth section of a larger list called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment.

five roots (*indriya* 五根): Five spiritual capacities that need to be developed in order to attain enlightenment. They are faith, determination, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. They are the fourth section of a larger list called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. Other translations: “five spiritual faculties.”

five degenerations (*pañcakaṣāya* 五濁): According to Indian cosmology the world undergoes a

cosmic cycle of creation and destruction over a duration of *kalpas*. The phase of destruction is marked by decay, corruption and conflict which is encapsulated in the five degenerations: the decay of the *kalpa*, the deterioration of views, the delusion of the *klesas*, the decline of sentient beings, and the diminishing of life-spans. Other translations: “five corruptions.”

four treasures (四寶): The first four treasures found in the list of seven treasures, namely, gold 金, silver 銀, lapis lazuli 琉璃, and crystal 頗梨.

Jetavana Anathapindika Park (Jeta-vana anāthapindika-ārāma 祇樹給孤獨園): A monastic compound located on the outskirts of Sravasti where the Buddha was traditionally said to have spent nineteen rain retreats. The park was donated to the Buddhist monastic community by a wealthy merchant named Sudatta, who was more commonly known as Anathapindika, which means “one who gives to the needy.” The land was originally owned by the royal prince, Jeta, who agreed to sell the land for the amount of gold coins that were required to cover the ground of the entire park.

When Anathapindika initially ran out of gold and gave instructions for more to be carted in Jeta was moved by Anathapindika's devotion to the Buddha and freely donated the uncovered patch of land. Together they built a meeting hall, a dining hall, residential halls, walkways, wells, and surrounded the park with a barrier wall. To honor the efforts of both Jeta and Anathapindika, texts refer to the park using both of their names. This site was excavated in 1863 by the English archaeologist Alexander Cunningham, and is located in modern day Saheth, India.

kalavinka (*kalaviṅka* 迦陵頻伽): A bird with a beautifully melodious voice. It is believed to sing just before it hatches out of its shell. It could possibly be associated with a type of cuckoo.

kalpa (*kalpa* 劫): An extremely vast measurement of time used in ancient India. The length of time of a single *kalpa* is considered to be of an almost inconceivable duration. Other translations: “eon,” “cosmic age.”

klesa (*kleśa* 煩惱): A term which denotes negative

psychological tendencies or vices which disturb the mind and hinder enlightenment. Other translations: “defilements,” “afflictions.”

Kucha (Kuchā 龜茲): An important kingdom located in the Tarim basin on the northern edge of the Taklamakan desert in modern day western China. It was a popular oasis often visited by those traveling on the Silk Road and became a major center for Buddhism by the time Kumarajiva, arguably its most important emigrant, was born.

Kumarajiva (Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什): (343-413) A famed Buddhist monk who hailed from the Central Asian kingdom of Kucha 龜茲 and traveled to China to become one of the “Four Great Translators” of Chinese Buddhism. He arrived in the capital of Chang'an 長安 in 401 and immediately headed a translation bureau in producing translations of Buddhist texts in Chinese. His translations are considered to be composed in the most elegant prose and have significantly impacted the history of Buddhism in China.

Land of Utmost Bliss (Sukhāvātī 極樂國土): The

utopian Buddha Land overseen by Amita Buddha. Beings who are born here are assured to attain enlightenment in that lifetime. Other translations: “Land of Bliss,” “Land of Supreme Bliss.”

mandarava (*māndārava* 曼陀羅): The Indian coral tree (*Erythrina indica*) which has racemes of crimson or scarlet colored flowers and is believed to grow in the heaven of Sakra. The flowers of this tree rain down in celebration from the heavens whenever particularly auspicious events occur. Other translation: “mandara.”

Saha (Sahā 娑婆): The name of the world in which we live and the one that Sakyamuni presides over. The term literally means “enduring” and refers to all of the suffering that the sentient beings must withstand.

Sakra Devanam Indra (Śakro-devānām-indra 釋提桓因): Literally “Sakra, the Indra (i.e. conqueror or king) of the *devas*.” Sakra is the name commonly used by Buddhists to denote the Vedic god Indra. Sakra is a supporter of Buddhism and is believed to reign over the heaven located on the

summit of Mt. Sumeru.

Sakyamuni (Śākyamuni 釋迦牟尼): A title given to Siddhartha Gautama who was born among the Sakya tribe. The title literally means “Sage of the Sakyas.” Mahayana texts typically use this title to distinguish the historical Buddha from the numerous other buddhas that proliferate the cosmos.

Sangha (*saṃgha* 僧): The monastic community organized by the Buddha. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha comprise the Three Jewels.

seven aspects of bodhi (*bodyaṅga* 七菩提分): The states of mind that are essential to realize *bodhi*, or awakening, which include mindfulness, discrimination between teachings, determination, joy, tranquility, concentration, equanimity. They are the sixth section of a larger list called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment. Other translations: “seven limbs of enlightenment,” “seven factors of enlightenment.”

seven treasures (*sapta-ratna* 七寶): Seven precious substances that are valued because of their scarcity and are generally ascribed no symbolic importance. The list varies from source to source but appear in this text as follows: gold 金, silver 銀, lapis lazuli 琉璃 (alternatively understood to be a type of green or blue beryl or even a translucent material such as glass), crystal 頗梨 (specifically rock crystal, also known as quartz), nacre 車磔 (iridescent nacre is known as mother-of-pearl; alternatively understood to be coral), red pearls 赤珠 (sometimes called pink or rosy pearls; alternatively understood to be rubies), and carnelian 馬瑙 (a type of chalcedony sometimes classified under the rubric of agate).

sari (*śārī* 舍利): A bird believed to have the ability of speech. It could possibly be associated with the Hill Myna (*Gracula religiosa*), a bird indigenous to India which is renowned for its ability to mimic human speech.

Sariputra (*Śāriputra* 舍利弗): The chief disciple of the Buddha who was considered foremost in wisdom. He entered the Buddha's monastic order with his lifelong friend Maudgalyayana, and both

are commonly represented in artworks as flanking the sides of the Buddha. Sariputra is regarded one of the ten great disciples of the Buddha.

śravaka (*śrāvaka* 聲聞): Literally meaning “hearers,” this is a name used in Mahayana texts to denote the early disciples of the Buddha who heard and practiced his teachings in order to become *arhats*.

Sravasti (*Śrāvastī* 舍衛國): Sravasti was the capital city of the ancient northern Indian kingdom of Kosala located in modern day Uttar Pradesh. To distinguish it from a southern Indian kingdom that was also called Kosala, this northern Indian state was sometimes referenced by its capital city, thus being called the Kingdom of Sravasti. Prasenajit, the sovereign ruler of this kingdom, was a devoted follower and friend of the Buddha.

six periods (*ṣaṭsu-kāleṣu* 六時): The divisions of a day according to ancient Indian calculations which roughly correspond to sunrise, midday, sunset, evening, midnight, and early morning. The first three occur during daytime while the latter three

occur during nighttime.

sutra (*sūtra* 經): Scripture which traditionally preserves the discourses of the Buddha. The earliest dialogues of the Buddha were preserved orally, and it is commonly held that his teachings were not committed to writing until the first century BCE. With the advent of Mahayana Buddhism new sutras were circulated in Northern India and Central Asia.

three evil realms (*trividhā-durgatī* 三惡趣): The three realms of rebirth that are considered to be the most despised and unfortunate, namely being reborn as a hell being, hungry ghost or animal. This is the same as the three evil paths 三惡道.

trichiliocosm (*trisaḥsra-mahāsaḥsra-lokadhātu* 三千大千世界): A term that typically designates a totality of one billion worlds, and symbolically represents the largest possible combination of worlds in Buddhist cosmology. It is believed that one thousand individual worlds constitute a “small world system,” and one thousand small world systems constitute a “medium world system,” and one thousand medium world systems

constitute a “great world system.” The number of individual worlds in a great world system is equal in number to a trichiliocosm, namely one billion (1000³). Other translations: “thousandfold great thousandfold world system,” “three thousand great thousand worlds.”

Tripitaka Master (三藏法師): Honorary title given to Buddhist monastics in China who mastered the teachings of the Buddha.

waters of eight merits (八功德水): The eight beneficial characteristics that describe the quality of the water in the Land of Utmost Bliss. According to Xuanzang’s version, the eight merits include the water being clear, temperate, nectarous, placid, shimmering, tranquil, with the ability to dispel hunger and thirst, and able to hone the skills of concentration of those who drink it.

world (*loka-dhātu* 世界): Term generally used to describe the greater structure of the Buddhist cosmos in which sentient beings are continuously reborn. In later Mahayana cosmologies there are an indefinite number of worlds, each with a

similar structure: a central axis centered at Mt. Sumeru which is subsequently surrounded by a total of eight mountain ranges, seven oceans, four large continents, eight sub-continents, and celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars. Other translations: “world sphere,” world system,” “galaxy.”

Yao Qin (姚秦): A short lived kingdom, more commonly referred to as the Later Qin 後秦, which lasted from 384-417 during the tumultuous period in northern China known as the Sixteen Kingdoms of the Five Barbarian Tribes. Yao Xing 姚興 (r. 393-415) was responsible for bringing Kumarajiva to the capital, allowing him begin his prodigious undertaking of translating Buddhist texts into Chinese.



APPENDIX



Names of Figures (in order of appearance)

Disciples:

Sariputra (Śāriputra 舍利弗)

Maha-Maudgalyayana (Mahāmaudgalyāyana 摩訶目乾連)

Maha-Kasyapa (Mahākāśyapa 摩訶迦葉)

Maha-Katyayana (Mahākātyāyana 摩訶迦梅延)

Maha-Kausthila (Mahākauṣṭhila 摩訶拘絺羅)

Revata (Revata 離婆多)

Suddhipanthaka (Śuddhipanthaka 周梨槃陀迦)

Nanda (Nanda 難陀)

Ananda (Ānanda 阿難陀)

Rahula (Rāhula 羅睺羅)

Gavampati (Gavāṃpati 憍梵波提)

Pindola Bharadvaja (Piṇḍola-bhāradvāja 賓頭盧頗羅墮)

Kalodayin (Kālodayin 迦留陀夷)

Maha-Kapphina (Mahākapphiṇa 摩訶劫賓那)

Vakkula (Vakkula 薄俱羅)

Aniruddha (Aniruddha 阿兔樓駄)

Bodhisattvas:

Manjusri (Mañjuśrī 文殊師利)

Ajita (Ajita 阿逸多)

Gandhastin (Gandhastin 乾陀訶提)

Nityodyukta (Nityodyukta 常精進)

Devas:

Sakra Devanam Indra (Śakro-devānām-indra 釋提桓因)

Buddhas of the Six Regions:**Eastern Regions:**

Aksobya (Akṣobya 阿閼鞞)

Emblem of Sumeru (Merudhvaja 須彌相)

Great Sumeru (Mahāmeru 大須彌)

Sumeru Brilliance (Meruprabhāsa 須彌光)

Wondrous Voice (Mañjusvara 妙音)

Southern Regions:

Solar and Lunar Lamp (Candrasūryapradīpa 日月燈)

Renowned Brilliance (Yaśasprabha 名聞光)

Shoulders of Great Flame (Mahārcisskandha 大焰肩)

Beacon of Sumeru (Merupradīpa 須彌燈)

Immeasurable Vigor (Anantavīrya 無量精進)

Western Regions:

Immeasurable Life (Amitāyus 無量壽)

Immeasurable Emblem (Amitaketu 無量相)

Immeasurable Banner (Amitadhvaja 無量幢)

Great Brilliance (Mahāprabha 大光)

Great Radiance (Mahāprabhāsa 大明)

Treasure Emblem (Ratnaketu 寶相)

Pure Brilliance (Śuddharaśmiprabha 淨光)

Northern Regions:

Flaming Shoulders (Arciskandha 焰肩)

Insurmountable Voice (Vaiśvānaraniṅghoṣa 最勝音)

Unconquerable (Duṣpradharaṣa 難沮)

Sunrise (Ādityasambhava 日生)

Net Radiance (Jālinīprabha 網明)

Lower Regions:

Lion (Siṃha 師子)

Renowned (Yaśas 名聞)

Acclaimed Brilliance (Yaśasprabhāsa 名光)

Dharma (Dharma 達摩)

Dharma Banner (Dharmadhvaja 法幢)

Upholding the Dharma (Dharmadhara 持法)

Upper Regions:

Brahma Voice (Brahmaghoṣa 梵音)

Constellation King (Nakṣatrarāja 宿王)

Foremost Fragrance (Gandhottama 香上)

Fragrant Brilliance (Gandhaprabhāsa 香光)

Shoulders of Great Flame (Mahārciskandha 大焰肩)

Multicolored Jeweled Flower Adornment Body

(Ratnakusumasampūṣpitagātra 雜色寶華嚴身)

King of the Sala Tree (Śālendrarāja 娑羅樹王)

Jeweled Flower Virtue (Ratnotpalāśrī 寶華德)

Discerning All Meanings (Sarvārthadarśa 見一切義)

Sumeru-like (Sumerukalpa 如須彌山)



EDITORIAL MESSAGE



With the growing popularity of Buddhism around the world, access to its doctrine through reliable translations of its scriptures is of utmost importance. Therefore, we have set as our pinnacle goal the production of a new standardized canon of Buddhist sutras in English. As scholars, teachers and students of Buddhism, we recognize that the most valuable resources for Buddhist texts are the exhaustive editions of the Chinese Buddhist canon, yet of the hundreds of sutras in Chinese, only a fraction have been reliably translated into the English language. We are aware of the efforts of other translation committees and translators involved in the effort to produce English translations of Buddhist texts. However, we feel our endeavor is unique in several important ways.

First, we are committed to producing bilingual editions of each sutra with tools for studying the original Chinese text. By providing facing bilingual pages, we hope to encourage those students who are learning Chinese to compare our English translation with the original source text, thereby

deepening their understanding of the translation process and of the content of the sutra. Our editions will also include a brief history of the particular sutra, an exhaustive glossary of foreign words and ideas, and, as an homage to the long Chinese tradition of compiling catalogues of sutras, a translation catalogue which lists many of the other Chinese and English translations of the same text.

Secondly, our method of translation attempts to provide a literal, yet fluid, rendition of the Chinese text, trying to capture the experience of reading sutras in Chinese while remaining as faithful as possible to the original text. For example, we choose to back-transliterate terms such as *biqiu* 比丘 (Skt. *bhikṣu*), instead of translating them (“monk”) to try to maintain a similar reading experience of the Chinese text. By attempting to make the translation process more transparent, we aim to uncover the subtleties of the text that are easily lost when rendering a sutra from one language into another. Our translation board consists of a variety of experts on Buddhism from different areas and fields, and all our translations go through a series of revisions and renditions before final printing to ensure their accuracy.

Finally, our focus is the production of not just one, but a complete series of translations of specifically Chinese Buddhist sutras using a consistent vocabulary for technical terms and foreign concepts. Throughout all our translations we will employ a standardized lexicon and methodology for translation, so that a technical term will be translated, or transliterated, in the same manner in every volume in this series. In this way, we hope to aid the reader in comprehending the complexities of Buddhist doctrine, which often call upon a diverse array of technical terminologies and conceptual constructs.

Through the publication of these translations, we hope to allow a greater accessibility to Buddhist sutras, and circulate them to a much wider audience. We hope to appeal not only to the uninitiated, but also to the more accomplished student of Buddhist thought.

We would like to extend our gratitude to William Bodiford (UCLA), Jonathan Silk (UCLA) and Paul Kjellberg (Whittier College) for their comments on this publication.





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Venerable Yifa has been a nun at Fo Guang Shan Monastery in Taiwan since 1979. She received a law degree from National Taiwan University, a MA in comparative philosophy from University of Hawaii and her Ph.D. in religious studies from Yale University in 1996. She was granted the awards “the Ten Outstanding Young Persons” in Taiwan in 1997, “Outstanding Women in Buddhism Award” in 2003 and “Juliet Hollister Award” in 2006. She has been the Dean at Fo Guang Shan Buddhist College and the Provost at Hsi Lai University, Rosemead, California, a visiting scholar at the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard University, a lecturer at Boston University and a faculty member at National Sun Yat-Sen University in Taiwan. She taught at McGill University as the Numata visiting professor in the spring of 2005 and currently serves as the chair of Department of Religious Studies at the University of the West in Los Angeles.

Recently Yifa has been conducting the “Humanistic

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She is the author of *The Origin of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China* (2002), by Hawaii University Press and *Safeguarding the Heart: a Buddhist Response to Suffering and September 11* (2002); *On Junk* (2007); *On Suffering* (2007); all by Lantern Books, NY; and co-author of *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict* (2001), Riverhead, NY.

Peter Matthew Romaskiewicz was born and raised in a small town near the Atlantic coastline of New Jersey. While attending Rutgers University he became interested in the study of philosophy and world religions and was ultimately attracted to the richness of Buddhism and Chinese culture. He embarked on his study of literary Chinese at

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Working with Venerable Yifa, Peter has been the co-translator of *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*, *Vajra Prajnaparamita Sutra*, *Amitabha Sutra* and *The Sutra on the Past Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva*. He has been teaching Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist art at the Center for Buddhist Studies at San Diego, University of the West in Los Angeles, Fo Guang Shan Monastery (Taiwan), Templo Zu Lai (Brazil), and Hsi Lai Temple (Los Angeles).

