

CHAPTER 1

The Emergence of Pure Land Buddhism

Life is never at a standstill. Individuals and societies grow and develop; their life force pushes them forward to repeat in an endless row the cycle of birth, maturity, and death. Yet there rarely is mere mechanical repetition. There is continuity but also experimentation along new paths. The lives of individuals, although apparently repeating the life cycles of their ancestors, are still personal, and patterns may change according to particular circumstances and influences incurred along the road. Nothing new ever happens, yet nothing is ever the same.

Religious organizations follow a similar pattern. There is a continuous tension between conservative forces opting for what is familiar and traditional, and progressive forces wishing to explore new vistas in response to new influences or circumstances. Christianity is an eloquent example of a religious organization suspended between conservatism and innovation. If Jesus would attend a Sunday morning mass at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, he would exclaim, "What is going on here?" If the Buddha would be present at a Pure Land ritual in modern Japan, he probably would be totally confused.

Individuals and groups do change, and it is not always easy to explain the exact causality effecting the changes. Very often one can only guess. The emergence of Pure Land Buddhism within the larger framework of Buddhism is an example of evolutionary changes that are difficult to explain. While the changes are taking place, one is not aware of them. It is only after the fact that one wonders and tries to unravel the complicated network of cause and effect that produced those changes.

The emergence of the Amitābha Cult, which eventually would become the Pure Land movement or Pure Land School of Buddhism in East Asia, is an example of a slow but radical shift when compared to the original message of Siddhārtha Gautama. One

may call it an aberration from the Buddha's original intention; one may alternately consider it the highest and purest achievement of Buddhism. It all depends on how one interprets the changes, which depends on one's own stand and beliefs. One will never convince a bona fide Lutheran that he is in fact a heretic within the Christian community.

Returning to our problem at hand, how does one explain, historically, the emergence of the Amitābha worship within the overall Buddhist way of life? There must be some historical factors responsible for this phenomenon, even if one has to admit that such a development is in fact an aberration from the founder's intention. Indeed, that is how it appears if one compares the two extreme poles: on the one hand, Gautama's message; on the other hand, the devotional path of Pure Land Buddhism. The two are in fact mutually contradictory; one has the feeling that worship of Buddha Amitābha is exactly what Buddha Shākyamuni did not wish to happen. His path, revolutionary in his own time, is one of self-reliance: one can only find release from this frustrating life process through a continuous self-effort by following a strict ethical, mental, and spiritual discipline. Nobody can do it for you. It is an arduous process of self-denial that will take many lifetimes to achieve, but there is no shortcut, no substitute, no cheap way of relying on the merits of others. Even the Buddha himself is only a guide, a teacher, a model. By following the path that he discovered, one may be able to reach the same goal of full enlightenment.

Yet, five hundred years later, there is a revolutionary group within the *sangha* claiming just the opposite: one has not after all to follow such an arduous schedule. There is an alternative way, a method both easy and certain, leading without fail to the same ultimate destination: perfect enlightenment. Gautama would have turned over in his grave, if his body had not been cremated.

Is there any standard to evaluate such a radical shift in perspectives? Is there any objective method to judge whether movements like Pure Land Buddhism, or Tantric Buddhism for that matter, are still authentic expressions of the Buddhist way of life? The present study will not try to answer this question. Our main concern is to understand the many factors that contributed to the emergence of the Amitābha Worship, and if possible, to discover the place and time of its appearance.

THEORIES ABOUT THE ORIGIN

The opinions of various scholars who have looked into this problem are greatly divided. The review article by J. Ikemoto in the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*¹ divides those opinions into three groups. First, several Western scholars assert extraneous religious influences, Persian or Iranian.² Others have formulated theories about Hindu influences: either a Vedic origin or a Vaishnavite prototype. Finally, other scholars, mostly buddhologists, interpret the rise of the Amitābha Cult as an inner Buddhist development. These scholars are mostly Japanese, such as Yabuki Keiki and Mochizuki Shimkyō. I feel that the latter's theory, although incomplete, is closest to historical truth. His views have inspired my own theory, which interprets the rise of Pure Land Buddhism in much wider perspectives than any of the above.

According to Ikemoto, the theories suggesting an Iranian origin "lack historical evidence,"³ but since no analysis is made, one cannot examine the validity of this rebuttal. However, many Western writers have been influenced by these theories.

Many have just taken this assumption for granted or at least as highly probable.⁴ For many years Western scholarship has not advanced any significant new interpretations, and Iranian influence seems to be generally accepted as the most likely. Soper's discussion is one of the better modern treatises. He considers the possibility of Christian trinitarian influence upon the formation of the Pure Land Triad, but his conclusions are rather tentative.⁵

Another recent contribution to the controversy, not included in Ikemoto's survey, is M.-T. de Mallmann's monograph on Avalokiteshvara.⁶ Taking up the hypothesis formulated by many predecessors, and more recently by one of her own teachers, P. Mus,⁷ she has strengthened the old arguments through more scientific research. Her thesis is that the origin of the Amita triad, Amitāyus-Avalokiteshvara-Mahāsthāmaprāpta, can be traced back to Irano-Babylonian Zervanism. On the one hand, Amitāyus-Amitābha would be a Buddhist replica of Zurvān Akarana (Infinite Time) as Amitāyus, and of Iranian light gods (not named by name, but possibly referring to Ahura Mazda) as Amitābha. On the other hand, Avalokiteshvara corresponds to personified Light, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta to personified Power and Wisdom.⁸ Without repeating the arguments brought forward, it must be

pointed out that some basic error vitiates the strength of the hypothesis. In fact, the cults of Avalokiteshvara and of Amitābha-Amitāyus may have had separate origins: this is much more probable than a common origin in imitation of a non-Buddhist triad. The main Buddhist text, in which the existence of the Buddhist triad is testified, is the *Kuan wu-liang-shou-Fo ching* (hereafter abbreviated as *Kuan-ching*), which is a rather late text (probably fourth century C.E.) and does not justify any assumptions about the beginning of the cult. The older Pure Land scripture, the *Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra*, does not mention the Bodhisattva's name in the Smaller Version, and the Larger Version mentions the names of the two Bodhisattvas associated with Amitābha, but the information is too vague to allow any conclusion.⁹ Besides, the discrepancy among the Chinese translations makes the authenticity of this passage rather doubtful.

The literary evidence available supports the view that the cult of Avalokiteshvara has been only gradually incorporated into or associated with the cult of Amitābha. If this is true, the main thesis of de Mallmann's research might still be acceptable, namely, that the cult of Avalokiteshvara shows dependence on the worship of Iranian deities. If, as seems more probable, the Amitābha Cult originated separately, it becomes a fascinating theory to maintain that these two cults, which were opposed to each other because of great similarity and hence competition, must have clashed at some moment in their development, and were finally harmonized because one defeated the other. Avalokiteshvara became a "Buddha-son," dependent on, or assistant to, Amitābha.¹⁰

The theories postulating Iranian or Hindu influences, although possibly not totally off the mark, still lack a broad and solid basis: a complex phenomenon such as the Amitābha Cult cannot be explained as the product of just one type of influence. The Japanese theories suffer from a similar kind of weakness. Buddhist influences alone cannot explain the total phenomenon. Most of the materials compiled to prove the case are still valid. If these building blocks are rearranged and integrated, a new and more complete theory can be reconstructed.

After critically reviewing the various arguments brought forward and also after reflecting upon the inner development of Buddhism (its theories and practices) from the early *sangha* to the emergence of Mahāyāna, I propose that the origin and growth of the Amitābha Cult can best be explained as part of a natural

growth within Buddhism itself. Extraneous influences, Iranian or Hindu, may have influenced some details of the cult, but the parallelism so often noticed in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Iranian religions can also be interpreted as a case of simultaneous but independent evolution within different traditions. When time and conditions are ripe, one may see the emergence of similar new developments in several traditions that are not linked geographically.

If one analyzes the essential features of the Amitābha worship from this new angle, one starts to realize that it arose at a time when a fairly large number of conditioning factors had matured. The essential, necessary factors were all present within Buddhism itself, at least in some of the newly developed branches of Buddhism.¹¹ That does not take away the possibility of some minor extraneous influences. Yet some factors, attributed to outside influence, could equally be explained in reverse order. It may have been Buddhism that inspired the development of devotionism in Hindu *bhakti*, or the Buddhist trinity could have inspired the Christian model of a trinity. In the absence of definite historical evidence to demonstrate the direction of influences, one should not be too outspoken but rather leave the issue open-ended. To discover parallelism without deciding upon the influences at play is in itself a fascinating study.

How does one identify or isolate the essential conditioning factors that made a movement such as the Amitābha worship possible, or that constitute the essence of the cult? One does it partially through comparison of the differences between primitive Buddhism, as far as we are able to know it, and Mahāyāna Buddhism, and partially through a detailed examination of the basic Pure Land sutras. The joint results of such an exercise are that one can identify five or six essential factors or components that were virtually absent in early Buddhism but gradually emerged within later streams of the Buddhist tradition. Without these factors, Pure Land cannot be explained, and although most of them are possibly observable in other Buddhist schools as separate factors, it is only in the Pure Land stream that all these factors converged to form a totally new movement.

How do we start this exercise? I choose to start with a brief analysis of the sutras, followed by a study of each of the conditioning factors, and will conclude with an attempt to sketch the historical origin of the cult and its early development.

THE PURE LAND SUTRAS

All Pure Land Buddhists claim three sutras as their basic scriptures:¹² The Longer and Shorter versions of the *Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra* (Longer Sutra and Shorter Sutra, respectively) and a text whose best-known assumed Sanskrit title is *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*. Since only a Chinese text exists (and the existence of a Sanskrit original is highly questionable), it will hereafter be called *Kuan-ching*, although its full Chinese title is *Kuan wu-liang-shou-Fo ching*, as mentioned earlier.¹³ Since the *Kuan-ching* is definitely of later date than the other two scriptures, it has hardly any significance in the discussion of the origin of the Amitābha Cult; its importance lies in its later development in China. It will be discussed in Chapter 2.

The former two sutras represent the earliest textual formulation of the Pure Land ideology and practice, but are certainly not its starting point. The texts presuppose an already active movement that inspired some devotee(s) gifted with literary talents to compose a book (or books). The spread of these scriptures and their great success must have consolidated the cult and even caused its further propagation and flourishing.

The two *Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtras* will therefore be our starting point. As can be seen in the study by Fujita, the literary history of these two texts is a very complex problem. Not only have some Sanskrit versions survived, but there are also several Chinese and Tibetan translations. I will not duplicate Fujita's detailed analysis, but I accept some of his conclusions as convincing.¹⁴ The earliest Chinese translation of five still extant translations¹⁵ of the Longer Sutra (seven more are presumed to have been lost) was believed to be the one made by Lokakshema (T. 361) of the Later Han dynasty (between 168 and 188). Zürcher questions and Fujita rejects the authenticity of this claim; the latter attributes this translation to Pai-yen of the Wei dynasty between 248 and 260. This would mean almost one hundred years' difference and could considerably alter the supposed date of the first Sanskrit original. The translation traditionally attributed to Chih-ch'ien (T. 362) of the Wu dynasty is acceptable to Fujita. But once again, this is the middle of the third century: between 222 and 253. A third translation (T. 360), believed to be the work of Sanghavarman of Wei (252 C.E.) is, according to Fujita, to be dated even later: around 421, as the joint work of Buddhahadra and Pai-yün.

The two extant translations of the Shorter Sutra¹⁶ were introduced to Chinese readers at an even later time: Kumārajīva's translation (T. 366) probably dates from 402; Hsuan-tsang's text (T. 367) dates from around 650. Since the former translation was so excellent, it became and remained the most popular version of this sutra in China. It inspired many commentaries in China, Korea, and Japan.¹⁷ The history of the translation of the Shorter Sutra is rather simple compared to the Longer Sutra, but the relationship between the Chinese versions and the Sanskrit (and possibly other) originals, as well as the mutual relationship between the Sanskrit originals of the Longer and Shorter versions, is extremely complex. Although the Chinese versions are secondary per se, they must have been based on Sanskrit originals older than the extant Sanskrit manuscripts, and therefore could be more reliable and accurate.

Perhaps a definitive solution to all these literary and historical problems will never be found. Therefore, it is more appropriate to employ a different set of criteria, interior literary criticism, and see what results we obtain to settle the question of relative priority of the Longer and Shorter Sutras.¹⁸

Table 1
The *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtras*

Longer Sutra

- A. Sanskrit original, English translation by Max Müller; *SBE* 49: Part 2
- B. Chinese translations (still extant): *Taishō*, vol. 12
 - T. 360: Buddhahadra and Pai-yün (421 C.E.)
 - T. 361: Po-yen (248–260) (previously attributed to Lokakshema (168–188?))
 - T. 362: Chih-ch'ien (222–253)
 - T. 363: Dharmahadra, Fa-hsien (982–1001)*
 - T. 310 (no.5): Bodhiruci (693–713)*

Shorter Sutra

- A. Sanskrit original, English translation by Max Müller; *SBE* 49: Part 2
- B. Chinese translations: *Taishō*, vol. 12
 - T. 366: Kumārajīva (402 C.E.)
 - T. 367: Hsuan-tsang (650 C.E.)

*T. 363 and T. 310 (no.5) are late translations, which did not influence early T'ang Buddhism.

It is Fujita's view that both versions originated around 100 C.E. But that is not the commonly accepted opinion. Winternitz thinks that the Longer Sutra is without doubt the earlier one,¹⁹ whereas Soper holds the opposite position.²⁰ What does a comparative analysis of the two texts have to show us?²¹

1. Concerning the audience to which the Buddha preaches: The Shorter Sutra has 1,250 *bhikshus*, of which 16 are named; and many Bodhisattvas, of which five are named; and also Indra, Brahman, and numberless devas. The place of discourse is Shravasti (Section 1), and the dialogue is held between the Buddha and Shariputra (2). In the Longer Sutra the audience consists of 32,000 *bhikshus* (of which 34 are mentioned by name), and many Bodhisattvas, led by Maitreya. The place of the sermon is Rajagriha (1), and the dialogue is held between the Buddha and Ananda (1–39) and between the Buddha and Ajita (40–47).
2. Concerning the vows of Dharmākara: The Shorter Sutra does not relate the “prehistory” of Buddha Amitāyus. The only allusion to time is in (8): ten kalpas have elapsed since his Enlightenment. On the other hand, in the Longer Sutra, great stress is put on the vows of *bhikshu* Dharmākara.²² His long concentration and achievements are equally emphasized (3–10).
3. The description of the Land of Bliss is rather simple in the Shorter Sutra (3–7), whereas in the Longer Sutra it becomes very elaborate. Most of the elements given in the Shorter Sutra are extended; new details are added (15–24).
4. The presiding Buddha is called Amitāyus in the Shorter Sutra; only once is he called Amitābha: to explain the meaning of this name (9). In the Longer Sutra, the Buddha is usually called Amitābha; sometimes, however, Amitāyus.²³
5. The conditions for rebirth are an important point of difference. In the Shorter Sutra, rebirth is not a result of good works performed in this life (10),²⁴ but is the reward for hearing the name of that Buddha and keeping it in mind for one to seven nights (10), or for making a

mental prayer for that country (17). The Longer Sutra seems to distinguish between three classes of rebirth: the first class are those who increase their stock of good works (27), and for the other two groups the conditions are rather vaguely expressed (28).

6. In the Shorter Sutra, Amitāyus's country is not unique: there are similar Buddha lands in the other five directions. In the Longer Sutra, Amitābha's land is superior, the Buddhas of the Ten Quarters glorify his name (30), and numberless Bodhisattvas will be reborn there (42).
7. In the Shorter Sutra, there is no reference to the two great Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteshvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. In the Longer Sutra they are mentioned, but they do not have a significant role yet (31, 34).²⁵ However, the Longer Sutra attaches a much greater importance to the Bodhisattvas in general (26, 30, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 42).
8. Whereas the Shorter Sutra does not have any "buddhophany," in the Longer Sutra a splendid apparition of Amitābha takes place and is the great climax of the sutra.

From the above enumeration, which is not exhaustive, some conclusions seem to be deducible as to the relative age of the two sutras (but always keeping in mind that a complete analysis should take into account the various Chinese translations). The Shorter Sutra appears to be the earliest in date, since it shows a less developed stage of Amitābha worship. Various reasons can be brought forward. First, the Shorter Sutra is still in a buddhological stage of six Buddhas, whereas for the Longer Sutra, the Buddhas of the Ten Quarters is already a familiar concept.²⁶ Second, the Shorter Sutra leaves out the (*jātaka*) story of *bhikṣu* Dharmākara and his vows (*pranidhānas*). Such an omission can hardly be expected if the *jātaka* had already been created. It is more likely that such an addition in the Longer Sutra points to a later composition. Third, some minor details corroborate the impression of relative lateness of the Longer Sutra: the increased audience; greater emphasis on the Bodhisattvas (in general) and on the two great ones (in particular); and more emphasis on "good works." This last may be a sign that originally the cult was a popular movement that was afterwards "legitimated" by the monastic order but with some revisions. More emphasis is placed on proper

Buddhist practice; a greater stress on meditation²⁷ may indicate that the sutra is more closely related to the *Pan-chou san-mei ching*,²⁸ in which a vision of the Buddhas is promised to the meditator. This emphasis on Buddha vision is also evident in the climax of the Longer Sutra: the apparition of Amitābha.

For these various reasons, it seems quite probable that the Shorter Sutra is the earlier of the two sutras. How early is hard to determine: if the terminus ante quem (250 C.E.) is accepted (supposed date of the first Chinese translation), we are still uncertain about the terminus a quo. Most authors either choose or hesitate between the first century B.C.E. and the first to second century C.E.²⁹ Further historical research is necessary to see whether more accuracy can be obtained.

THE ESSENTIAL CONDITIONS AND COMPONENTS OF AMITĀBHA WORSHIP

The *Sukhāvati-sūtras* were the end of a first round in the origin of the Amitābha Cult. Pure Land devotionism will have a long history yet in Central Asia, China, and Japan. How did this movement arise within Buddhism? What were its conditioning factors, which eventually would also make up the essential characteristics or essential components of Pure Land Buddhism? This has now to be explained in some detail by analyzing the *Sukhāvati-sūtras* and historical literature referring to the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

It appears that the Amitābha Cult is characterized by at least five or six essential components that did not exist in primitive Buddhism but gradually developed after the Buddha's *parinirvāna*. Each of these components was an essential precondition for the rise of the Amitābha Cult. Each developed independently from the others. It is only by their merging together that the new cult took shape. In that sense, it was a unique and probably not repeatable phenomenon in the history of religions.

The components³⁰ are (1) faith and devotion; (2) a new Buddha concept and the "creation" of Buddha Amitābha; (3) the concept of the Bodhisattva, his vows and transference of merits; (4) the concept of Sukhāvati, concretization of *Buddha-kshetra*; (5) the practice of invoking the name as an example of mindfulness; also, the desire of seeing the Buddha(s) in this life; and (6) the concept of two Bodhisattvas-attendants or the concept of a Buddhist trinity. This last is perhaps not an essential precondition and is the least

characteristic factor in the early cult because of its relative lateness. Extraneous influences may be responsible for this development, yet there is no clear evidence. It will be left out of our present discussion.

Faith

Faith is an alternative road to emancipation, especially within the context of belief in the corruption of the *dharma*. At first, it seems strange that the factor of faith would be introduced in a religious movement such as Buddhism in its original phase, characterized as it was by a strong rejection of any supernatural or divine help and by an intensive appeal to self-effort. However, it is a historical fact that this happened. What is not so well established is when it occurred: presumably at a relatively early stage in the development of the Buddhist movement.

Faith (*śraddhā*; Pali: *saddhā*) was originally an essential prerequisite for the Path followers. This is shown by the place it occupies in various early lists of spiritual cultivation.³¹ At first this term did not mean faith in the sense of the later *bhakti* faith; it was used in the sense of trust in the word and experience of the Buddha and was in fact considered to be a necessary condition to overcome doubt.³² Through this *śraddhā*, a follower is confident, or has at least tentatively cast aside his hesitation, and is fully prepared to enter the Path to enlightenment.

In an early period after the Buddha's *nirvāna*, faith developed a new meaning. Whereas the Theravādins faithfully kept to the ancient idea of the Buddha as a human teacher, other groups in the community drifted away from this concept and started to idealize Shākyamuni. That this took place within those sectors of the sangha where the lay influence was most decisively at work is not astonishing. The instinctive needs of the common people for a cult object paved the way for a growing *bhakti* movement,³³ of which the end result was the Buddha concept of Mahāyāna. *Śraddhā* became not only trust, but also surrender of the "self," homage and worship. To give expression to this new trend of Buddhist practice, *ceṭiyas* and *stūpas* were erected and became centers of popular religious practice where circumambulation, offerings, hymn singing, and recitation of the "Three Refuges"³⁴ took place. The practice was later given canonical sanction, and by the time of Ashoka worship had become a regular aspect of popular Buddhism; it was considered as a means to be reborn in the heavens.³⁵

In the period between the Buddha's *nirvāna* and the reign of Ashoka, two trends were growing: among the common people the rise of *bhakti*, with the Buddha (Gautama) as their object; among both monks and more educated laypeople, the development of *śraddhā* with less stress on the strict ascetic rules, which was finally accepted as a simpler and shorter way to the attainment of *nirvāna*.³⁶

The New Buddha Concept: Buddha Amitāyus-Amitābha

Although the great push toward *bhakti* seems to have been made in the post-Ashokan period, the evolution had started earlier, with the rise of the first schism within the *sangha*, the Mahāsāṅghikas.

After this first school became autonomous, it was more likely to develop its own system of thought, its own buddhology. The main argument in this important matter would be as follows: (1) the (already arisen) *bhakti* pushes toward a revision, an amplification of the Buddha concept. The object of the cult is sublimated, not only in the practice of worship, but in the systematic buddhology elaborated by the scholars; (2) the new buddhology in turn gives rise to new forms of cult, of which the concept of Amitābha may be a concrete example. Cult (ritual) and doctrine (myth) influence each other, giving rise to new cult forms and elaboration of new myths. How far foreign examples were required or useful will be discussed along with the main argument.

It is not incidental that both the sublimation of the Buddha figure and the recognition of lay participation in the Buddhist way are found together in the new school, the Mahāsāṅghika. There is a necessary link between the two. There is also a logical link between the old and the new school in ancient Buddhism:

In the Pāli Nikāyas, and especially in the Sanskrit Āgamas, one can already notice the tendency to distinguish three bodies in the Buddha: a corruptible body (*pūti-kāya*), born from the chorion, composed of the four elements, subjected to old age and death; spiritual bodies (*manomaya-kāya*) in which he visits the superior worlds, . . . [and] finally and especially a body of Law (*dharmakāya*), defined by the teaching itself, and venerated above all by the devotees.³⁷

These rather unrelated ideas were systematized by the Sarvāstivādins. They attribute three distinct bodies to the Buddha: first a body of retribution (*vipāka-kāya*), also called a material body

(*rūpa-kāya*), which is not apparitional but still impure; second, a *dharma-kāya*, a collection of conditioned but pure *dharma*s (*samskrita*, *anāsrava*) in which the faithful take refuge; and finally, imaginary bodies (*nirmāna-kāya*), which the Buddha produces and multiplies in certain circumstances in the fashion of magicians.³⁸ These Sarvāstivādin speculations appear to be “a compromise allowing one to reconcile the historical existence of Śākya-muni with the translucent nature with which popular piety invests the Buddha. The Mahāsāṅghikas and their descendants did not hesitate at all to sacrifice the former to the second, proclaiming the Buddha to be ‘transworldly’ (*lokottara*).”³⁹

As a result of this view, the Buddha’s earthly existence, his birth, and all his actions are said to be purely apparitional, pure fiction, because of the Buddha’s conformism. He seems to perform the same actions as all human beings, but this is only to conform to the standards of man. In fact, he is transcendent.⁴⁰ This ‘docetism’ was shared by all Mahāsāṅghika subsects, the Andhaka group, and the northern group (the Uttarāpathaka), as well as the Lokottaravādins.

The various theses held by these (and other Hīnayāna) schools are summed up in three treatises on the sects, written by Vasumitra, Bhavya, and Vinitadeva. Vasumitra is generally identified as the Sarvāstivādin monk who participated in the compilation of the *Mahāvibhāsa* during the reign of Kanishka.⁴¹ His treatise has been translated into Chinese by Hsuan-tsang (T. 2031), Kumārajīva (T. 2032),⁴² and Paramārtha (T. 2033),⁴³ and because of the buddhological views attributed to the Mahāsāṅghika groups, it is important to go into textual detail. The three translations are very similar in their general outline but slightly different in some of the particular views, which shows that they probably go back to slightly different Sanskrit originals. With respect to the doctrines about the Buddhas, the Mahāsāṅghikas are said to believe the following:

1. According to T. 2031, translated by Hsuan-tsang (662 C.E.), “all the world-honored Buddhas are transcendent. All the Tathāgatas are without impure dharmas . . . The *rūpa-kāyas* of the Tathāgatas are indeed without boundaries. The majesty of their power is equally without boundaries. The length of their life is also without boundaries. Because they are always [immersed] in meditation . . .”⁴⁴

2. According to T. 2032 (translated by Kumārajīva (385–413), “the *rūpa-[kāya]* of the Tathāgatas is without boundaries. Their radiance is without measure, the length of their life [equally] without measure.”⁴⁵
3. According to T. 2033, translated by Paramārtha (557–569), “the *rūpa-kāya* of the Tathāgatas is without boundaries. The majesty of their power and the strength of their influence is without boundaries. The measure of their life is without boundaries. The mind of the Tathāgatas is continuously [immersed] in contemplation, peaceful, and immovable.”⁴⁶

When comparing these three different formulations, one can make several interesting observations. First, the three texts ascribe to the Buddhas various attributes, of which the commonly accepted are that their body (*rūpa-kāya*) is without boundaries, and that their life duration, either *shou-liang* or *shou-ming*, is equally without boundaries. When describing their other related qualities, the texts show some divergence: one text does not refer to “power” but has “light, radiance” instead (T. 2032), whereas the two other texts mention “power” but not “light.” This may be due to mistranslation but is more likely due to difference in the Sanskrit sources: “power” (*prabhāva*) and “light” (*prabhāsa* or *prabha*) may have been two variant readings in the original. This brings about a second consideration, namely, the underlying Sanskrit terminology. Lamotte retranslates “life duration” by *ayus*,⁴⁷ whereas both Ba-reau and Masuda⁴⁸ omit any Sanskrit equivalent. On the other hand, whereas Lamotte does not retranslate “illimités,” Ba-reau has *ananta* for “illimité” when referring to the *rūpa-kāya* of the Tathāgatas.⁴⁹ The importance of this apparent digression lies in the original doctrines of the Mahāsāṅghika School and, more concretely, in the exact formulation of these doctrines. As far as is possible to reconstruct or to presume the Sanskrit terminology, it seems certain that this early school of Buddhism expressed some views in its buddhology that may have been either the occasion for the rise of the Amitābha Cult, or had been occasioned by an already existing cult. No matter how the process developed, the links between the two terms in the process are not few.

Taking up again the previously discussed views, and adding some other views from the same and other works,⁵⁰ these are the

links between the Mahāsāṅghika buddhology and the Amitābha Cult:

1. The Buddhas dwell in all the directions (*Kathavatthu*, xxi, 6: Vinitadeva, thesis 27). There are Buddhas in the four directions, in the nadir, the zenith, in the whole universe, . . . everywhere.⁵¹
2. The longevity of the Buddhas is unlimited, without boundaries.⁵² The Chinese terminology used is in one case almost the *same* as the one used for Buddha Amitāyus (*shou-ming wu-liang*) and in other cases very close. Lamotte suggests *ayus* as the Sanskrit original, whereas possibly *amita* expressed the idea of measurelessness.
3. One text (translated by Kumārajīva) has *kuang-ming wu-liang*, the same words as those used for translating Amitābha, only in reverse order. The Sanskrit original was possibly *abha amita*.
4. In Kumārajīva's translation, the two main epithets of Buddha Amita are found together in one verse: *kuang-ming wu-liang, shou-ming wu-liang*: their brightness is without measure, the length of their life is without measure.
5. The Tathāgatas are without impurities: this is a link with the Pure Buddha Lands.
6. Since they have cultivated the way for a long time, they have accumulated inconceivable merits and powers: a link with *bhikṣhu* Dharmākara.
7. The Buddha's *rūpa-kāya* is limitless. This is explained as being the *sambhoga-kāya*.⁵³
8. The Buddhas are eternally immersed in *samādhi*. This may be an early forerunner of the *dhyāni Buddhas*.
9. The power of the Tathāgatas is limitless; the Sanskrit is presumed to be *prabhāva*; the Chinese translators have *wei-li* and *shih-li*. Is there any connection with Mahāsthāmaprāpta?
10. In one Chinese text (T. 2033), Paramārtha's translation, it is said that the Buddhas are continuously absorbed in meditation and that "they are peaceful and immovable,"

chi-ching pu-tung.⁵⁴ This Chinese expression *pu-tung* (immovable) is the name of another Buddha: Akshobhya.⁵⁵ It is possible that both Amitābha and Akshobhya were “born” in the minds of the Mahāsānghikas.⁵⁶

11. The belief in the compassion of the Buddhas is first implied by Vasumitra: “They are never tired of enlightening sentient beings . . .”⁵⁷ Explicitly, however, it is formulated by K’ui-chi: “His compassion is limitless . . .”⁵⁸ Although compassion is one of the main characteristics of Buddha Amita, it is not clearly enough attested to in the earlier texts to take it into account. The balance is still impressive. As far as the theses of the Mahāsānghika schools can be reconstructed, most of the elements necessary and useful to trigger a popular movement like the Amita Cult were already their property. It is even more justified to accept this view, since neither of the translators seems to have consciously thought of the links between the school and the practice, probably because at that time the link had already been forgotten.

This whole argument of comparing the links between the Mahāsānghika doctrine and the popular Amitābha worship is not a proof of historical fact, but of historical probability. What has been expressed in the form of buddhological theses has no immediate relationship to popular practice. Doctrine is usually aloof from practice, but on the other hand, it is inspired by practice and finds new stimulation in it. Very often new theories and myths are created to rationalize and justify practice. In the particular case of Buddhism, the Mahāsānghika buddhology may be considered a compromise of the monks with the aspirations of the laypeople,⁵⁹ as a gradual infiltration of lay ideas into the *sangha*, which in fact was constituted of persons who once were laymen and had already, as such, gone through Buddhist practice. Whereas their minds were trained in the monasteries, much of their emotional (*bhakti*) background remained as it was, and may have given vitality to the development of new ideas.

The Bodhisattva, His Vows, and Transference of Merits

The vows pronounced by *bhikshu* Dharmākara in his early career, and realized when he became the Buddha Amitābha, constitute

one of the basic teachings of the Pure Land School. However, this teaching is not an isolated entity. It is deeply rooted in and connected with the doctrine of Bodhisattvahood, which gradually took shape in Indian Buddhism along with the idealization of Shākyamuni and the growth of *bhakti*.

As a reaction against the ideal of arhatship, the Mahāsānghikas broke away from the Sthaviras and “gradually redefined the ideal type of person whom the follower of the Dharma was bidden to emulate”:⁶⁰ the Bodhisattva.⁶¹ If it is correct to say that the Bodhisattva doctrine probably originated in the second century B.C.E.,⁶² it must be acknowledged that several of the components may have already been active since an earlier time, and especially the basic motive of the program: altruism, compassion.

The Mahāsānghikas again seem to have been instrumental in the formulation of the new ideal. The *Mahāvastu* has some sections about the *bhūmis* that “represent an early stage in the development of the idea.”⁶³

If we now return to the function of the “vows,” they must be understood within the general context of the Bodhisattva aspirations. “A *Bodhisattva*’s career is said to commence with the ‘production of the thought of *bodhi*’ (*bodhicittotpada*). He thinks of becoming a Buddha for the welfare and liberation of all creatures, makes certain great vows, and his future greatness is predicted by a living Buddha.”⁶⁴

The Sanskrit word for “vow,” *pranidhāna*, has been variously translated,⁶⁵ but “strong wish, aspiration, prayer, or an inflexible determination to carry out one’s will”⁶⁶ seem to contain the essential meaning. “Vow” and “resolution” are more frequently used,⁶⁷ and are said to include “a Bodhisattva’s determination to attain Buddhahood, his intention to carry out the altruistic practices of the Pāramitās, and his wish to establish an ideal Buddhahood in order to save other beings.”⁶⁸

When comparing these various elements with the vows of Dharmākara, as expressed in the Longer Sutra, one can see that this text offers a perfect example of the Bodhisattva vows. Perhaps it is an unusual example, for the number of *pranidhānas* is rather high: 24 in the Chinese version of Chih-ch’ien, and 48 in Sangharvarman’s and Bodhiruci’s translations, whereas the Sanskrit text translated by M. Müller has 46. Even if we recognize the number 24 as the most original, it still is high compared to the usual number of vows pronounced by Bodhisattvas.⁶⁹

The vows of Dharmākara cannot be fully understood without consideration of one particular *pāramitā*: *dāna* (giving, liberality).⁷⁰ It is the first of the original six *pāramitās*, and is explained as the perfection of sharing one's possessions with other beings, even to the point of giving away everything one has: "his wealth, his limbs, his life, his 'merit' (*punya*), and also his wife and children."⁷¹ The distribution of material possessions is rather obvious from a Buddhist viewpoint: monastic life can hardly be imagined with substantial bank accounts and large properties. But it seems that giving away something so personal and intimate as one's own spiritual merits cannot be an ancient Buddhist viewpoint. It contradicts the strict law of *karma*. It is much more reasonable to accept that it was one of the "demands" made by the laypeople, who felt themselves incapable of intensive spiritual cultivation but desired to share in the merits of those who performed better. It is, once again, the "logic" of religious development that gave it an important place in later thought, probably starting within the atmosphere of the Mahāsāṅghika School, where the layinfluence was powerful.

"Transfer of merit" (*parināmanā*) became one of the central elements of the Bodhisattva doctrine. It appears equally heroic to give away all the merits one has accumulated as to postpone one's entrance into *nirvāna* until all sentient beings are brought to emancipation. In the Amitābha Cult, "transfer of merits" is an essential component. All those who rely on this Buddha will be reborn in his Land because of his vast merits.

The Concept of Sukhāvātī

The Land of Happiness, described in both the *Sukhāvātī-vyūhasūtras* with ecstatic splendor, may very well be one of the main reasons why the Amitābha Cult, in the end, became the most successful among its competitors. Another important factor was the superiority of Dharmākara's vows.

Although Amitābha's Land appears in many respects to be quite different from the Hindu "heavens," it would be surprising if the authors of the sutras had not undergone any influences in creating their own image of this Buddha Land. The question of literary relationship, not only with other Indian works but with extraneous ideas as well (such as Iranian concepts), is too complex to allow a detailed comparative study. All that can be done is to

point out some affinities and suggest a hypothesis for how the image of *Sukhāvātī* was brought into existence. The points of possible contact are threefold: (1) Hindu cosmology; (2) Buddhist antecedents; (3) non-Indian parallels.

Hindu Cosmology The Buddhists took over many concepts of Hindu cosmological speculation which held that “the universe is very old; its evolution and decline are cyclic, repeated *ad infinitum*; it is immensely large; and there are other universes beyond our own.”⁷² The earth was considered to be flat, of enormous size, with Mount Meru as its center. Around this huge mountain, there were thought to be four continents, the southern continent being *Jambudvīpa*, populated by human beings.⁷³

The northern continent is called *Uttarakuru*. In the Sanskrit epics, the *Purānas*, and the classical literature, it is regarded as an earthly paradise⁷⁴ where the life span of the blessed is extremely long. Two classical passages describe this land and their inhabitants: *Rāmāyana* iv, 43 and *Mahābhārata* vi, 7.⁷⁵ When comparing these two references with the description of *Sukhāvātī*, one sees some striking similarities: rivers full of leaves the color of sapphire and *lapis lazuli*, and lakes filled with lotuses; the land is covered with jewels and precious stones, and trees of gold swarming with birds. (In a Bengal version, it is said that “beautiful maidens hanging down from their branches” grow on the trees.) There is no sorrow whatsoever; one always hears the sound of songs and music, mixed with laughter. These features all appear, in variant ways, in the *Sukhāvātī-sūtras*. However, one marked difference is to be observed: although the inhabitants are a race of superior beings, neither divine nor human, “they lead a long life of happiness and sensual pleasures . . .”⁷⁶ “all are given to love, all dwelling together with their wives, have their desires fulfilled.”⁷⁷ This description is in opposition with the Buddhist sutras, which exclude women from Amitābha’s Land.

Buddhist Antecedents As Buddhist antecedents of *Sukhāvātī*, one should consider, on the one hand, the “heavens” of Hīnayāna, “for the greater part, adopted and adapted from Brahmanic or Hindu belief,”⁷⁸ and, on the other hand, the concept of Pure Buddha fields (*Buddha-kṣetra*),⁷⁹ which reached its full development in Mahāyāna. For the Hīnayāna schools, the heavens are only temporary abodes; only he can be called “blessed” who enters into

absolute *nirvāna*. The heavens are not rejected altogether, since they are rewards for good actions performed in this life, and more important, “birth in heaven often appears as a progress towards emancipation . . .”⁸⁰

With the growth of buddhology, the multiplication of Buddhas, both in time and in space, appeared. Whereas the Sarvāstivādins held that only one Buddha existed at the same time in the whole universe,⁸¹ other schools, such as the Mahāsāṅghikas, held the view that many Buddhas existed simultaneously in six directions.⁸² Although the technical word *Buddha-kshetra* is not used, it seems implied in the concept of various Buddha worlds. Besides, one of the objects of the Bodhisattva vows is to create an ideal Buddha land. In Mahāyāna terminology, the two opposite Buddha lands are called pure (*parishuddha*) and impure (*aparishuddha*).⁸³ The impure Buddha lands are the world systems inhabited by beings in all the six states of existence, and the pure Buddha fields are spheres of influence ruled by particular Buddhas. They are “realms which are not natural, but ideal, or transcendent in the sense that they stand outside the ‘triple world’ of sense-desire, form and formlessness . . . There one sees the radiant body of the Buddha, listens to his preaching, and undergoes further and further purification until Buddhahood is reached by all.”⁸⁴

How much is the creation of the concept *Sukhāvātī* dependent on these various Buddhist and non-Buddhist parallels? To start with the end, it is almost tautologous to say that *Sukhāvātī* is a particular exemplification of the “pure Buddha field” idea, but it seems that this concept of *Buddha-kshetra* is presupposed. *Sukhāvātī* could not come into existence without a previous elaboration of *Buddha-kshetra*. In this respect, Amitābha’s Land of Purity is essentially a Buddhist creation.

Non-Indian Parallels In the description of its details, however, certain outside influences have very likely been operative. M. Müller suggested a borrowing from Hindu sources, but he probably overestimated this influence when he said that the city of Varuna in the West, called *Mukhyā* (the chief) or *Sukhā* (the happy), is the prototype of *Sukhāvātī*.⁸⁵

Other authors, such as I. Yamada and G. Tucci, have equally been impressed by Indian parallels. Yamada refers to the Kausitaki Upanishad (I, 3, 3–5), where the Brahmāloka is described.⁸⁶ Tucci⁸⁷ suggests that the paradises known in Buddhism, such as