

The Indian Roots of Pure Land Buddhism: Insights from the Oldest Chinese Versions of the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha*

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MASATOSHI NAGATOMI WAS a panoramic thinker. Raised in a Jōdo Shinshū family, he chose the distant world of Indian Buddhism as his research field. Educated at Kyoto University, he went on to complete his doctorate at Harvard University, spending time studying in India as well. When thinking about Indian Buddhist literature he could call upon analogies from East Asia; when discussing Buddhist rituals in China he could draw upon his knowledge of Tibet. In sum, for him Buddhism was not a regional or sectarian entity but a worldwide and multi-faceted tradition, and no student of his could fail to be impressed by the broad range of his perspective.

Most students of Pure Land Buddhism, by contrast, have approached their topic within a far narrower frame. Generally this form of Buddhism has been treated as an East Asian phenomenon, and indeed it is often studied (with, one should recognize, many valuable results) within the parameters of a single school or sect. This paper, however, is intended as a small attempt to emulate Professor Nagatomi's sweeping cross-cultural vision of Buddhist history by examining the evidence for Pure Land Buddhism not in East Asia, but in India.

To understand how Amitābha was viewed by Indian Buddhists, however, requires beginning with a sketch of the circumstances within which scriptures devoted to this figure emerged. I will begin, therefore, with a brief overview of some of the key developments that preceded—and indeed, may have elicited—the composition of scriptures devoted to Amitābha.

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Early Indian Buddhism, as best we can reconstruct it from existing sources, was a “one-vehicle” religion. The vehicle in question was not, of course, the “one vehicle” (Sanskrit *ekayāna*) found in texts like the *Lotus Sūtra*, where the Buddha recommends three distinct paths to liberation, though only one of these—the bodhisattva path leading to buddhahood—

is ultimately real. On the contrary, the “sole path” advocated in early Buddhism was the path to arhatship, a path followed (though of course at varying speeds) by all those who devoted themselves to the Buddha’s teachings. This path was believed to lead to *nirvāṇa*, i.e., to final liberation from the cycle of *saṃsāra*, the same liberation that had been attained by Śākyamuni Buddha himself.

This is not to say, of course, that Śākyamuni Buddha was not viewed as superior to his followers. But what was seen as special about him, in this early period, was not the quality of his enlightenment, nor even of his compassion (for in early Buddhism, as in the Theravāda tradition today, arhats also teach). What was unique about the Buddha was the fact that he was the first person in recent memory who had discovered on his own, without the help of an awakened teacher, the way to escape from rebirth.¹ Like the grammarian who compiles a description of a previously unknown language, Śākyamuni’s explication of the path to *nirvāṇa* made it dramatically easier to attain for those who followed in his footsteps. In sum, it is clear that in the earliest days of the Buddhist religion the awakening experienced by Śākyamuni was understood as a model to be emulated by his disciples. The fact that Śākyamuni was described, in the well-known list of “ten epithets of the Buddha,” as an arhat (among other things) demonstrates the continuity that was perceived between his own achievement and that of his followers.²

EARLY MAHĀYĀNA IN INDIA: THE PATH OF THE BODHISATTVA

Perhaps a century or two before the beginning of the Common Era, however, the gap between descriptions of buddhahood (the awakening experienced by a person who has discovered the path for himself) and of arhatship (the awakening experienced by women and men who followed the path the Buddha had taught) began to widen. More specifically, as the Buddha came to be portrayed in increasingly glorified terms, the status of actual living arhats, whether of the present or the past, began to decline. In such an environment it became possible to speak of arhatship as a lesser spiritual goal, one far less admirable than the supreme and perfect awakening (*anuttarasamyakṣaṃbodhi*) experienced by a buddha.

Not surprisingly, as the status of arhats declined some Buddhists began to consider the possibility of choosing a higher goal: that is, of attaining buddhahood rather than “mere” arhatship. By re-enacting in every detail the path that the bodhisattva who was to become Śākyamuni Buddha had traversed—not only in his final life but in countless lives before—an exceptional devotee might succeed in becoming a world-redeeming Buddha himself.³ Not only would he then experience the

superior awakening of a buddha (an experience which, according to some later texts, would entail complete omniscience), but he would be able to help countless others to reach nirvāṇa, just as Śākyamuni Buddha had done.

The background to this idea was not only the increasingly exalted status of the Buddha, but the traditional idea that “all compounded things are transitory”—a category within which Buddhist thinkers, with admirable consistency, included the Buddhist religion itself. While the truths embodied in the Buddha’s teachings were of course viewed as an expression of the nature of things-as-they-are (*dharmatā*) and thus not subject to change, the Buddhist teachings (formulated in human language) and the Buddhist sangha (understood as a humanly constructed community) were both considered subject to decay. Most important of all, the life span of any living being—including a fully awakened buddha—was viewed as finite. Thus after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha (as was the case with other buddhas before him) it was only a matter of time before the memory of his life and teachings would fade away.⁴

Given this scenario it is clear why Buddhists came to believe that at least one disciple of every buddha must do more than simply strive for nirvāṇa, but must vow to become a Buddha himself. If the future Buddha, Maitreya, had not done so, when Śākyamuni’s Dharma eventually disappears it would never be discovered again. In Śākyamuni’s own biography the story of his vow made in the presence of the ancient Buddha Dīpaṅkara (though not included in the earliest collection of stories of the Buddha’s previous lives, or *Jātaka Tales*) came to be a powerful model for what was expected of a buddha-to-be.

Other *Jātaka Tales*, however, suggested that the path to buddhahood was far from easy, for they contained stories of the *bodhisattva* (Pāli *bodhisatta*)—that is, of Śākyamuni prior to his attainment of buddhahood—giving up not only his possessions and his family but parts of his body and even life itself.⁵ In one widely circulated *Jātaka Tale* the future Buddha is cut to pieces by an angry king;⁶ in another, he donates his body to feed a hungry tigress and her cubs.⁷ There is no miraculous rescue in either tale; instead, the future Buddha simply dies—attaining, however, a tremendous store of merit in the process.

For rank-and-file Buddhists the *Jātaka* tales seem to have served primarily (as they still do today) as an account of the greatness of Śākyamuni Buddha. But for the very few who, in the early days of “three-vehicle” Buddhism, opted to become bodhisattvas, the *Jātakas* served another purpose as well, for they could be read as a manual filled with specific instructions on how to emulate Śākyamuni’s career in every detail.

In light of the severe challenges that a prospective bodhisattva would have to endure over the course of countless lifetimes, it is clear that the path leading to buddhahood was by no means viewed as easy; indeed, it was far

more demanding than the pursuit of arhatship. It is no exaggeration, then, to suggest that the vocation of the bodhisattva was viewed, by those pioneers who first embarked on it, as suitable only for “the few, the proud, the brave.”⁸

ONE COMMUNITY, TWO VOCATIONS: PROBLEMS WITH THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL

Early Mahāyāna scriptures often speak of “three vehicles”: the vehicle of the disciple (*śrāvaka*), the vehicle of the candidate for pratyekabuddhahood, and the vehicle of the bodhisattva. Although there was considerable overlap in the practices carried out by the members of these three categories, they were viewed as three distinct paths leading to three distinct goals: arhatship, pratyekabuddhahood, and buddhahood, respectively (in ascending order of superiority). Of these three theoretical options there seems to be no evidence that members of living Buddhist communities actually took the middle one—the path of the solitary Buddha or pratyekabuddha—as a genuine option for practice; indeed, there is not even a name parallel to the terms “disciple” and “bodhisattva” for persons who are pursuing, but have not yet completed, the pratyekabuddha path.⁹

There is considerable evidence, by contrast, that by the beginning of the Common Era a small minority of monks, belonging in all probability to a number of different monastic ordination lineages (*nikāya-s*), had chosen to devote themselves to the attainment of buddhahood. Most of their fellow monastics, however, were still dedicated to the pursuit of the traditional arhat path, and the introduction of the new bodhisattva ideal seems to have brought with it a number of problems. Some Buddhists seem to have rejected the very possibility of living Buddhists becoming bodhisattvas in the present; others questioned the legitimacy of this “new vehicle,” since it was not recommended by the Buddha in scriptures preserved in the traditional Buddhist canon (*Tripitaka*). And the status of the new scriptures known as Mahāyāna sutras remained a contentious one for centuries, with many Indian Buddhists rejecting their claim to be the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*).

Beyond questions concerning the legitimacy of this new path and the scriptures that recommend it, bodhisattvas faced yet another potentially divisive issue: that of social status. Those pursuing the path to buddhahood were attempting to reach a goal that was universally acclaimed as the most exalted of spiritual destinations, yet most of these early bodhisattvas’ monastic fellows were content to “settle” for the lesser goal of arhatship. One can well imagine the tensions that could erupt in Buddhist communities where the choice by an individual or a small group to become bodhisattvas rather than *śrāvaka-s* introduced a two-tier hierarchy of

spiritual vocations. The warnings found in early Mahāyāna scriptures that bodhisattvas should not disparage or disrespect those who are on the path to arhatship offer concrete evidence, I would suggest, that such conflicts were actually taking place.¹⁰

In addition to such challenges as these, all of which were related to issues of community life, there were also difficulties facing the individual practitioner, problems rooted in the very structure of the bodhisattva path. First was the amount of suffering it would surely entail: rebirth in saṃsāra is said to be pervaded by suffering even under the best of circumstances, but candidates for buddhahood would have to endure the particular sufferings described in the *Jātaka Tales* as well. One can well imagine a potential bodhisattva wavering as he considered the fact that—following the script presented in many of these tales—he would surely be dismembered and killed in life after life.¹¹

In addition to the difficult acts of self-sacrifice that characterized the bodhisattva's path, there was the additional problem of its sheer duration. While arhatship could, at least in theory, be achieved in this very life, buddhahood took far longer to attain. Standard accounts of the bodhisattva path (in both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna scriptures) hold that an unimaginable amount of time is required—a common figure is “three incalculable eons (*asaṃkhyeyakalpa*) and one hundred great eons (*māhākalpa*)”—to attain the amount of merit (*puṇya*) and the knowledge (*jñāna*) necessary to become a buddha. This would mean spending thousands if not millions of additional lifetimes in saṃsāra, rather than pursuing the possibility of experiencing the bliss of nirvāṇa in this very life.¹²

Both merit and knowledge could best be acquired, of course, in the presence of a living buddha, for by serving and making offerings to such a being one could make merit in vast quantities, and by listening to his teachings one could quickly acquire the requisite knowledge necessary to teach the Dharma in the future oneself.¹³ In our own world-system, however, ever since the final nirvāṇa of Śākyamuni, no buddha has been present to serve as such a “field of merit” (or, to coin a parallel phrase, a “field of knowledge”) for his devotees. Bodhisattvas thus had to resign themselves to laboring slowly, over the course of eons, to gradually accrue these two prerequisites for buddhahood.

In addition to the amount of time required to attain these prerequisites for buddhahood, another problem—what we might call a structural or even cosmological problem—presented itself as well. In early Buddhism (and indeed, for most advocates of the Mahāyāna throughout its history in India) it was axiomatic that only one buddha can appear in the world at a time. It was also taken for granted that the appearance of a buddha is exceedingly rare, and thus that there are immense intervals between the appearance of a given buddha and his successor. Between the final nirvāṇa of Śākyamuni and the appearance of Maitreya, for example, some 5.6 billion

years (five hundred sixty million years according to other texts) are expected to pass.¹⁴ Not only would a bodhisattva have to continue his self-cultivation over this long expanse of time without the support of a Buddhist community, he would also have to wait until Maitreya's attainment of buddhahood and, after his final nirvāṇa, the disappearance of every trace of his teachings. Only then—when the memory of Buddhism has long been forgotten—can the next candidate in line awaken to enlightenment himself. In sum, the expanse of time that separated the ordinary bodhisattva from his eventual realization of buddhahood was immense. Ironically, the greater the number of devotees who had undertaken the path to buddhahood, the longer a particular bodhisattva's wait would be.

Bodhisattvas were confronted, in sum, with an extremely attractive ideal, on the one hand—that of becoming the kind of heroic being who could rediscover the Dharma in the future for the benefit of all—and a daunting timetable and set of requirements for its accomplishment on the other. It is thus little wonder that early Mahāyāna scriptures abound in recommendations for techniques, ranging from acquiring a certain *samādhi* to reciting a certain scripture to viewing the world from the perspective of the *prajñāpāramitā*, that will help the bodhisattva to “quickly attain buddhahood.” That in this context “quickly” (Sanskrit *kṣīpam*, Chinese 速 and related expressions) generally means attaining buddhahood in millions rather than billions of years only underscores the immensity of the challenge that these early bodhisattvas faced.

OTHER BUDDHAS, OTHER WORLDS: NEW VISIONS OF THE BUDDHIST UNIVERSE

Around the beginning of the Common Era, however, a new idea appeared in India that was to radically alter this understanding of the bodhisattva path. Certain bodhisattvas emerged from deep meditation with tales of visions they had experienced, visions of a universe far more vast than had previously been supposed.¹⁵ Throughout the ten directions, they claimed, were other world-systems like our own, each with its own hierarchy of gods and human beings. Most important for aspiring bodhisattvas, however, was the news brought by these early visionaries that in some of these world-systems buddhas were currently living and teaching. Thus while our own world-system is currently devoid of a buddha (though the Dharma itself is still present and accessible), other buddhas were now held to exist in the present, albeit in world-systems located (to use contemporary scientific parlance) many millions of light-years away. These new visions thus introduced the dramatic possibility of encountering a living buddha in the near future—indeed in one's very next life, through being reborn in his realm.

That the idea of the existence of these “buddhas of the ten directions” was the result not of scholastic speculation but of intensive meditational experience is amply attested in early Mahāyāna scriptures.¹⁶ But what is particularly noteworthy is that this new view of the universe seems to have emerged not among śrāvakas practicing traditional meditation but among devotees of the bodhisattva path. This idea seems to have been formulated, in other words, by precisely those Buddhists who most needed to acquire merit and knowledge in the presence of a living buddha in order to accelerate their own progress toward the goal.¹⁷

These newly discovered worlds were not, at least at the outset, referred to as “pure lands” (in fact this term seems to be of East Asian, not of Indian, origin).¹⁸ But there is no question that these world-systems were viewed as far more attractive than our own. Indeed, their features are regularly compared to those of the traditional Buddhist heavens, a fact which appears to have made them an attractive destination even for those who did not hope to become bodhisattvas themselves.

THE BEGINNINGS OF PURE LAND BUDDHISM: THE EASTERN PARADISE OF AKṢOBHYA

The earliest extant scripture to articulate this view in detail may well be the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, which describes the career of the bodhisattva whose intense ascetic practice led to his becoming the Buddha Akṣobhya.¹⁹ According to this sutra, after a long period of preparation during which the man who was to become Akṣobhya became a monk in life after life and carried out stringent acts of self-denial, he attained buddhahood in a world far to the east of our own. This world, known as Abhirati (“Extremely Joyful”), had a number of features that are described in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* as the by-product of Akṣobhya’s bodhisattva practice: the climate is delightful, food and drink are plentiful and easy to obtain, and women and their infants suffer from no pain or defilement in the course of pregnancy and birth.²⁰ But more than this: Abhirati is an ideal place to make progress on the Buddhist path, for it is extremely easy to attain arhatship there. Some devotees attain awakening on the first occasion when they hear the Buddha preach; others require as many as four such lectures before attaining nirvāṇa, advancing one step at a time through the four stages of sainthood, from stream-enterer to arhat. The fact that members of the latter group are considered “slow learners” in Abhirati makes it clear that arhatship is within the reach of everyone who is reborn there.

Bodhisattvas, too, can make rapid progress toward toward buddhahood in Akṣobhya’s presence, yet none are described as attaining their objective in his realm. On the contrary, the scripture reiterates the doctrine that each bodhisattva must carry out over many lifetimes all the ascetic practices that

the Buddha (in this case, Akṣobhya) performed before becoming a buddha himself. Only in his final life, when the bodhisattva born into a world-system (with no knowledge of Buddhism) of his own, will he attain supreme, perfect awakening (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*) and become the presiding buddha there.

The views embodied in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* thus belong to a relatively early period of the Mahāyāna in India, for buddhahood is presented as a spiritual option for some, but is not recommended for all. The understanding of buddhahood found in this sutra is also quite traditional, for Akṣobhya's life—though far longer than that of Śākyamuni Buddha—is clearly patterned on canonical biographies of the latter. Like Śākyamuni, at the end of his long preaching career Akṣobhya enters into final nirvāṇa, in this case with a spectacular act of self-cremation in the sky. And again like Śākyamuni, Akṣobhya confers a prophecy on his successor, a bodhisattva named Gandhahastin, who will attain buddhahood at an unspecified time after Akṣobhya's death. After becoming a buddha named "Golden Lotus," Gandhahastin will preside over a buddha-field equal in every respect to that of Akṣobhya's Abhirati.²¹

The *Akṣobhyavyūha*, then, portrays a scenario that is in many respects quite traditional. The "job description" of a buddha is still—as it was in the time of Śākyamuni—to lead his followers to arhatship, though (in harmony with the early Mahāyāna teachings of the "three vehicles") some may choose to pursue buddhahood instead. The appearance of a buddha is still relatively rare, and a buddha (like an *arhat*) necessarily enters into complete extinction at the end of his final life. Only then is his designated successor reborn, in his own final life as a bodhisattva, to rediscover the Buddhist Dharma and lead his followers to nirvāṇa in turn.

Akṣobhya is described by Śākyamuni, who appears as the narrator of the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra*, as living and preaching in the present—that is, during the time of Śākyamuni's discourse on Abhirati (and, given Akṣobhya's long lifespan, well into the future as well). Yet this scenario does not violate the cardinal principle (found in early Buddhism and still assumed in the period of "three-vehicles Buddhism") that there can be only one buddha in the world at a time. For Akṣobhya's realm of Abhirati is not located within our own world-system, but on the contrary is located far to the east, comprising an entire world-system complete with its own set of heavens (though it is said to lack the hell, ghost, and animal realms) of its own. Thus we might rephrase this principle, as understood in texts like the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, to say that there can be only one buddha *in a given world system* at a time. While there cannot be another buddha in our world until Śākyamuni's teachings have died out and have been rediscovered in the distant future by his successor, the Buddha Maitreya, there is no longer any barrier to the appearance of other buddhas in the present, as long as they are located in world-systems elsewhere in the universe. Such a view—

which would eventually be extended to refer to buddhas currently living and teaching in all of the ten directions—dramatically shortened the length of time that a Buddhist practitioner could expect to spend cycling through *samsāra* before encountering a buddha again.

The requirements for rebirth in Abhirati also seem quite traditional, for—as in the case of the Buddhist heavens, on which most of the features of Abhirati are clearly patterned—a tremendous amount of merit is required. Conversely, however, there is no requirement that the practitioner engage in any particular devotional acts directed toward Akṣobhya in order to ensure his or her rebirth there. Again, as in the case of the various Buddhist heavens, a woman or a man who has made sufficient merit in this lifetime may simply awake, after dying in this world, to find that he or she has earned a place in Akṣobhya's realm.

The scenario described in the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, in sum, is that of the traditional biography of Śākyamuni writ large: after many lifetimes of striving, Akṣobhya awakens to buddhahood, after which he teaches countless followers and inspires them to attain arhatship. Akṣobhya's biography differs from that of the historical Śākyamuni, however, in that his religious community includes bodhisattvas as well, who will eventually attain buddhahood rather than arhatship, each in a world-system of his own.²² They do not attain buddhahood in Abhirati, however, for in the worldview set forth in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* the idea that there can be only one buddha per world system at a time is still in force. Akṣobhya's bodhisattva disciples must thus wait their turn, being born into worlds that know nothing of Buddhism in order to experience their final awakening. One of these future buddhas is singled out for special attention: the bodhisattva Gandhahastin, who will receive a prophecy from Akṣobhya and thus becomes his "heir apparent," who will succeed him in attaining buddhahood but (like a crown-prince in a secular setting) only after Akṣobhya's death.²³

The story of Akṣobhya, in sum, exhibits great continuity with the life story of Śākyamuni, differing from it only in the heaven-like qualities of his world, the long lifespans of beings there, and the ease of attaining arhatship (or of making progress toward, but not yet attaining, buddhahood) in his presence. Reading the account presented in the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, it is easy to see the description of such a figure could have evolved step by step from canonical accounts of the lives of Śākyamuni Buddha himself.

FROM AKṢOBHYA TO AMITĀBHA: THE EVOLUTION OF PURE LAND THOUGHT

Scriptures describing the career of Amitābha, by contrast, are generally viewed by modern Buddhists as presenting a far different scenario. Amitābha's lifespan is said to be unlimited (as indicated by his alternate

name, Amitāyus), and rebirth in his realm is viewed (especially in the Jōdo Shinshū school of Buddhism) as due not to one's own merits but to Amitābha's grace.²⁴ All practitioners are assimilated to the category of "bodhisattvas," while the possibility of attaining arhatship—whether in Sukhāvati or elsewhere—has faded from view. Moreover, the understanding of the bodhisattva career differs significantly from the rigorous and often bloody path of self-sacrifice described in the *Jātaka Tales* and presupposed in early Mahāyāna scriptures. No longer is the bodhisattva path viewed as appropriate only for the few hardy individuals capable of carrying out extreme ascetic acts; on the contrary, it is now seen as accessible to all, and virtues such as gratitude to Amitābha and kindness to other living beings—rather than renouncing one's family and suffering from death at the hands of evil kings and hungry tigresses—are brought to the fore. Finally, the idea that thousands (if not millions) of lifetimes are required in order to attain the goal of buddhahood has also disappeared from view. Rather than anticipating a drawn-out spiritual pilgrimage, for most Pure Land Buddhists the focus is on living a good life in the present, and (at most) in the next life as well.

The fact that such a scenario is so different from the outlook of early Buddhism—and indeed, from the worldview presented in relatively early Mahāyāna scriptures such as the *Akṣobhyavyūha*—has led some critics to question whether such "pure land" beliefs should be described as Buddhist at all.²⁵ Some have appealed to foreign (notably Iranian) influences or to the "contamination" of Buddhism by local (notably Hindu) ideas to explain what seems to be a radical departure from mainstream Buddhism. Yet the content of the *Akṣobhyavyūha* as described above suggests that a far different historical process was at work. Specifically, it points toward the likelihood that so-called "pure land" Buddhism emerged gradually as the result of insights formulated within Buddhist communities themselves rather than as the product of alien elements absorbed from without. But can the same be said of scriptures dealing with Amitābha? It is to those works that we will now turn.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE AMITĀBHA TRADITION: THE LARGER SUKHĀVATĪVYŪHA

The Buddha Akṣobhya—despite solid evidence that he was an important figure in early Indian Mahāyāna—is relatively little known today, appearing mainly as the Buddha of the East in certain tantric texts. The Buddha known as Amitābha or Amitāyus, by contrast, has been the object of devotion of countless East Asian Buddhists for centuries. References to Amitābha occur in a wide range of Buddhist scriptures composed in India, some devoted primarily to this figure and others in which he makes only

a cameo appearance.²⁶ There is no question, therefore, that Amitābha has been one of the most popular figures in all of Buddhist history.

Whether devotees of Amitābha in India ever grouped a set of scriptures together as an “Amitābha canon” we do not know. For Buddhists in East Asia, however, three scriptures concerning this figure have long held pride of place: two sutras entitled (in Sanskrit) the *Sukhāvativyūha*, popularly known as the “larger” and “smaller” versions, respectively, and a third scripture known in the West by the reconstructed Sanskrit title of **Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra*. Of these the third—the *Guan wuliangshou fo jing* (Jpn. *Kan Muryōjubutsu kyō*; *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 365)—is now widely considered to be an apocryphon composed in China (or even in Central Asia, though the evidence for this is extremely weak).

The two *Sukhāvati* sutras, by contrast, are considered genuine Indian compositions, and indeed both versions are among the very few non-Theravāda scriptures that have been preserved in an Indian language. Since our concern in this paper is to try to understand the emergence of devotion to Amitābha in India, only the latter two will be considered here.

In East Asia, of course, these two texts were read not in Sanskrit but in Chinese, and indeed some of the Chinese translations of these works predate the surviving Sanskrit manuscripts by several centuries.²⁷ The earliest Chinese translation of the shorter *Sukhāvativyūha* appeared in the early fifth century C.E., when the renowned Kuchean captive Kumārajīva produced a version of the text entitled the *Amituo jing* (Jpn. *Amida kyō*; *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 366). This text is devoted mainly to a description of the features of Sukhāvati itself, and contains relatively little information about Amitābha himself.

It is in the larger *Sukhāvativyūha* that we find by far the most detailed account of the career of Amitābha, beginning with his first resolution to attain buddhahood when he was still a bodhisattva named Dharmākara. The translation most used in East Asia, the *Wuliangshou jing* (Jpn. *Muryōju kyō*; *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 360), is credited to the third-century monk Saṃghavarman in late medieval Chinese catalogues, an attribution followed by the editors of the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*. This attribution has not, however, withstood scholarly scrutiny. On the basis of information found in earlier catalogues (notably the *Chu sanzang jiji* produced by Sengyou in the early sixth century C.E.; *Taishō*, vol. 55, no. 2145), most scholars now assign this text to Buddhahadra and Baoyun, two translators who were active in the early fifth century.²⁸ Thus the most popular Chinese version of the larger *Sukhāvativyūha* is thought to date from approximately the same time as Kumārajīva’s translation of the shorter text.

There are, however, two considerably earlier Chinese translations of the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*. The first goes by the unwieldy title of *Amituo sanyesanfo saloufodan guodu ren dao jing* (Jpn. *Amida-san’yasambutsu-sarubutsudan-kadonindō-kyō*, often abbreviated as the *Dai amida kyō*;

Taishō, vol. 12, no. 362), produced by Lokakṣema (Jpn. Shi Rukasen) in the late second century C.E. The other, translated in the early to mid-third century by Zhi Qian (Jpn. Shiken), is the *Wuliang qingjing pingdengjue jing* (Jpn. *Muryōshōjōbyōdōgaku-kyō*; *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 361).²⁹ Not only are these Chinese translations earlier than that contained in the *Muryōju kyō*, their content makes it clear that their translators were drawing on an earlier stage in the life of the Indian scripture itself. In the following section, therefore, I will focus on these two early Chinese translations, for they provide our best means of access to early traditions concerning Amitābha in India. In most respects these two translations are quite similar, so I will treat them in conjunction here (noting any important differences as we go). All references given below to the “larger *Sukhāvativyūha*,” unless otherwise indicated, refer to the two slightly different Indian recensions reflected in these early Chinese texts.

As in the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, the larger *Sukhāvativyūha* begins with an encounter between a buddha and a monk. In the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, inspired by the grandeur of a buddha named “Great Eyes” (the Sanskrit counterpart of this name has not been preserved), the future Akṣobhya makes his initial resolution to become a buddha. In the *Sukhāvativyūha*, by contrast, it is in the presence of the Buddha Lokeśvararāja that the future Amitābha, a monk named Dharmākara, sets out on his quest. Already at this point in the story, however, we can discern an important difference in perspective between the two texts. The Buddha “Great Eyes” initially tries to discourage his young devotee from becoming a bodhisattva, pointing out that the path to buddhahood is difficult indeed. In the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, by contrast, the Buddha Lokeśvararāja makes no attempt to dissuade Dharmākara from his objective, and nothing is said about the difficulty of the bodhisattva path. For the author of the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, in other words, the bodhisattva path is a challenging (indeed daunting) option for Buddhist practitioners; for the author of the *Sukhāvativyūha*, by contrast, such a choice seems to be a matter of course.

This distinction is underscored when we examine the content of the vows made by these two bodhisattvas, for in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* the future Akṣobhya vows to undertake ascetic practices in life after life. The beauty of the realm of Abhirati is presented as the by-product of the merit he has acquired by engaging in these activities, not as the result of a conscious plan. In the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, by contrast, Dharmākara’s vows (here only twenty-four in number, in contrast to the forty-eight found in the fifth-century version of the text) deal primarily with the features of his future buddha-field and with the means by which his devotees will gain access to rebirth there. The future Akṣobhya’s vows, in sum, refer to traditional elements of the bodhisattva path, while the future Amitābha’s vows focus on the creation of a “pure land” itself.

A second difference between these two texts can be seen in the means by which Buddhist practitioners come to be born in these two delightful worlds. In the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, as we have seen, rebirth in Abhirati is not the result of devotion to Akṣobhya himself, but of the generalized acquisition of merit.³⁰ In the *Sukhāvativyūha*, by contrast, knowing about Amitābha and bearing his name in mind have come to play a central role. To put it another way, rebirth in Abhirati (like rebirth in the various Buddhist heavens) is attained through one's own religious merit, and it does not require even an awareness of the existence of Akṣobhya himself. In the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, by contrast, access to Amitābha's world is associated with knowledge of him and with personal reliance on his name—the beginning stage, it seems quite clear, of what would become the broadly popular cult of Amitābha in East Asia.

Third, both women and men, as we have seen, can be born in Abhirati. Indeed, beings who arrive there to take birth there are physically born from mothers (albeit without sexual intercourse as a prerequisite). In the two earliest versions of the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, by contrast, it is explicitly stated that all of the beings reborn there are male. In Lokakṣema's translation the absence of women from Sukhāvati appears as the second of Dharmakara's vows; in Zhi Qian's version this same statement is made elsewhere in the sutra.³¹ In both versions of the text, however, it is clear that the early Mahāyāna assumption that one must be reborn as a male before becoming a buddha has been generalized to include all of the inhabitants of Sukhāvati as well. Given the absence of women in Sukhāvati, birth cannot take place by the normal means, and indeed we are told that all beings who are reborn there appear apparitionally, arising spontaneously within a lotus flower.

Not all of those born in Sukhāvati are bodhisattvas, for (as in the *Akṣobhyavyūha*) there are copious references to the presence of arhats in Amitābha's world as well. Once again the fact that they are referred to as arhats (and not merely *śrāvaka*-s en route to arhatship) makes it clear that Sukhāvati was considered, at least in the texts reflected in these two early translations, to be an optimal locale for the attainment of this goal.

The *Akṣobhyavyūha* and the larger *Sukhāvati* also agree that the rule of "one buddha per world system" is still in effect. Indeed, for readers familiar with later "pure land" traditions the most striking passage in Lokakṣema's *Sukhāvativyūha* is the one describing how, after the final extinction of Amitābha, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (here given in an ancient transcription which probably goes back to an older form such as *Avalokaśvara) will take his place. After the death of Avalokiteśvara, in turn, Mahāsthāmaprapta will succeed to the position of presiding buddha.³² In this early recension of the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, in other words, we can see that the basic principle that Amitābha must die before his successor (in this case, Avalokiteśvara) can become a buddha is still fully in force. Once

again there is no mention of any of Amitābha's disciples attaining buddhahood in his presence, while there are copious mentions of arhats in his world. At this early stage in the development of the *Sukhāvativyūha*, in sum, the thread connecting the story of Amitābha to earlier ideas about the path to buddhahood (including those found in the *Akṣobhyavyūha*) is still quite clearly visible.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS:
THE *WULIANGSHOU JING* (*TAISHŌ*, VOL. 12, NO. 360)

When we now turn, with the above observations as background, to the version of the larger *Sukhāvativyūha* that is best known in East Asia, we can observe several developments that separate it from the two earlier translations (based on earlier Indian recensions) of this text. First, references to arhats (or for that matter, to *śrāvaka*-s en route to arhatship) have become far less common, while hyperbolic descriptions of the qualities of the bodhisattvas in Amitābha's world occur in great profusion.³³ Indeed, the authors of this recension of the larger *Sukhāvativyūha* seem to understand the bodhisattva path as something that is accessible to all, a vision far different than that presented in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* or for that matter in the earlier Chinese translations of the *Sukhāvativyūha*. Second, the statement that everyone born in Sukhāvati must become male has disappeared, a development which is congruent with, and quite likely was elicited by, the apparent universalization of the bodhisattva path. Third, though Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprapta are still present, their role now seems vestigial, and there is no explicit mention of their inheriting Amitābha's role as presiding buddha after the latter's death. Fourth—and surely most significant—there is no longer any mention of Amitābha's death at all, a fact which has allowed centuries of commentators to conclude that he is (as his epithet Amitāyus "limitless life" would seem to suggest) indeed immortal.

This being said, there are still a few features in the *Wuliangshou jing* that hark back to older "pure land" understandings. First, disciples (*śrāvaka*-s) are still mentioned occasionally, though their role is clearly ebbing away. Second, despite the sutra's effusive descriptions of the bodhisattvas in Sukhāvati, it never states that any one of them will actually become a buddha in Amitābha's presence, thus adhering to the rule of "one buddha per world-system at a time" discussed above. Finally, though the sutra no longer refers to the death of Amitābha (while, on the contrary, it makes much of the incalculable duration of his lifespan, as well as that of the other inhabitants of his realm), it never makes the claim that he is immortal. Thus the idea that all living beings—including all living buddhas—must eventually pass away, however distant that date may be, is left in place.

In sum, by reading the earlier and later versions of the larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha* in conjunction, we can observe a clear process of development: from the *Akṣobhyavyūha* to the early *Sukhāvatīvyūha* translations (produced by Lokakṣema and Zhi Qian in the second and third centuries) to the fifth-century translation by Buddhahadra and Baoyun. By placing these texts in their chronological order we can thus discern the gradual emergence of devotion to Amitābha within Indian Buddhism, prefiguring his central role in East Asian Buddhism today.

CONCLUSIONS: THE EMERGENCE OF “PURE LAND” BUDDHISM IN INDIA

Based on the materials reviewed above, it is now clear that there is no need to appeal to “foreign influences” or “non-Buddhist borrowings” to explain the rise of devotion to Amitābha in India. On the contrary, we can see the emergence of his cult as the result of an ongoing process of reflection—heavily informed, to be sure, by an ongoing series of visions reported by certain religious virtuosi—taking place within the Buddhist community itself.

More specifically, we can now see ideas about other buddhas and other worlds as a response to difficulties inherent in the practice of the bodhisattva path as understood in early Mahāyāna. With the introduction of the notion of other buddhas presently living and teaching elsewhere in the universe—first Akṣobhya in the East, then Amitābha in the West, and subsequently countless buddhas throughout the ten directions—vast new horizons, in a quite literal sense, were opened to Indian Buddhist devotees. No longer did aspiring bodhisattvas have to wait for the appearance of Maitreya, followed by the eventual disappearance of his Dharma—and then followed by the appearance and disappearance of the Dharma of other future buddhas who were ahead of them in the queue—before they could finally attain their goal. The vastly expanded universe envisioned in these new scriptures offered both the possibility of being born in the presence of a buddha in one’s very next life, and thus of accelerating one’s accumulation of the necessary prerequisites of merit and knowledge, and of finding a world with no knowledge of Buddhism (a “Buddha-free zone,” as it were) in which one could attain awakening and become a Buddha oneself. The content of these new pure land scriptures, in short, offered an alluring new scenario in which a devotee currently striving for buddhahood could hope to reach his goal in the very near future.

Reading these texts in conjunction we can also see how the popularity of devotion to Amitābha was able to surpass Akṣobhya’s cult. Akṣobhya’s world, while quite attractive, was still difficult to reach; it required a great amount of merit, and there is nothing in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* to suggest

that admission was assured.³⁴ In the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, on the other hand (in both earlier and later recensions), the possibility of reaching Amitābha's realm is presented as far easier, a development which paved the way for the view later expressed by Shinran that admission to the pure land is due to Amitābha's grace alone. In light of the description conveyed in the larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, ordinary Buddhists could thus place their faith in the certainty of encountering Amitābha after death. That such believers were (and are) described as "bodhisattvas" involved radical new developments in the concept of what a bodhisattva is, a fact that is particularly evident in the text of the *Wuliang shou jing*.

As these "pure land" notions made the prospect of becoming a bodhisattva less daunting, they paved the way for the sweeping universalism of the "one vehicle" doctrine set forth in the *Lotus Sūtra* and other texts, according to which the bodhisattva path is appropriate to every Buddhist man, woman, and child. In a sense, then, one could see the Japanese Buddhism of today—which, regardless of sect (*shū*), takes ideas found in the *Lotus* as a central interpretive framework—as having come full circle, returning to the idea found in early Buddhism that "one vehicle" is appropriate for all.

NOTES

1. An early (quite likely pre-Buddhist) tradition holds that other buddhas had existed in the past. According to one widespread tradition, Śākyamuni is the fourth Buddha of the present “good eon” (*bhadrakalpa*), having been preceded by others who lived and taught long before. On the buddhas of the past (and subsequent traditions concerning future ones) see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), pp. 19–26, and Jan Nattier, “Buddhas,” in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Robert E. Buswell, Jr., ed., pp. 71–74 (New York: Routledge, 2003).
2. On the ten epithets of the Buddha, and in particular the ways in which they were interpreted by early Chinese translators, see Jan Nattier, “The Ten Epithets of the Buddha in the Translations of Zhi Qian,” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2002*, vol. 6 (2003): pp. 207–250.
3. The masculine pronoun is chosen advisedly, for during the initial period of formulation of the bodhisattva ideal only men seem to have been viewed as capable of pursuing this path. For a discussion of attitudes toward women in some of the first Mahāyāna scriptures to be translated into Chinese see Paul Harrison, “Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity Among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 10-1 (1987): pp. 67–89; for a detailed discussion of the place of women in one of these texts, the *Fajing jing* (*Ugraparipṛcchā-sūtra*, *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 322), see Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to The Inquiry of Ugra* (*Ugraparipṛcchā*) (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), especially pp. 96–100.
4. On traditions concerning the decline and repeated disappearance of Buddhism, which are found in a number of Buddhist canonical texts, see Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*. In some Indian Mahāyāna circles the idea that the Buddha had entered extinction was modified, with the formulation of ideas such as the “three bodies of the Buddha” (*trikāya*), suggesting that there is a permanent entity (the *dharmakāya*) of which all buddhas who appear in the world are mere manifestations. Since these developments postdate the sources with which we are concerned here we need not deal with them in detail. It is worth noting that not all occurrences of the term *dharmakāya* in Buddhist scriptures have this meaning; see Paul Harrison, “Is the Dharmakāya the Real ‘Phantom Body’ of the Buddha?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15-1 (1992): pp. 44–94.

5. On this motif see Reiko Ohnuma, “*Dehadāna: The ‘Gift of the Body’ in Indian Buddhist Narrative Literature,*” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1997.

6. See the *Khāntivādi Jātaka* (no. 313 in the Pāli *Jātaka* collection).

7. It is often said that the “Hungry Tigress” story (which is not included in the Pāli *Jātaka* collection) is quite late, appearing for the first time in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra*, a Mahāyāna text which probably dates from the Gupta period (fourth to sixth century C.E.). This is not the case, however, for a version of the story was translated into Chinese by Kang Senghui in the mid- to late third century CE (in his *Liudu jijing, Taishō*, vol. 3, no. 152, Story #4, p. 3.2b). The story is also referred to in passing in an even earlier text, a biography of the Buddha assigned to Kang Mengxiang (early third century CE; see *Taishō*, vol. 3, no. 184, p. 463a19–22). Two additional mentions of the story appear in Chinese texts which, though difficult to date, are probably not later than the early fourth century and may be considerably earlier; see *Taishō*, vol. 17, no. 778 (p. 714c19ff.) and *Taishō*, vol. 15, no. 1507 (p. 35a29ff.).

8. On the idea of that the bodhisattva path (that is, the Mahāyāna) began as a kind of Buddhist marine corps seeking to recruit only “a few good men” see Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, especially pp. 193–197.

9. Various definitions of the *pratyekabuddha* are found in Buddhist texts, but one of the most common characterizations is that this figure becomes enlightened without the aid of a teacher and does not teach what he has discovered to others (a “no-input, no-output Buddha,” as it were). By this definition no member of a living Buddhist community would qualify as a candidate for this type of awakening (not in this present life, at any rate), since he or she would have access to the teachings of the Buddha, which *pratyekabuddha* candidates do not. For further discussion and additional references see K. R. Norman, “The Pratyeka-Buddha in Buddhism and Jainism,” in *Buddhist Studies Ancient and Modern: Collected Papers on South Asia*, Philip Denwood and Alexander Piatigorsky, eds. (London: Centre of South Asian Studies, University of London, 1983), pp. 92–106; Steven Collins, “Problems with Pacceka-Buddhas” review of *Ascetic Figures before and in Early Buddhism* by Martin G. Wiltshire, *Religion* 20 (1992): pp. 271–278; and Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, pp. 139–140 and n. 6.

10. For a recent discussion of this issue see Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, especially pp. 84–89.

11. Such fears were still echoing in the eighth century CE, when Śāntideva in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* refers to the bodhisattva fearing that “I shall have to sacrifice a hand or a foot or something” or “I shall be cut up, split apart, burned, and split open for innumerable billions of aeons” (§ 7.25); see the English translation in Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, trans., *Śāntideva:*

The Bodhicaryāvatara (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 69. Cf. Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, pp. 144–145.

12. It is important to emphasize that this does *not* mean that bodhisattvas purposely postponed their own awakening. On the contrary, there are countless passages in Buddhist scriptures that refer to the desirability of attaining buddhahood as quickly as possible. Rather, the issue here is that the bodhisattva path simply takes more time to complete than does the path to arhatship—rather like the difference between the time required to fulfill the requirements for a M.A. vs. a Ph.D. degree. A person who has chosen to pursue a Ph.D. will have to remain in school (i.e., in *samsāra*) much longer than the candidate for a M.A. degree, but this does not mean that she has chosen to “postpone” her graduation. For further discussion of this issue see Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, pp. 142–143.

13. The idea seems to have been that, because the teachings of all buddhas are identical, a bodhisattva must learn all of the teachings (i.e., all of the “eighty-four thousand scriptures”) preached by Śākyamuni Buddha before he will be qualified to become a teacher (i.e., a buddha) himself.

14. See Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, pp. 24–26, and Jan Nattier, “The Meanings of the Maitreya Myth: A Typological Analysis,” in *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*, Alan Sponberg and Helen Hardacre, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

15. The pioneering discussion of the importance of visionary experience in early Mahāyāna by Stephen Beyer, “Notes on the Vision Quest in Early Mahāyāna” in *Prajñāparamitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze*, Lewis Lancaster and Luis O. Gómez, eds. (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1977), should now be read in light of the perceptive comments by Egil Fronsdal, “The Dawn of the Bodhisattva Path: Studies in a Religious Ideal of Ancient Indian Buddhists with a Particular Emphasis on the Earliest Extant Perfection of Wisdom Sutra,” Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University (1998), pp. 133–147.

16. Two of the earliest scriptures to present this scenario are the *Pratyutpanna-buddhasaṃmukha-avasthita-samādhi Sūtra* (*Taishō*, vol. 13, no. 418, translated into Chinese by Lokakṣema in the late second century CE) and a short sutra corresponding to part of the later *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, translated into Chinese by Lokakṣema in the late second century CE (*Taishō*, vol. 10, no. 280, 282, and 283) and by Zhi Qian in the early to mid-third century (*Taishō*, vol. 10, no. 281). On the former see Paul Harrison, trans., *The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present* (Tokyo: The International Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1990); on the latter, see Jan Nattier, “The Proto-History of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*: The *Pusa benye jing* and the *Dousha jing*” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the*

Academic Year 2004, vol. 8 (forthcoming 2005), which includes evidence that *Taishō*, no. 282 and 283 were originally parts of *Taishō*, no. 280, and thus that this entire group of texts (originally comprising a single Chinese translation) is the work of Lokakṣema.

17. It is particularly noteworthy that this vastly expanded cosmos seems to have been specific to Buddhists (for it has no counterpart in contemporary Hindu or Jain texts), and more particularly, to Mahāyāna Buddhists, in India.

18. This was pointed out long ago by Fujita Kōtatsu; for a brief discussion in English see Fujita Kotatsu, "Pure Land Buddhism in India," Taitetsu Unno, trans., in *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development*, James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard K. Payne, eds. (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1996), p. 20. For a discussion of how the term "pure" might have come to be associated with the realms of Akṣobhya, Amitābha, and others in India see, Jan Nattier, "The Realm of Akṣobhya: A Missing Piece in the History of Pure Land Buddhism," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23-1 (2000): pp. 73–74, n. 6.

19. The *Akṣobhyavyūha* was translated into Chinese already in the late second century C.E.; see *Taishō*, vol. 11, no. 313 (pp. 751b–764a). The translation is credited to Lokakṣema, though on stylistic grounds the attribution seems unlikely; at the least, it would appear that—if this was originally Lokakṣema's work—it has subsequently been revised. For a detailed discussion of the contents of this sutra see Nattier, "The Realm of Akṣobhya"; on the attribution of the text to Lokakṣema see Paul Harrison, "The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema," *Buddhist Studies Review* 10-2 (1993): pp. 135–177, and Erik Zürcher, "A New Look at the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Texts," in *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religion in Honour of Prof. Jan Yün-hua*, Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schopen, eds. (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1991), pp. 277–304.

20. Though birth in Abhirati takes place by the normal means—that is, children are physically born to mothers—it differs from birth in our world in several ways. First, in Abhirati (a realm where only beings with little desire are reborn) there is no sexual intercourse; the Tibetan translation of the *Akṣobhyavyūha* specifies that when a man looks at a woman and experiences a modicum of desire, he immediately goes into *samādhi*, where his desire is extinguished; as for the woman who was the object of his gaze, she immediately conceives a child. Pregnancy lasts only seven days, and mother and child suffer from none of the pains ordinarily associated with birth. For further discussion see Nattier, "The Realm of Akṣobhya," pp. 81–82.

21. This bodhisattva, while relatively unknown today, was evidently quite widely recognized in the early centuries of the Common Era as Akṣobhya's

designated heir. It is this same figure, for example, who appears in this capacity in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* and several other perfection of wisdom sutras as well as in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.

22. The requirement that a bodhisattva be reborn as a male before attaining buddhahood is maintained even in scriptures that appear to date from long after the composition of the *Akṣobhyavyūha*. On the necessity of attaining a male body before becoming a buddha as described in a number of Mahāyāna sutras see Jan Nattier, "Gender and Enlightenment: Sexual Transformation in Mahāyāna Sūtras," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27 (forthcoming, 2004).

23. The analogy to the succession from a king to his son, the crown prince, is made explicit in the discussion of the necessity for a buddha to designate a successor—i.e., to confer a prediction to buddhahood (*vyākaraṇa*) on a bodhisattva—is made explicit in the *Da zhidu lun* (Jpn. *Daichidoron*; see *Taishō*, vol. 15, no. 1509 [pp. 284c29–285a9]; for a French translation see Étienne Lamotte, tr., *Le traite de la grande vertu de sagesse* (*Mahāprajñāparamitāśāstra*) IV (Louvain: Institut orientaliste, Université de Louvain, 1991). I owe this reference to Stefano Zacchetti, who discusses this passage in his work-in-progress on Dharmarakṣa's Chinese version of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* (*Taishō*, vol. 8, no. 222).

24. This is, incidentally, an important difference between Chinese and Japanese understandings of Amitābha's world, for attaining merit (through performing good actions and avoiding negative ones), as well as reciting Amitābha's name, is still viewed as an important prerequisite for rebirth there by most Chinese Buddhists today.

25. One of the most widely circulated of such statements is that made in the late 1920s by Sir Charles Eliot, who suggested (in a work on Japanese Buddhism published posthumously) that "the process of development resulted in such a complete transformation that one can no longer apply the same name to the teaching of Gotama and the teaching of Shinran." Charles Eliot, *Japanese Buddhism* (1935. Reprint. London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1959), pp. 389–390. On Eliot's comments and the perspective they represent cf. Nattier, "The Realm of Akṣobhya," pp. 71–72.

26. On the appearance of references to Amitābha (or Amitāyus) in scriptures devoted mainly to other topics see Gregory Schopen, "Sukhāvātī as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 19 (1977): pp. 177–210.

27. For a discussion of the earliest known Indic-language fragments of one of these texts see Paul Harrison, Jens-Uwe Hartman, and Kazunobu Matsuda, "Larger Sukhāvātivyūha," in *Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, III: Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. 2 (Oslo: Hermes Publishing, 2002), pp. 170–214.

28. The unreliability of late medieval Chinese catalogues (many of which reflect the spurious attributions introduced in the late sixth century C.E. by Fei Changfang in his *Lidai sanbao ji*, *Taishō*, vol. 49, no. 2034) was not yet recognized at the time the *Taishō Tripitaka* was compiled. As a result, a substantial number of the attributions contained in the *Taishō* addition of the canon—some have estimated upwards of 25%—are wrong. The solution to this problem is to check each attribution in the earliest (and far more reliable) catalogue, the *Chu sanzang jij*.

29. The attribution of these two translations to Lokakṣema and Zhi Qian, respectively, is the result of recent research by Paul Harrison; for details see Paul Harrison, “On the Authorship of the Oldest Chinese Translation of the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*,” unpublished paper presented at the International Association of Buddhist Studies meeting, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1999, and Harrison, et al., “Larger Sukhāvativyūha.” A major study of these two texts by Harrison is now in progress, which should contribute greatly to our understanding of the Pure Land tradition in India.

30. At the end of the text, in what seems clearly to be a later addition, devotees are offered an additional means of access to rebirth in Abhirati through veneration of the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra* itself.

31. See *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 362, p. 301a27–28 and *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 361, p. 283a20–21, respectively. On this topic see the discussion in Paul Harrison, “Women in the Pure Land: Some Reflections on the Textual Sources,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26 (1998): pp. 553–572.

32. For this scene (which has not, to the best of my knowledge, been discussed in any Western-language publication to date) see *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 362, p. 309a14–24 (for Lokakṣema’s version) and *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 361, p. 291a3–13 (for that of Zhi Qian).

33. Two of the most remarkable statements in the sutra, in this regard, are (1) that all beings born in Sukhāvātī will possess the thirty-two marks (marks which are ordinarily acquired by bodhisattvas, not *śrāvaka*-s, and by the former only at the very end of their careers), and (2) that all bodhisattvas born there will have just one life remaining before the attainment of buddhahood, with the exception of those who have taken vows to save other beings (*sic!*). These two statements occur in close proximity to one another at two different points in the sutra; see *Taishō*, vol. 12, no. 360, p. 268b6–7 and 8–10 (the twenty-first and twenty-second of Dharmakara’s vows) and p. 273b19–21 and 27–28; for an English translation see Luis O. Gómez, *Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), pp. 168 and 193, respectively. Both of these claims imply that radical changes have taken place in the understanding of what a bodhisattva is. Indeed, the second of the two statements given above—which seems to say that only a subset of those in

the category of “bodhisattva” take vows to save living beings, while other bodhisattvas do not—suggests that a significant disintegration in the concept of the bodhisattva career had taken place in the locale where this recension was produced.

34. The sole exception to this statement is the “book cult” section appended at the end of the text, which suggests that devotion to the scripture itself can offer such a guarantee. As I have argued elsewhere (Nattier, “The Realm of Akṣobhya,” pp. 91–92); cf. Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, pp. 184–186, this portion of the sutra is surely a later interpolation, reflecting the popularity of the book cult (for which see Gregory Schopen, “The Phrase ‘sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet’ in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 27 [1975]: pp. 147–210) as such in a wide range of Mahāyāna-oriented circles.

Pure Land Buddhism, devotional cult of the Buddha Amitabha, the "Buddha of Infinite Light."™ Pure Land schools believe that rebirth in Amitabha's Western Paradise, Sukhavati, known as the Pure Land, or Pure Realm, is ensured for all those who invoke Amitabha's name with sincere devotion. In the larger Pure Land sutra, Buddha tells the story of Amitabha: many eons ago, as a monk, he learned from the 81st Buddha about the glories of innumerable buddha lands, whereupon he vowed to create his own buddha land (which he is now doing), making it 81 times more excellent than all the others and drawing into it all creatures who invoke his name. According to this sutra, in addition to calling upon Amitabha, one needs to accumulate merit and concentrate on enlightenment. "Pure Land Buddhism became the most important kind of Buddhism in China and Japan in terms of mass appeal. Thus knowledge of the beginnings of this phenomenon in China is very significant for our study of East Asian Buddhism in general. This is breaking new ground." It may take up to 1-5 minutes before you received it. Please note: you need to verify every book you want to send to your Kindle. Check your mailbox for the verification email from Amazon Kindle. You may be interested in Powered by Rec2Me. Most frequently terms. "The Indian Roots of Pure Land Buddhism: Insights from the Oldest Chinese Versions of the Larger Sukhavativyuha." Pacific World, 3rd ser., 5: 179-201. Nattier, Jan. Vetter, Tilmann E. 1984. "A Comparison between the Mysticism of the Older Prajnaparamita Literature and the Mysticism of the Mula-madhyamaka-karikas of Nagarjuna." Acta Indologica 6: 495-512. Vetter, Tilmann. 2001. "Once Again on the Origin of Mahayana Buddhism." Ed. and trans. Anne MacDonald. Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens 45, 59-90. Vimalakirtinirdesa: Transliterated Sanskrit Text Collated with Tibetan and Chinese Translations. 2004. Ed. Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism, Taisho University. Jan Nattier, "The Indian Roots of Pure Land Buddhism: Insights from the Oldest Chinese Versions of the Larger Sukhavativyuha." Pacific World, 179-201. Linda Heuman, "Whose Buddhism is Truest?"