



The descent of Amida Buddha and Attendants, Japan, 14th c

Devotion in Mahāyāna Buddhism

[The texts here consist of excerpts from Chapter 10, "Trust, self, abandonment and devotion: the cults of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas" from Paul Williams' book *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. The first selection makes clear that, even though devotion was not emphasized in Theravāda Buddhism, the roots of the devotional aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhism can be traced back to the earliest Buddhist discourses of the Pali Canon. The second selection explains the notion of a Buddha Field, a central concept in Buddhist cosmology. The subsequent selections explain some of the most important Bodhisattvas and celestial Buddhas that are the object of devotion in Mahāyāna Buddhism.]

***Buddhānusmṛti* — recollection of the Buddha**

The *Sutta Nipāta* of the Pali Canon is generally held by scholars to be one of the oldest extant Buddhist texts. At the very end of the *Sutta Nipāta*, in a section also held to be among the oldest strata of that text, is a wonderfully moving and, I think, potentially significant discussion. A Brahmin named Piṅgiya 'the wise' praises the Buddha in heartfelt terms:

They call him Buddha, Enlightened, Awake, dissolving darkness, with total vision, and knowing the world to its ends. . . . This man . . . is the man I follow. . . . This prince, this beam of light, Gotama, was the only one who dissolved the darkness. This man Gotama is a universe of wisdom and a world of understanding.

Why is it, Piṅgiya is asked, that you do not spend all your time with the Buddha, that wonderful teacher? Piṅgiya replies that he himself is old, he cannot follow the Buddha physically, for 'my body is decaying'. But:

there is no moment for me, however small, that is spent away from Gotama, from this universe of wisdom, this world of understanding . . . with constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him.

(Saddhatissa 1985: vv. 1140, 1142)

In this ancient and extraordinary discussion Piṅgiya indicates that it was possible through his awareness, through his meditation, for him to be constantly in the presence of the Buddha and constantly to revere him. Towards the end the Buddha himself testifies that Piṅgiya will go to 'the further shore' of enlightenment.

The interpretation of this discussion is perhaps difficult. One certainly should not assume that we have here a fully-fledged devotionalism. Nevertheless, Piṅgiya's praise of the Buddha and his reference to seeing him with the mind appear to connect with the practice of *buddhānusr̥ti*, recollection of the Buddha, a practice known from other contexts in the Pali Canon and practised by, as far as we can tell, all schools of Buddhism. [. . .]

The notion of a Buddha Field (*buddhakṣetra*)

From the perspective of Buddhist cosmology space, like time, is infinite. Infinite space is full of infinite universes, world systems, stretching to the 10 directions (the four cardinal points, four intermediate directions, up and down). Within these infinite reaches some universes are known as Buddha Fields or Buddha Lands. Generally, this term denotes an area, a cosmos, where a Buddha exerts his spiritual influence.

The concept of a Buddha Field, while of considerable importance in Mahāyāna thought, is not unique to the Mahāyāna. The *Mahāvastu*, which is a Lokottaravāda text, points out that there are many, many universes or world systems which are devoid of a Buddha, for Buddhas are relatively very rare. Moreover, the *Mahāvastu* notes, there cannot be two Buddhas in the same Buddha Field, for this would imply that one Buddha is not adequate to his task. And even though Buddhas are relatively rare, still, throughout the infinite universes there are innumerable Buddhas, and innumerable tenth-stage Bodhisattvas who are about to become Buddhas. Each leads infinite beings to liberation, and yet there is no chance that eventually all will be liberated and no one will be left. For with infinite sentient beings, even if infinite Buddhas each liberate another infinite being, still there are infinite suffering sentient beings left (*Mahāvastu* 1949-56: I, 96 ff.).

Human beings live in a world sphere called *Sahā*, said to be in the south, for which the current Buddha is Śākyamuni. The notion of a Buddha Field may have arisen from a consideration of Śākyamuni's knowledge on the one hand, the field of his awareness, and his authority and influence on the other—his field of activity. In addition, one can refer to the actual geographical area where the Buddha was born. Naturally the sizes of these three fields are different. The Buddha's knowledge (and from a Mahāyāna perspective, his compassion) is often held in Mahāyāna to be infinite, although his direct spiritual power is exerted over a vast but finite area, his Buddha Field in the primary sense, the area in the centre of which the Buddha appeared.

The principal function of a Buddha is to teach sentient beings in his Buddha Field. But the Buddha Field in this primary sense is not simply a place where the Buddha happens to have appeared. Rather, during his career as a Bodhisattva the Buddha-to-be is said to 'purify' his Buddha Field, and the Buddha Field is in some sense the result of his great compassion (Fujita 1996a: 34-5). In other words, the very existence of a Buddha Field depends upon the Buddha's wonderful career as a Bodhisattva. The Buddha's infinite deeds of wisdom and compassion have created his Buddha Field as an area where he can 'ripen' sentient beings. Beings themselves also contribute, for it is a place where they have been reborn through their deeds, as beings potentially able to be ripened. Moreover, a Bodhisattva can himself be reborn in the Buddha Field of a Buddha, in the Buddha's direct presence, or travel there in meditation. The Buddha Field is precisely a place where conditions are obviously advantageous to his spiritual progress. Thus a Buddha Field is both a place where a Bodhisattva can see the Buddha and pursue his or her career, and also the goal of the Bodhisattva's striving, his own Buddha Field purified for sentient beings through his own efforts (Rowell 1935: 185 ff., 406 ff.). And from his place within his realm one text rather poetically informs us that three times a day, and three times a night, the Buddha surveys his Buddha Field in order to see who can be morally and spiritually helped (Lamotte 1962: 396-7).

So the Bodhisattva purifies his Buddha Field, and the realm within which the Buddha exerts his activity is the result of his purifying deeds as a Bodhisattva. This gives rise to a problem. It is agreed on all counts that the *Sahā* world of Śākyamuni is not a very pure place. This world is indeed a thoroughly impure Buddha Field. Some Mahāyāna texts speak of three types of Buddha Field: pure, impure, and mixed. For example, in an impure Buddha Field there are non-Buddhists, seriously suffering beings, differences of lineage etc., immoral beings, lower realms such as hells, inferior conduct and Inferior Vehicles (the Mainstream

Buddhist traditions), and so on. Bodhisattvas of excellent conduct, and the actual appearance of a Buddha, are rare. In fact this world of Śākyamuni is pretty grim for the pious follower of Mahāyāna. A pure Buddha Field, on the other hand, such as Amitāyus' Sukhāvātī, will be something like this:

well adorned, having no filth or evil, no tiles or pebbles, no thorns or thistles, no excrement or other impurities. Its soil shall be flat and even, having no high or low, no hills, or crevices. It shall have vaiḍūrya ['beryl', following Paul Harrison] for earth, and jewelled trees in rows. With cords made of gold shall its highways be bordered. It shall be everywhere clean and pure, with jewelled flowers scattered about.

(*Lotus Sūtra*, in Hurvitz 1976: 120)

Such a pure Buddha Field—in East Asia it is spoken of as a 'Pure Land'—has a Buddha who lives for a very long time (perhaps for all eternity), who does not abandon his flock, as Śākyamuni appears to have done after only 40 years or so. There are many Bodhisattvas in that realm, and the devil, Māra, and his evil host cannot work their vicious ways. Obviously such a Pure Land is an excellent place for developing the path to enlightenment while our *Sahā* world, particularly since the death of the Master, is not really so very good. Since there are infinite Buddha Fields and therefore also infinite Pure Lands at this very moment throughout the 10 directions, surely the overriding immediate task must be to visit these Pure Lands if at all possible and eventually to be reborn there.

Earlier Buddhism had taught that merit led to a heavenly rebirth after death, but all heavens are *saṃsāra*, impermanent and pervaded with final frustration and suffering. A Pure Land is emphatically not, in Buddhist terminology, a heaven (*svarga*). Rather, one should practise the correct meditations (i.e. *buddhānusmṛti*) and skilfully direct the fruit of one's good deeds, merit, to be reborn not in a heaven but in the chosen Pure Land. While it may certainly not be easy to get to a Pure Land, in a Pure Land because of the presence of Buddha and his teachings one can relatively easily attain *nirvāṇa*, or significantly advance on the path to Buddhahood, as we know from the stories people were able to do in India at the time of Śākyamuni. Indeed, attaining *nirvāṇa* in a Pure Land is much easier than it was in India at the time of Śākyamuni, since a Pure Land is much more conducive to practising the Dharma than impure India was and is. Thus, unlike a heaven, from a Pure Land there need be no further uncontrolled *saṃsāric* rebirth.

This is all quite logical, and perfectly consistent with the development of Buddhist thought. The present world bereft of a Buddha is a difficult place in which to attain enlightenment. Nevertheless, in infinite universes there are still Buddhas, perhaps even Śākyamuni himself. It is possible to see them in meditation, and to hear their wonderful teachings. There is thus nothing to prevent one from being reborn in their presence. Consequently, the quest for *nirvāṇa*, or even Perfect Buddhahood, requires in most cases the immediate goal of rebirth in a Pure Land in the presence of a Buddha. In ensuring that he or she will be reborn in a Pure Land after death, the practitioner becomes here and now a 'non-returner' (*anāgāmin*), one who will no longer be reborn in this world, but will attain enlightenment very soon, perhaps in the very next life. This is a very advanced stage of Buddhist practice indeed, much more advanced than most people would normally expect to attain under present conditions in the world as it is now bereft of a Buddha.

But where does this leave poor Śākyamuni? His Buddha Field is impure, therefore Śākyamuni and his purifying activity as a Bodhisattva were obviously strikingly ineffective. To quote from Śāriputra in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*:

If the buddha-field is pure only to the extent that the mind of the bodhisattva is pure, then, when Śākyamuni Buddha was engaged in the career of the bodhisattva, his mind must have been impure. Otherwise, how could this buddha-field appear to be so impure? (Thurman 1976: 18)

Moreover, Śākyamuni has now gone, while there are still many sentient beings here in this world to be saved. His compassion must therefore be defective.

There are a number of ways in which one can deal with these problems. First, one could simply say that all Buddhas are in fact identical. Śākyamuni appeared to help sentient beings at a particular time and place. Although he has died there are many other Buddhas, and also there are Pure Lands elsewhere. These Buddhas are continuing to help beings in this *Sahā* world. One could combine this with the scheme of the Buddha bodies. Śākyamuni was a Transformation Body, an emanation of another Buddha, who remains in a pure Buddha Field, still active in all ways for the benefit of sentient beings here on earth. In other words, the impure Buddha Field is not the primary Buddha Field, but is a skilful means of a Buddha who necessarily, as a Buddha, really has a Pure Buddha Field. Alternatively this supramundane Buddha could himself be Śākyamuni (as in the *Lotus Sūtra*). Another strategy would be to see the Buddha Field as the range of a Buddha's activity, but not necessarily completely purified by his previous activity. Since he is compassionate, a Buddha creates his Buddha Field as the most suitable place for particular beings to be saved. This strategy was strikingly adopted by the *Karunāpūṇḍarīka Sūtra*, a sūtra which sought to restore Śākyamuni to pre-

eminence in the face of Pure Land cults centred on Amitāyus and Akṣobhya. These other Buddhas teach sentient beings who can reach their Pure Lands. But the greatest Bodhisattvas, the real Bodhisattvas, vow to appear as Buddhas in *impure* realms, tainted Buddha Fields, out of their great compassion (Yamada 1968: I, 78). The very fact that Śākyamuni appeared in this *Sahā* realm, a ghastly place, indicates his remarkable compassion.

The most common solution to Śāriputra's dilemma, however, and of crucial importance in subsequent East Asian Buddhism, is that given by the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* itself. This impure Buddha Field is indeed the Pure Land. It only appears impure because of the minds of sentient beings dwelling in it. If there are mountains in this world, and all is flat in the Pure Land, that is because there are mountains in the mind. Śākyamuni is not a deficient Buddha. To him all is pure. The impurity that we see is the result of impure awareness, and also the Buddha's compassion in creating a world within which impure beings can grow (Thurman 1976: 18-19; cf. Rowell 1937: 142 ff.). Thus the real way to attain a Pure Land is to purify one's own mind. Put another way, we are already in the Pure Land if we but knew it. Whatever the realm, if it is inhabited by people with enlightened pure minds then it is a Pure Land. This is very much like the Buddha-nature/*tathāgatagarbha* assertion that we are already fully-enlightened Buddhas if we but recognize the fact, and it is only a short step from the Chan (Zen) notion that the Pure Land is really simply the tranquil, clear radiant, pure Mind. The Pure Land is truly, therefore, not a 'heavenly abode' but is rather demythologized as enlightenment itself.

Some Bodhisattvas

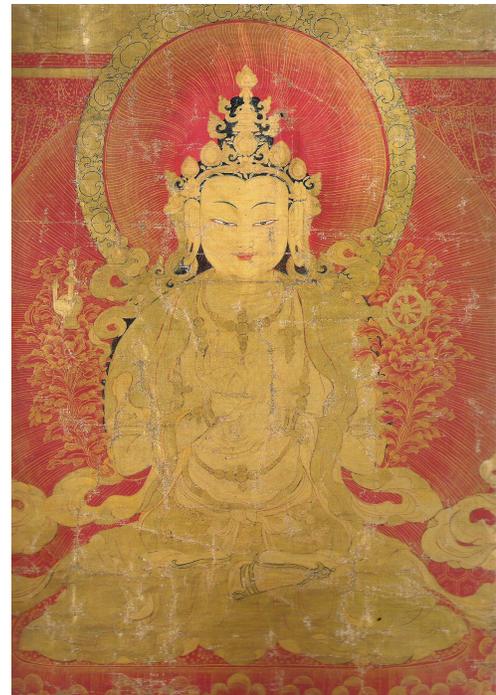
Maitreya

The truth that the Buddha discovered and taught was not unique to him. It is the true way of things, and 'whether Tathāgatas arise or do not arise the true way of things remains'. The idea that there were Buddhas previous to Śākyamuni must have originated fairly early, perhaps during the lifetime of the Buddha himself, and it is scarcely a dramatic inference to deduce from this that there will be further Buddhas in the future. Moreover, if there are future Buddhas then the being who is to become the very next Buddha in this world must already exist and be far advanced on his Bodhisattva path. That being is Maitreya (Pali: Metteyya). Maitreya is the only present Bodhisattva with a 'celestial' status accepted by both the Mahāyāna and the Mainstream Buddhist traditions.

A version of the story of Maitreya is contained in a Sanskrit work, the *Maitreyavyākaraṇa*, the *Prediction of Maitreya*, which may also have been an important text in establishing a Mahāyāna cult of Maitreya. Life under the Buddha Maitreya will take place in a type of Buddhist millennium. This time is commonly (but by no means always) thought to be very far in the distant future. At that time gods, men and other beings will worship Maitreya and

will lose their doubts, and the torrents of their cravings will be cut off;
free from all misery they will manage to cross the ocean of becoming;
and, as a result of Maitreya's teachings, they will lead a holy life. No longer will they regard anything as their own, they will have no possessions, no gold or silver, no home, no relatives! But they will lead the holy life of chastity under Maitreya's guidance. They will have torn the net of the passions, they will manage to enter into the trances, and theirs will be an abundance of joy and happiness; for they will lead a holy life under Maitreya's guidance. (Conze 1959: 241)

[. . .] In art Maitreya is frequently portrayed not in the traditional lotus posture but rather seated on a throne in 'Western' fashion with his legs crossed at the ankles. Depiction of Maitreya in his palace in the middle of Tuṣita [a heavenly realm, not a Pure Land] may well have preceded historically the representation of the Pure Lands and had some influence on it. In Central Asia there are many images and paintings of Maitreya surviving, placed particularly in the space above the door of a shrine, facing the main figure. Maitreya often carries a vase or bottle. Thus as the devotee turns to leave, having circumambulated the shrine, or prostrated to, say, Śākyamuni, he or she is confronted by the Buddha of the Future, awaiting his final birth on earth. Gigantic statues of Maitreya were erected on the trade and pilgrimage routes through Afghanistan and Central Asia to China. It was apparently the custom to erect such a colossal statue on the border of each new country conquered by the faith—bound over



Maitreya in Tuṣita Heaven, Tibet, 17th c.

to the millennium of Maitreya (Gaulier *et al.* 1976: 11). The custom of constructing such large statues was no doubt influenced by the idea that Maitreya is 80 cubits tall, a statement found in both Sanskrit and Pali sources (cf. Soper 1959: 214, 216). This fact too was witnessed, it seems, by the flying sculptor in Faxian's travelogue.

In Asian art Bodhisattvas are frequently portrayed as princes or princesses, with rich jewellery and robes. They are indeed consecrated to succeed the Buddha as *dharmarāja*, Kings of the Doctrine. An exception to this is the fat, roly-poly 'Laughing Buddha' who is found in so many Western homes. He too is a Chinese form of Maitreya. As in Central Asia, the Chinese cave sanctuaries also have a number of images of Maitreya. At Dunhuang, for example, there are large painted clay statues instantly identifiable by their 'Western' sitting posture. There is also an impressive painting on silk from Dunhuang (ninth/tenth centuries) in the British Museum, depicting the delights of the world when Maitreya appears as a Buddha. The king and queen can be seen with shaved heads, renouncing the world to become enlightened under Maitreya's tutelage. Wedding feasts, ploughing and reaping are old, pre-Buddhist devices for indicating a true age of plenty, the golden age of the past which is yet to come anew.

Avalokiteśvara



Avalokiteśvara Padmāṇi, Ajaṅṭā, India, 6th c.

In his (or her) different forms Avalokiteśvara is perhaps the most popular of all Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Like Maitreya, Mañjuśrī and the others he is a Bodhisattva of the elevated tenth stage. It is by no means clear how early a practical cult of Avalokiteśvara appeared 'on the ground' in India. On archaeological and epigraphic grounds it may have been as late as the fifth century CE. But we have looked already at one of the earliest literary sources for his cult, the Avalokiteśvara chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. This chapter frequently circulated as a separate sūtra in its own right. It describes how calling to mind Avalokiteśvara will save from numerous sufferings—fire, rivers, storms on the ocean, murderers, demons and ghosts, prison (whether one be guilty or innocent), and also robbers. It can remove moreover lust, anger and stupidity and lead to the birth of sons or daughters to those who wish for them. As an advanced Bodhisattva, through his skill-in-means Avalokiteśvara can also appear in manifold different forms, whichever is most suitable for aiding, converting, and saving sentient beings. If a Buddha form is suitable, then he appears as a Buddha; if a Hearer form, as a Hearer; if a god, then as a god. He appears as a householder, or as a monk; as a nun, boy, girl or non-human. According to one Tibetan tale he appeared in the form of a cuckoo so that the birds too could hear the teaching of the Buddha. Tibetans also commonly say that he appears among them in the form of the Dalai Lama. Avalokiteśvara comes to be seen as the most wonderful compassionate saviour of the universe, constantly and tirelessly acting with all the powers of a tenth-level Bodhisattva for the benefit of all sentient

beings without discrimination. As such, Avalokiteśvara is said to be the veritable incarnation of all the Buddhas' compassion, their essence, and very reason for being. As compassion incarnate, Avalokiteśvara is held to be concerned not only with enlightenment but with all the little sufferings of everyday life. Avalokiteśvara is a divine being to whom one can pray for aid and consolation. Faxian, on his long and dangerous journey to and from India, describes how he prayed earnestly to Avalokiteśvara to save him from shipwreck, and also to save him from his travelling companions, who wanted to cast him adrift on a desert island as a bringer of bad luck. [. . .]

Apart from the *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the other principal Indian sources for the Avalokiteśvara cult is the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. This text is entirely devoted to recounting and praising the miraculous deeds of the Bodhisattva. Avalokiteśvara descends into hell in order to save the suffering hell-beings. The hot hells immediately become cool, lotuses appear, the torture cauldrons burst asunder. Hell is well and truly harrowed. The Bodhisattva is praised as having 1,000 arms and 11 heads, an important iconographic feature of one form of Avalokiteśvara. Quite extraordinarily, it is also suggested that Avalokiteśvara created the world and all the Hindu gods with it:

From his eyes arose the moon and sun, from his forehead Maheśvara [Śiva], from his shoulders Brahmā, from his heart Nārāyaṇa [Viṣṇu], from his teeth Sarasvatī, from his mouth the winds, from his feet the earth, and from his belly Varuṇa. When these gods were born from the body of Avalokiteśvara, then he said to the god Maheśvara, "Thou shalt be Maheśvara in

the Kālī age, when the world of evil creatures arises. Thou shalt be called Ādideva (the primal god), the creator, the maker. . . .' (Thomas 1952: 76-7)

Avalokiteśvara places the Hindu gods in their places, they rule by his permission. There is undoubtedly an iconographical and quite possibly an historical connection of Avalokiteśvara with the Hindu god Śiva. We have seen already that Avalokiteśvara bestows upon Śiva his place in the Hindu pantheon. Nevertheless, Avalokiteśvara himself is also called Maheśvara in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha* —Great Lord, a standard epithet of Śiva. He is described as 'a beautiful man . . . wearing a diadem on his matted hair, his mind filled with the highest friendliness, and looking like a disc of gold' (Thomas 1952: 74). This could be a description of Śiva, for whom the matted hair is a symbol as Lord of the Yogins. In a lovely Kashmiri brass sculpture from c. 1000 CE, Avalokiteśvara is shown seated on Potalaka, his mountain home, with matted hair and deer. Behind is what initially looks very much like Śiva's trident. Śiva too dwells in the mountains as a yogin, and is associated with animals in his role of Lord of the Animals. Elsewhere Avalokiteśvara is described as 'blue-throated', a term for Śiva embedded in Śaivite mythology. Śiva too could hence find himself worshipped as a Bodhisattva (as indeed can Viṣṇu: Gellner 1992: 79, 95),

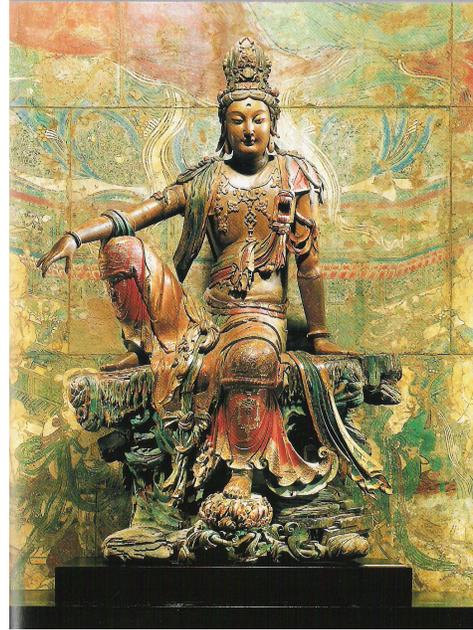
In spite of his obvious links with the Brāhmanic god Śiva, in Nepal where Avalokiteśvara is a particularly important figure Hindus also sometimes identify Avalokiteśvara with Kṛṣṇa. Correspondingly it is common for Newar Buddhists in Nepal to worship Hindu gods holding that they are 'really worshipping Avalokiteśvara' (Gellner 1992: 81, 95). This is one way in which Buddhism to the present day in Nepal can survive in a dominant Hindu environment, and may well suggest a process that occurred in past centuries in India too. And yet in the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra* Avalokiteśvara declares: 'I am no god, but a man, and have become a bodhisattva, having compassion on the abandoned and wretched, and a teacher of the way of enlightenment' (Thomas 1951: 191). Avalokiteśvara travels to Sri Lanka to save the demons who dwell there. In Benares (Varanasi) he hums the Doctrine in the form of a bee in order to save thousands of worms. Elsewhere he reveals his great *mantra*, the utterance which articulates and invokes his very being: *oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ*. [. . .]

In East Asia, Avalokiteśvara has changed sex, It is not totally clear why or exactly how early this began to happen, although it may have had something to do with absorption into the figure of Avalokiteśvara of Chinese female deities. D. T. Suzuki implies that the male version of Avalokiteśvara is the 'doctrinal' Bodhisattva, while the female is the 'popular' version (Suzuki 1935: 341). This is scarcely very helpful or convincing, A Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) painting shows Avalokiteśvara (known in China as Guanyin; in Japanese: Kwannon or Kannon) with a moustache, and in this form he was also portrayed at Dunhuang. Nevertheless, we have seen that 'he' could manifest in female form, Although cases are found earlier, in China the transformation seems to have taken place definitively during the Song dynasty (tenth-thirteenth centuries), and it was complete by the sixteenth century. Which is the real form? Obviously neither male nor female. Each is taken according to needs and circumstances. Or, put another way, in 'his' true nature, as a Chinese poem has it, Avalokiteśvara is sexless:

The Dharma-body of Kuan-yin [Guanyin]
Is neither male nor female,
Even the body is not a body,
What attributes can there be? . . . ,
Let it be known to all Buddhists:
Do not cling to form,
The bodhisattva is *you*:
Not the picture or the image.

(Tay 1976: 173)

Truly, the Bodhisattva is the Buddha-nature, which is equally in all sentient beings. In spite of this, the female form of Avalokiteśvara has provided some of the most attractive stories in Buddhist folk literature (Blofeld 1977), and some of the most beautiful works in the world of religious art. Among the various forms of Guanyin, all female, we find the Guanyin 'Giver of Children' —the so-called 'Chinese Madonna and Child' —or the 'Lion' Roar' Guanyin, seated on the back of a playful Chinese



Guanyin, China, 12th-13th c.

lion, or the Guanyin 'Holder of the Lotus', reflecting the old versions of Avalokiteśvara Padmāpaṇi found in India, most notably in the extraordinarily beautiful painting in Cave I at Ajaṅṭā (Gupta period, sixth century). In this painting Avalokiteśvara is at once male and female, with broad shoulders and a soft face, epitomizing compassion, gentleness, and yet inner strength, a willingness and ability to help. There is also Guanyin 'Holder of the Willow Branch', and many figures of Guanyin holding the slender-necked vase containing the elixir of immortality, but the East Asian Guanyin *par excellence* is probably the swirling porcelain White-Robed Guanyin. From Japan, where there are many places of pilgrimage sacred to Kannon; there is a famous wooden statue carved from a single block of camphor wood; and also a striking wooden figure from the fourteenth century in which the wood itself is gilded, and then giltbronze, crystal and semi-precious stones are used for the detail and trappings, most notably an ornate 'spiky' headdress and halo. Both these figures appear to be male, although the female Kannon is also popular. On a hill south-east of Tokyo was erected in the late 1950s an enormous Kannon, more than 50 metres high, to serve as a war memorial. It is possible to ascend the statue and observe the view from a viewing platform in the crook of her protective arms.

Eleven-headed forms of Avalokiteśvara were popular in Central Asia and China during the seventh and eighth centuries, while 11-headed, 1,000-armed Avalokiteśvara, together with a four-armed version, are still the most popular forms in Tibetan Buddhism. In his four-armed version Avalokiteśvara (who in Tibetan Buddhism is always depicted as male) is shown seated in the lotus posture, a deer skin over his left shoulder, with two palms pressed together holding a wish-fulfilling jewel, his other right hand holding a rosary and his left a lotus. He is white in colour. He smiles, irradiating his devotee with compassion, a compassion the devotee seeks to generate in himself as he transcends the outer form and realizes his own nature as that of Avalokiteśvara.

One last point. Do all these Bodhisattvas really exist, or are they simply teaching devices of the Buddha, for the benefit of those who are at a particular level on the spiritual path? The answer is both—or neither. From a Buddhist point of view these beings do not *really* exist, they are empty of intrinsic existence, or products of the mind. But then, so are we all. The Bodhisattvas like Avalokiteśvara are as real as we are. On the level of their unreality there is enlightenment, and no one to be enlightened. But on the level of our unenlightened state, they are real enough—and as unenlightened beings we need all the help we can get.

Tārā

As far as I know, all the forms of Avalokiteśvara found in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism are male. The feminine aspect of compassion is more than adequately fulfilled, however, by Tārā. In particular, devotion to Tārā is a hallmark of Buddhism in Tibet and those areas influenced by Tibet, and is also very important in Nepalese Newar Buddhism.

Tārā too dwells on the Potalaka mountain, for she is closely associated with the figure of Avalokiteśvara. Like Avalokiteśvara, Tārā appears to have Śaivite elements in her tradition and iconography. According to a popular Tibetan legend Avalokiteśvara despaired of saving so many sentient beings, even with a 1,000 arms and 11 heads. The task was so great that he wept, and from a teardrop of compassion Tārā was born to help him: 'So there is not a being, no matter how insignificant, whose suffering is not seen by Avalokiteśvara or by Tārā, and who cannot be touched by their compassion' (Hyde-Chambers and Hyde-Chambers 1981: 6; slightly modified). According to another, more 'literary' version, Tārā was born from a blue lotus which grew in his tears. Either way, her real origin lies in her development of *bodhicitta* and her cultivation of the Bodhisattva path over many aeons. Particularly significant is her vow in response to the suggestion that she should change sex in order to develop further along the path to enlightenment:



Eleven-Headed Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara, Bhutan, 19th c.

There are many who desire Enlightenment in a man's body, but none who work [*sic.*] for the benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. Therefore, until saṃsāra is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman's body. (Tāranātha, in Willson 1986: 34)

Tibetans are now quite happy to refer to Tārā as a fully-enlightened female Buddha.

There are no major Tārā sūtras, although there is a *Tārā Tantra* which is relatively late. As far as we can tell at the moment, Tārā first appears in Indian Buddhist art during the sixth century, together with Avalokiteśvara and expressing his compassion. In the *Tārā Tantra* and elsewhere she is also said to be the 'Mother of all the Buddhas', in spite of the fact that she is held to be perpetually 16 years old — old but yet young. This suggests an absorption with the earlier image of the deity Prajñāpāramitā, also female, and therefore with emptiness itself. By the seventh century Tārā is established as a deity in her own right, and is said in particular to save from eight great fears: lions, elephants, fires, snakes, bandits, captivity, shipwreck and demons. She has clearly taken over here some of the functions of Avalokiteśvara.

The great importance of Tārā in Tibetan Buddhism is perhaps due to the enthusiastic advocacy of her cause by Atiśa, the eleventh-century Bengali missionary to Tibet. Tārā was Atiśa's personal chosen deity, and she is said to have intervened at a number of crucial points in his life. Atiśa consulted her before going to Tibet. We are told that she predicted that if he went his life would be shorter, but he would benefit numerous beings. Atiśa wrote a brief praise of Tārā (Willson 1986: 293 -4), but one of the most impressive praises of the Bodhisattva is the fervent prayer by the nineteenth-century Tibetan lama bLo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (pronounced: Lo zang ten pay gyel tsen), in which he shows despair at the usual channels of religious activity and inspiration, and a deep, loving devotion to his chosen deity:

I call the jewels as witness — from not just my mouth,
But the depth of my inmost heart and bones, I pray —
Think of me somewhat! Show me your smiling face!
Loving One, grant me the nectar of Your Speech!
(Willson 1986: 324)

Iconographically, Tārā has a number of forms. Tibetan iconography is very complex and strict, since the images are of crucial importance in tantric meditation. Twenty-one forms of Tārā are commonly referred to in Tibetan Buddhism, and these are hymned in the most frequent of chants to Tārā. In general, however, the most frequent forms found are the Green and White Tārās. The Green is the principal form of Tārā, seated on a moon resting on a lotus, with left leg drawn up, and the foot of the right leg on a lotus 'footstool'. She is adorned with all the ornaments and trappings of a Bodhisattva, very beautiful, and her left hand in front of her heart holds the stem of a blue lotus, while the right arm and hand are extended, palm open, as if handing down blessings. Sometimes this hand too holds a blue lotus. Sūryagupta, a ninth-century Kashmiri scholar, cries out to her:

Homage! Whose right hand grants boons to beings,
Blue lotus in left; complete with all ornaments,
Graceful, with shining blue-green complexion,
Youthful, wide-eyed and full-breasted.'
(Willson 1986: 139)

The White Tārā is generally associated in Tibetan Buddhism with long-life practices. She is seated in the full lotus position, white in colour, with her left hand at her heart holding the stem of a white lotus. Her right arm and hand are again extended, bestowing blessings. She is easily recognized, since she has seven eyes, three on her face, and one in each palm and foot.



White Tārā, Tibet, 17th c.

Mañjuśrī

Just as Avalokiteśvara is said to incarnate all the Buddhas' compassion, so Mañjuśrī manifests the other 'wing' of enlightenment — wisdom. Of course, both are tenth-stage Bodhisattvas and in reality have equal attainments. But just as Avalokiteśvara is met performing heroic deeds of compassion in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Mañjuśrī is particularly associated with the role of interlocutor on questions concerning ultimate truth in such sūtras as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Like Tārā, on the other hand, Mañjuśrī is said to be ever young, a youth of 16, a 'crown prince' who is nevertheless ancient in wisdom. Mañjuśrī is not important in the earlier *Prajñāpāramitā*, but he does play a significant role in the *Saptaśatikā Prajñāpāramitā*, and an important text for the cult of Mañjuśrī, the *Mañjuśrībuddhakṣetraguṇavyūha*, had already been translated into Chinese by the end of the third century. According to Paul Harrison the very early Lokakṣema corpus of texts translated into Chinese 'reflect the emergence of Mañjuśrī as an important archetypal *bodhisattva* figure by the middle of the second century C.E.'. In Indian Buddhist art, on the other hand, Mañjuśrī appears relatively late (from about the fifth century). [. .]

According to the 25,000-verse *Perfection of Wisdom*, a Bodhisattva who has reached the tenth stage is to be known, quite simply, as a Tathāgata — which is to say, a Buddha. Although he is not a Buddha, from our side he (or she) is so amazing that we could not distinguish him from a Buddha. In the *Mañjuśrībuddhakṣetraguṇavyūha* we are told how Mañjuśrī many, many aeons ago gave rise to the *bodhicitta* in the presence of a previous Buddha. In producing the *bodhicitta* he made a series of vows. He would always act for the benefit of sentient beings, without greed, miserliness or resentment. He would always observe complete morality and be perfectly pure. Moreover, most significantly, Mañjuśrī would never wish to attain a rapid (self-seeking) enlightenment (*bodhi*), but rather would continue to benefit sentient beings 'until the end of future. He would purify an immense, inconceivable Buddha Field, and would cause his name to be known throughout the 10 directions.

Mañjuśrī has now attained the tenth stage of a Bodhisattva. He is asked why he does not proceed straightway to full Buddhahood. The reply is that in fully understanding emptiness and acting accordingly there is nothing more to do. He has let go of the notion of full Buddhahood. He no longer seeks enlightenment; indeed, in the light of emptiness he cannot attain enlightenment (Chang 1983: 170 ff., 177-8, 183). In saying this, of course, Mañjuśrī indicates that he is already fully enlightened. According to the *Aṅgulimālīya Sūtra*, Mañjuśrī is now actually a Buddha, with a Buddha Field (Lamotte 1960: 29-30). We have seen that a tenth-stage Bodhisattva can manifest in whatever way he or she wish for the benefit of beings. In an important section of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi Sūtra*, a work first translated into Chinese perhaps towards the end of the second century, Mañjuśrī is said to have been in the past a Buddha, who manifested all the deeds of a Buddha and finally entered nirvāṇa — or so it seemed. Nevertheless, in so doing the great Bodhisattva do not give up their (compassionate) nature as Bodhisattvas, and in entering final nirvāṇa they have not in fact completely disappeared and abandoned sentient beings. The same point is made in a short sūtra which may depend upon the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*, known as the *Mañjuśrīparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (translated into Chinese at the end of the third century). Mañjuśrī, through his meditative power, many times manifests entry into final nirvāṇa (*parinirvāṇa*) in different regions, and even leaves holy relics behind. All this is for the benefit of beings. He emanates as many Buddhas as are needed, but he can also manifest as a poor wretch, in order that beings can make merit through compassion and donations. Immense benefits arise from seeing even an image of Mañjuśrī, and also pronouncing his name. Through such practices beings will be freed from the lower realms (Lamotte 1960: 35-9). According to a Chinese tradition, Mañjuśrī vowed to take the same form as every pilgrim who visits his sacred mountain of Wutai. Thus he could appear even as a thief or gambler. An important abbot and Chan monk of recent times, Xuyun (Hsü-yün: dates said to be 1840-1959) tells how he was helped on his arduous pilgrimage by a beggar whom he later realized to be Mañjuśrī himself. Various scholars in Buddhist history are said to have seen



Mañjuśrī, Tibet, 19th c.

and received visionary inspiration from Mañjuśrī, most notably, perhaps, Tsong kha pa, and Mañjuśrī is said in Tibet to be the inspirer of the profound wisdom teachings of the Mādhyamika.

According to one relatively early Mahāyāna sūtra, Śākyamuni Buddha disclosed that in the past he was a disciple of Mañjuśrī, and his very status as a Buddha is now due to Mañjuśrī, who is both father and mother to innumerable Buddhas. Mañjuśrī, is, of course, wisdom incarnate, and one remembers here both Prajñāpāramitā and Tārā as 'mother of all the Buddhas'. He is referred to by one scholar, appropriately named Mañjuśrīmitra (late seventh/early eighth centuries), as 'the errorless comprehension of the character of *bodhicitta*, the birthplace of all the Buddhas' (*Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti* 1985: 8). The supremacy of Mañjuśrī is stated repeatedly in one of the most important texts on Mañjuśrī used for chanting in Tibetan Buddhism, the tantric *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*. Mañjuśrī 'holds the enlightenment of a fully enlightened Buddha' (*ibid.*: 8: 42). He is the fully awakened, supreme, omniscient one (*ibid.*: 9: 15). He is the progenitor of all the Buddhas, and at the same time their most excellent son (*ibid.*: 6: 19). Mañjuśrī is master (*indra*) of the gods, and god of gods (*ibid.*: 10: 6), who dwells in the mind of all beings (*ibid.*: 9: 20).

At this sublime point, however, let us note that just as in India early Mahāyāna may have been characterized by cultic practices centred on certain sūtras, and certain meditative absorptions, so it was very likely also marked by groups centred on different and often rival Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In one lovely sūtra, Mañjuśrī is bettered in a discourse on wisdom by an 8-year-old girl. She had been treading the Bodhisattva path for 60 aeons when Mañjuśrī made his vows. Her future Buddha Field will be — oh, so much better than that of Mañjuśrī (Chang 1983: 93-4). Still, Mañjuśrī's Buddha Field is said elsewhere to be much better than Sukhāvāti (*ibid.*: 183-4), So there!

The iconography of Mañjuśrī is a relatively late development. In Indo-Tibetan Buddhism he is usually represented as a young prince, seated on a lotus, with a sword in his right hand, held above his head, and a book in the left. Sometimes in the left hand he holds the stem of a lotus, and the book is placed on the lotus behind his left shoulder. The sword is said to be the sword of gnosis which cuts aside the bonds of ignorance. The book is the *Prajñāpāramitā*, usually held in Tibet to be the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* version.

In Sino-Japanese art in particular, and Central Asian art which is influenced by China, Mañjuśrī rides on a lion, and often parallels Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, who rides an enormous six-tusked elephant. The two bodhisattvas are found placed either side of the Buddha Vairocana to form a triad. Because of the importance of the *Avataṃsaka* in East Asian Buddhism, and also because of his role as a guardian of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Samantabhadra has a significant place as a cult figure in Sino-Japanese Buddhism. In China he too is given a sacred mountain, this time Emei (Omei) Shan in Sichuan province.

A block-print of Mañjuśrī and lion from Dunhuang (tenth century) makes clear the association of Mañjuśrī with Wutai Shan, where apparently the oldest wooden temple buildings in China (782-897) still stand (Zwalf 1985: 230). A lovely Chinese ink painting from the fourteenth century depicts a long-haired, relaxed Mañjuśrī reading a scroll (the *Perfection of Wisdom?*), seated on a sleepy but perhaps slightly peeved lion. A statue of Mañjuśrī from Dazu (Ta-tsu), in Sichuan (1154), also depicts him on his lion — a Chinese lion that looks facially more like a giant Pekingese dog, dogs which were bred precisely to look like Mañjuśrī's lion. In Mañjuśrī's left hand is the book. The sword seems more often than not to be missing in Sino-Japanese art (Oort 1986: 2, plate 23a).

Some Buddhas

Akṣobhya

Our principal literary source for the mythology of Akṣobhya and any cult it might have involved is the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra*, although further information is found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*. The *Akṣobhyavyūha* exists in more than one recension, of which the earliest was translated into Chinese towards the end of the second century CE. In terms of antiquity of translation, therefore, this makes it one of the earliest datable Mahāyāna sūtras. As such it may well show an early textual stage in the development of the Pure Land tradition, a stage subsequently



Akṣobhya, Tibet, 12th c.

extended and elaborated in connection with the traditions centred on Amitābha/Amitāyus and Sukhāvātī that gradually eclipsed it (see Nattier 2000: 73, 79-80). The *Akṣobhyavyūha* was possibly written originally not in Sanskrit but in Gāndhārī, the local language of north-west India under the Kuṣāṇas (Dantinne 1983: 1).

According to the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra* there is in the east, far, far away, a Buddha Field named Abhirati. In that world-system, long ago, a monk vowed to follow the path to full Buddhahood. In so doing he made, as is the custom, a series of great vows which are very difficult to fulfil, stressing his future Bodhisattva practices. In following the path he would never in any way bear malice, never retreat into the lower Vehicles, never engage in even the slightest immorality. As a monk he would always be the most perfect monk, austere, eloquent, dignified, mindful in the presence of women, not listening to non-Buddhist doctrines and so on. This applies not just to the present life but to all lives, with body, speech and mind. He would always save criminals about to be punished, even at the cost of his own life. This account of the Bodhisattva's vows, particularly his perfect morality, is important. First, it indicates the scope of Akṣobhya's aspirations. Second, through adhering to mighty vows the Bodhisattva, and eventual Buddha, gains great, immeasurable merit, and as a direct consequence immense power to help others. Finally, as the text itself makes clear, the purity of the Bodhisattva's morality has a direct bearing on the purity of his eventual Buddha Field. Akṣobhya's realm of Abhirati is, after all, a fully-qualified Pure Land.

As a consequence of his great aspiration and vows this Bodhisattva was predicted to full enlightenment, a prediction accompanied by suitably wonderful miracles. After extraordinary exertions over a phenomenal length of time all has now come to pass, and he is indeed the Buddha Akṣobhya, who reigns over that land of Abhirati far, far distant in the east. At Akṣobhya's enlightenment Māra did not even bother to try and hinder him. The sūtra devotes some time to describing the delights of Akṣobhya's Buddha Field, for this indicates the greatness of Akṣobhya, tempts devotees, and serves as a basis for visualization and recollection of the Buddha Akṣobhya. In that land there is an enormous tree under which the Buddha sits on a raised platform:

Around the bodhi-tree are rows of palm trees and jasmine trees, which in the gentle breeze, [gives] forth a harmonious and elegant sound surpassing all worldly music. Furthermore . . . that Buddha-land does not have the three miserable planes of existence. . . . All the sentient beings in that Buddha-land have accomplished the ten good deeds. The ground is as flat as a palm and the colour of gold, with no gullies, brambles, or gravel; it is as soft as cotton, sinking as soon as one's foot steps on it and returning to its original state as soon as the foot is lifted.

(Chang 1983: 322; cf. Dantinne 1983: 189-90)

In Abhirati there are no illnesses, no lying, no ugliness or smelly things. There are no jails. No non-Buddhists. Trees are laden with flowers and fruit, and there are also trees which produce fragrant and beautiful garments. Food and drink appear as wished: 'There are . . . many gardens and pavilions, all pure and clean. The sentient beings there all live with joy in the Dharma' (Chang 1983: 322). There is no jealousy, women there are wonderfully beautiful, and they are freed from the curse of menstruation (*ibid.*: 323, 319; Dantinne 1983: 97, 194 ff.):

Furthermore, in that land, mother and child are safe and unsullied from conception to birth. How can this be? All this is due to the power of Tathāgata Akṣobhya's original vows. . . . [I]n that Buddha-land there is such peace and bliss. . . . [T]here is neither trade nor trader, neither farms nor farming; there is happiness at all times. . . . [I]n that Buddha-land, singing and playing do not involve sexual desire. The sentient-beings there derive their joy exclusively from the Dharma.

(Chang 1983: 325; cf. Dantinne 1983: 201-2)

[. . .] How is the aspirant then to be reborn in this wonderful land? It is made clear that in general such a rebirth is quite difficult. It is through strenuous moral and spiritual cultivation. Broadly, first, if the aspirant is able to do so then they should follow the Bodhisattva path, and vow to be reborn in that land of Abhirati. Second, all merit obtained through good works should be dedicated to the future rebirth there. Nevertheless, one should not be selfish. The motive power for this rebirth is in order to attain enlightenment and then 'illuminate the whole world' (Chang 1983: 332). The practitioner should learn meditation and frequent holy people. Significantly it is also important to visualize the Buddhas in their Buddha Fields expounding the Doctrine, and vow to be like them. By such means one can be reborn in the Pure Land of Buddha Akṣobhya in the future, and even now, immediately fall under his divine protection (*ibid.*: 332-5).

One noteworthy feature of Akṣobhya and his Pure Land is that this Buddha will eventually enter final nirvāṇa, having arranged for his successor, in the same way that Śākyamuni arranged for Maitreya. Akṣobhya's final act will be self-cremation, apparently through internal combustion generated by the force of meditation. The Doctrine preached by Akṣobhya will endure for many aeons after his passing, but will eventually decline. All this will happen because of the declining merit of people in Abhirati: 'It is because people of that time will lack interest in learning the Dharma that those who can expound the Dharma will go away from

them' (Chang 1983: 332). People will hear little of the teaching, and will cease to practise. The learned monks will therefore withdraw into seclusion, and eventually the Dharma will be no more.

It is clear throughout this discussion that the land of Abhirati and the Tathāgata Akṣobhya are modelled on Śākyamuni and his world — but raised in all respects to a higher plane of loveliness and spirituality. It is our world *as it ought to be*, the world of dreams. This very fact suggests the antiquity of interest in the Buddha Akṣobhya, although we have no idea now what concrete form any cult may have taken. Akṣobhya was clearly important in certain circles during the early centuries CE, although any cult seems not to have survived, or to have been transmitted in any identifiable form as a separate cult to other Buddhist countries. This may be because it was eclipsed early on by other forms of Buddhism in India, and the development of a Sukhāvati cult of Amitāyus in Central and East Asia. Nevertheless, Akṣobhya does become an important Buddha in a rather different context, the tantric traditions of late Indian Buddhism (ninth to twelfth centuries). Through these traditions he is also important in Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhism. As a tantric Buddha, Akṣobhya is often the principal Buddha of the *maṇḍala*, the cosmogram which is so important in tantric ritual and meditation. In such a context he is coloured blue, and associated with four other Buddhas: Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi.

Bhaiṣajyaguru

Bhaiṣajyaguru is the Medicine Buddha. We have seen that other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas include among their functions the preventing and curing of illness, but Bhaiṣajyaguru represents an incarnation of the dimension of healing in all its aspects — from the curing of a cold through that of mental disease to enlightenment itself, a healing of the human condition. In Tibet, Bhaiṣajyaguru serves as the patron saint of medicine, most of which is carried out by monk-physicians. Meditative generation of Bhaiṣajyaguru, together with the recitation of his mantra, can be used to empower and enrich the medicines themselves."

[. . .] The Buddha Field of Bhaiṣajyaguru is, like that of Akṣobhya, in the east. Its description is very brief, for it is said to be just like Sukhāvati, with the ground of beryl and roads marked with gold. There are no women in that land, for women are reborn there in the superior state of men. In his own Pure Land Bhaiṣajyaguru is accompanied by two Bodhisattvas, as is Amitābha, known as Sūryaprabha and Candraprabha. These Bodhisattvas lead the dead into the presence of Bhaiṣajyaguru. There appear to be no non-Mahāyāna practitioners in this Pure Land.

The benefits of worshipping Bhaiṣajyaguru, or the *sūtra*, are strikingly 'this-worldly'. First, Bhaiṣajyaguru saves those who would otherwise go straight to the lower realms, even the most vicious. He can also save those who have already reached the lower realm but who, as with a distant echo, remember for some reason his name. Through his power they then attain favourable rebirths, including, under certain conditions, rebirth in Sukhāvati itself — although strangely no mention is made in this context of his own Pure Land. The best method of worshipping Bhaiṣajyaguru is to set up an image of the Buddha on a throne, scatter flowers, burn incense, and adorn the area with banner and pennants:

For seven days and seven nights they should accept and hold to the eight-fold vows, eat pure food, bathe in fragrant and pure water, and wear new and clean clothing. They should give birth to the unstained, single-minded state, with no thought of anger or harm. Towards all sentient beings there should arise the thoughts of blessings and benefits, peace, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. They should play musical instruments and sing praises while circumambulating to the right of the Buddha image. Furthermore, they should recall the merits of that Tathāgata's fundamental vows and study and recite this *sūtra*. They should think only of its principles and lecture on the *sūtra*, elucidating its main points.

According to the *sūtra*, through practices like these one can attain longevity, wealth, an official position, sons, daughters, freedom from nightmares or whatever is required (Birnbbaum 1980: 162). Concentration on the name of the Buddha and worshipping him is of value at the time of death, and also for women in childbirth. It can bring



Bhaiṣajyaguru, the Medicine Buddha, Tibet, 19th c.

back beings who have been presumed dead, and who have already travelled beyond this world to the court of Yama, the King and Judge of the Dead. Such a person will have witnessed the fruits of good and bad deeds 'like a dream', and will become a reformed person for ever more (*ibid.*: 165). Naturally the sick: too can be saved by worshipping Bhaiṣajyaguru (details are given for a special ritual). A king can overcome epidemics, invasions, rebellion, meteorological, astronomical and astrological calamities. The state can be made tranquil.

[. . .] In Buddhist iconography Bhaiṣajyaguru is usually represented seated as a Buddha in full lotus posture. He is blue, a colour of beryl, or gold with a halo of blue rays. In his left hand on his lap he holds a bowl containing medicine, although sometimes in Japanese versions Bhaiṣajyaguru holds a small medicine bowl in the palm of his left hand, which rests on his left knee. In Tibetan art the Buddha's right hand is characteristically open and resting on his right knee with the palm facing outwards. He holds the stem of a medicinal myrobalan plant. In artistic representation Bhaiṣajyaguru may be flanked by his two Bodhisattvas, Sūryaprabha and Candraprabha, and perhaps also the 12 *yakṣa* generals. Some of these features can be seen in a large and complex painting on silk from Dunhuang (ninth century) in the British Museum, which also contains side-scenes of the forms of untimely death from which, according to the sūtra, one can be protected by Bhaiṣajyaguru — illness aggravated by lack of proper treatment or through recourse to spirit-mediums, execution, death due to over-indulgence, burning, drowning, wild beasts, falling off a mountain, poisonous herbs, spells or magic, and finally starvation or dehydration. On the other side are depicted the 12 vows of Bhaiṣajyaguru (Zwalf 1985: 217). The Pure Land itself is modelled closely on Amitāyus' Sukhāvātī, as one might expect.

Amitābha/Amitāyus

The Amitābha sūtras

The most widespread of the cults devoted to Buddhas is that of Arnitābha or Amitāyus. In contemporary Japanese Buddhism it accounts for more practitioners than any other Buddhist tradition. For centuries the sūtras that focus on Arnitābha and their exegesis by Chinese and Japanese devotees have formed the vision and the hope of millions of East Asian Buddhists, and their influence on East Asian culture has been correspondingly immense.

[. . .] The Indic textual basis for the Japanese Amitābha cult, often known simply as 'Pure Land Buddhism', lies in three sūtras — the Larger and Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtras*, and a sūtra of particularly obscure origin which has been given the Sanskrit title **Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra*. [. . .] We should not assume, however, that this much later linking of these three sūtras corresponds to a link in India itself. The latter sūtra may well have never existed in India, and the exact connection between the other two is very unclear. In India they may not have been directly associated, and as we have seen there were other Mahāyāna sūtras (such as the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra*) that gave a role to Amitāyus and many more that gave one to Sukhāvātī. The association of these three sūtras in particular as the Indian textual basis for some sort of Pure Land school reached its definitive form late in the day in Japan, where they were classed together by Honen (1133-1212), on the basis of their use by earlier Chinese masters like Tanluan (see below). In actual fact we have very little evidence (from accounts of Chinese pilgrims, for example) that there ever was much by way of a Pure Land *school* as such, in Indian Buddhism and what sort of Amitābha *cult* I here may have been if there was one we simply do not know. The evidence from, e.g., archaeology and epigraphy is scarce, certainly for most of the earlier period. We do not know with any assurance how important these texts were in Indian Buddhism, or even in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India. They have little by way of specific surviving Indian commentaries, which suggests that they were not that significant in Indian Buddhist scholarship,



Amitāyus Buddha, China, Qing Dvynasty, 18th c.

although significance for scholars is not the only sort of significance. Either way, we should be cautious about projecting much later East Asian models and understandings of Buddhism back onto the Indian situation.

[. . .]The *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtras* speak of the Buddha Amitābha or Amitāyus (Japanese: Amida), Generally, and for the Pure Land traditions, these are two names of the same Buddha, although in Tibet the two are treated separately. According to the Larger *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha*, he is called 'Amitābha' — Immeasurable Light — because his light is immeasurable, illuminating myriads of Buddha Fields in every direction with its radiance; Later Pure Land exegetes state that this Immeasurable Light of Amitābha is in fact a reference to his infinite wisdom, his all-illuminating and infinite omniscience. He is called 'Amitāyus' — Immeasurable Life — because his life is immeasurable, lasting for innumerable aeons. He remains for the benefit of sentient beings, constantly helping them in many different ways. Thus, corresponding to his infinite light as wisdom, Pure Land scholars refer to Amitābha's infinite life as an expression of his boundless compassion (Eraclé 1973: 33-4).

The Larger *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra* tells of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara who, in the presence of a previous Buddha, conceived and set his mind on a most marvellous Buddha Field, embodying all the virtues of myriads of other Buddha Fields, and exceeding them all. He then made a series of vows, as Bodhisattvas are wont to do in such circumstances. The number of these vows differs from version to version [. . .] Common to all of these vows, however, is the condition 'if this vow is not fulfilled, then may I not become a Fully Enlightened Buddha'. Since the Bodhisattva Dharmākara is now none other than the Buddha Amitābha, reigning in his Pure Land of Sukhāvātī in the west, we know that these conditions must indeed have been fulfilled. Thus Dharmākara vows that all who are born in his land will never return to the lower realms. They will all remember their past lives, and have other miraculous abilities (vows 5 ff.). They will be firmly established in a state set on enlightenment. Those in his land will have, if they wish, an unlimited lifespan (vow 15). Innumerable Buddhas will glorify the name of Amitābha and praise him (vow 17). Those who sincerely trust in Amitābha and desire to be reborn in his Pure Land need 'call on the name' of Amitābha only 10 times and they will be reborn there — provided they have not committed any of the five great crimes of murdering father or mother, or an Arhat, harming a Buddha, or causing schism in the *saṃgha*, or have slandered the Dharma. At the time of death Amitābha will appear, together with a 'multitude of sages', before his followers, who have awakened *bodhicitta* and practised merit, wishing to be reborn in the Pure Land (vow 19). All those who hear the name of Amitābha and sincerely wish to be reborn in the Pure Land, directing their merits towards such a birth, will indeed be reborn there (vow 20). Moreover, if Bodhisattvas from elsewhere reach Sukhāvātī, they will thus enter the state of 'one more birth', which is to say that they will require only one more birth before attaining Buddhahood. This is always supposing, the sūtra adds, that such is what they want. If they are among those rare and exceptional ones who desire, out of compassion, to be continually reborn in order in that way to help other sentient beings, then they can continue to do so. And of course from Sukhāvātī beings will very rapidly and easily be able to visit other Buddha Lands to make grand offerings to innumerable Buddhas (vows 23-4).

All has come about as Dharmākara wished. There is indeed a most wonderful Pure Land, and both versions of the *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra* give extensive details of the appearance of Sukhāvātī, doubtless as a prescriptive basis for the visualization of the Buddha Amitābha within his Pure Land. If someone wishes in order to attain enlightenment to be reborn in that Pure Land, he or she should produce *bodhicitta*, hear the name of Amitābha, meditate on him and think of him, pray to be reborn in Sukhāvātī and attain merit as a basis for such a birth. Even those who are not very keen on Amitābha will be led to Sukhāvātī at death — not by Amitābha personally but by a magically-produced Buddha. Within such a framework rebirth in Sukhāvātī and eventual enlightenment is not difficult. It is much easier than trying to attain enlightenment under adverse conditions in this decadent world. At death generally Amitābha will himself conduct someone to his Pure Land, and this descent of Amitābha is the subject of innumerable Japanese paintings. In one example Amitābha, together with his heavenly host, drums and music, is seen descending rapidly across the mountain tops. Trees burst into spring blossom at his approach. He crosses the canvas diagonally towards the monk who awaits the coming of the Lord, peacefully invoking Amitābha's holy name from his hermitage.

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Amida Buddha, Japan, Heian period, 11th-12th c.