

STUDIES IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

# THE LAND OF BLISS

THE PARADISE OF THE BUDDHA  
OF MEASURELESS LIGHT

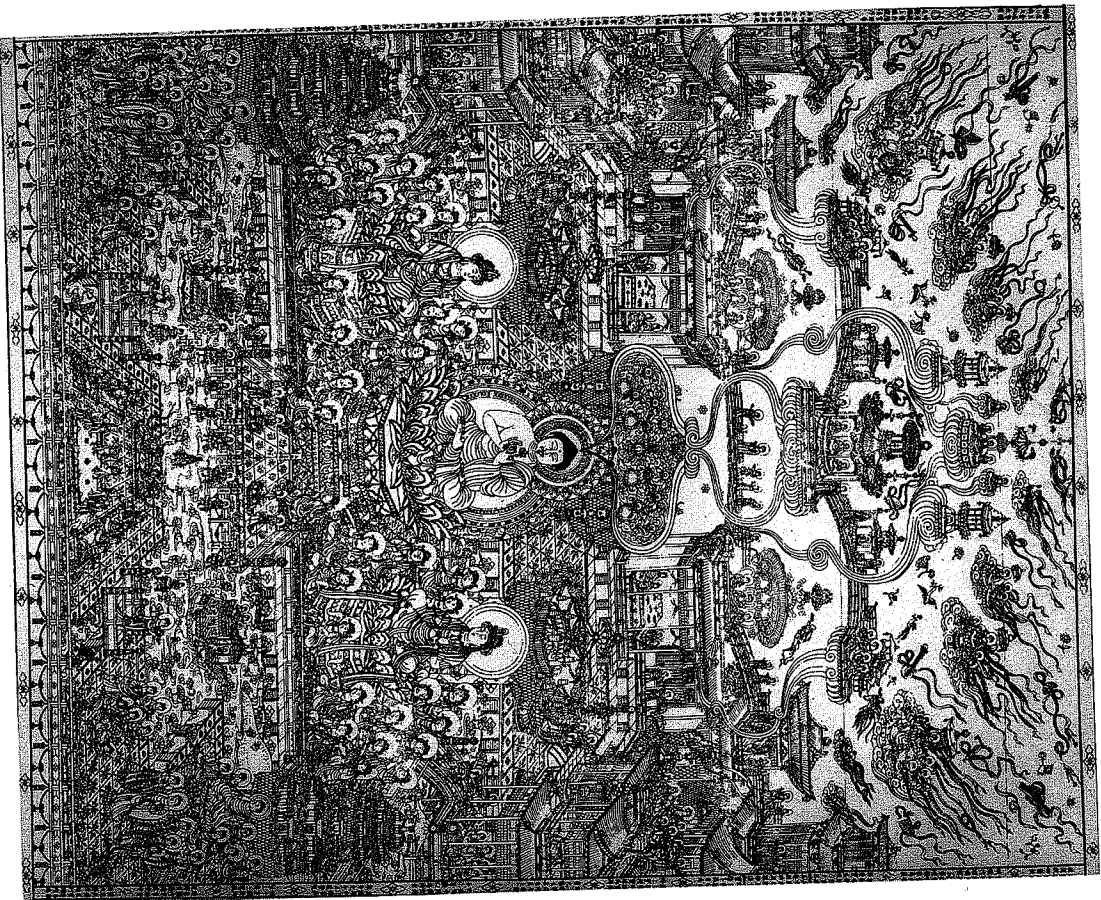
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Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the  
*Sukhāvāṭīyūha* Sūtras

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Introductions and English Translations by

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UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, HONOLULU  
and  
HIGASHI HONGANJI SHINSHU ŌTANI-HA, KYOTO

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Publication of this book has been supported by Higashi Honganji Shinsbū  
Otani-ha, Kyoto, Japan, and the University of Michigan's Institute for  
the Study of Buddhist Traditions.

03 04 05 06 07 08 9 8 7 6 5 4

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tripiṭaka. Sūtrapiṭaka. Sukhāvatīyūha (Larger) English

The land of bliss : the paradise of the Buddha of measureless  
light : Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the Sukhāvatīyūha sūtras /  
introductions and English translations by Luis O. Gómez.

p. cm. — (Studies in the Buddhist traditions)  
ISBN 0-8248-1694-3 (cloth : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-8248-1760-5

(pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Gómez, Luis O. II. Tripiṭaka. Sūtrapiṭaka. Sukhāvatīyūha

(Smaller). English. III. Series.

BQ2012.E5G66 1996

294.3'823—dc20

95-35867

CIP

University of Hawai'i Press books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Council on Library Resources.

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## Introduction to the Shorter Sutra

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### The Two Texts and Their Titles

One way of looking at the two sūtras is to think of them as links between two worlds. They tell a double story. The first is that of the Buddha Śakyamuni (*Śākyamuni*), speaking as a human being in our world to an audience of human beings. The second narrative is presented through the words of this Buddha, who describes for his disciples a different, distant world. As the audience, we stand in this world of suffering and death while the narrative acquaints us with a hope that is gradually turned into a reality: the presence of a distant paradise, brought near to us through the words of the sūtras, made present, as it were, as we get carried into the story.

The two texts lead us to a vision of the paradise of the Buddha Amitabha (*Amitābha*). This is a distant world system (*lokaśāṭha*) called Sukhavatī (*sukhāvātī* or "blissful"—hence the free rendering "Land of Bliss"). Existence in that world is indeed blissful; the inhabitants of that world do not even know the words "evil" and "suffering," let alone experience any form of pain or suffering. The two texts derive the first part of their Sanskrit titles from the name of this paradise.

The second part of the title of the sūtras, *vyūṭha*, refers to the "magnificent display," narrative as well as visual, of the wondrous qualities of that paradise.<sup>1</sup> But these texts are not simply descriptions of a paradise; they are authoritative and revelatory depictions of the Land of Bliss. Both texts are considered to belong to the class of texts called *sūtra*. Loosely defined, these are texts that contain the words of the Buddha, and hence carry scriptural authority.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the complete title of both texts, *Sukhāvātī-vyūṭha Sūtra*, means "The Sūtra on the Display of the [World] of Bliss" or "The Sūtra Displaying the [World] of Bliss."<sup>3</sup> Because the two sūtras carry the same title and share the same

themes, one has hardly any basis for suggesting different titles for the two works. One of the two, however, is much shorter than the other. Therefore, the two sutras have come to be known in the West as the *Smaller Sukhavitayuhā* and the *Larger Sukhavitayuhā*, or as *The Smaller Sutra* and *The Larger Sutra*, for short. In the present translation, I have preferred the more idiomatic expressions *The Shorter Sutra* and *The Longer Sutra*.

The two sutras are also preserved in Tibetan translation and in several Chinese renditions. The Chinese translations, as well as the work of Chinese commentators, are an important source for our understanding of the texts. Much of what we read in modern studies about these two sutras is influenced in one way or another by the Chinese tradition, especially as it has come down to us through the work of Japanese commentators, scholars, and missionaries.

In Chinese and Japanese, the Shorter Sutra is usually known as the *Sutra on Amita Buddha*, the Longer Sutra as the *Sutra on Amitayus Buddha*.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Sanskrit titles, which are based on the name of Amita Buddha's paradise, the Chinese titles focus on the name of the Buddha presiding over the paradise, who is known as Amita, Amita-bha, or Amitayus (*Amitayus*).<sup>5</sup>

### The Message of the Two Sutras<sup>6</sup>

As sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism, the Shorter and the Longer Sutras share with other texts of the same tradition most of the general beliefs that we have come to associate with this form of Buddhism. They are texts about extraordinary beings who possess wisdom, knowledge, and extraordinary powers. These are the buddhas who have attained supreme enlightenment. The two sutras accept the general assumption that these buddhas started their spiritual careers with a solemn promise and determination to become *bodhisattvas*, that is, aspirants to awakening. The promise takes the form of a vow, a solemn attestation to their inviolable determination to pursue the long and arduous career that leads to full awakening.<sup>7</sup> Those who have reached the end of this difficult path serve as teachers, and saviors to other sentient beings. They can also appear in miraculous manifestations or in the visions of deep meditation, sometimes surrounded by other beings who are themselves on their way to enlightenment and are now advanced bodhisattvas.

One can in fact read the two sutras merely in the context of these generalized Mahayana beliefs. But to do so would give only a superficial reading of the texts. One would gloss over what is specific to these texts. The Sanskrit titles of the sutras point to one dimension of the sutras: the central topic, the Land of Bliss. The Chinese titles point to

### Introduction to the Shorter Sutra

the central figure of the two texts: the Buddha Amitabha. The meaning of these two central topics is best clarified by trying to understand the way in which the two texts present a *mise-en-scène*, a story, and a variety of voices.

### Setting

On a first reading, it is helpful to focus on understanding the assumptions of the sutras regarding time, "historical" truth, and cosmology. In the present introduction, however, I bracket questions of history and social origins, and even issues of doctrinal polemics (all of which will be taken up in the introductions to the technical translations).

Although the two sutras differ in detail and in the degree to which each is committed to different dimensions of the cosmic, mythic, and ideal world of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, they both share a common world view. In outline form, this world view includes the following three central features (all occurring in both the Shorter and the Longer Sutra). First, the structure of a typical world system corresponds to different degrees of spiritual progress, conceived as different forms of rebirth. Sentient beings will be reborn in a more or less fortunate form of rebirth, depending on each one's spiritual progress. This conception is closely connected to the unquestioned belief in the coexistence of spiritual beings, benevolent or malevolent, joyous or woeiful, with "natural" sentient beings—humans and animals. Second, there is more than one world system (more than one "inhabited world," we would say today), but the most important differences among these worlds are not so much cosmographic as spiritual. Third, the more fortunate among the world systems have a buddha who, accompanied by a retinue of bodhisattvas, guards over and promotes the spiritual health of his world (called his "buddha-field").

The sutra presents itself as partly a dialogue, partly a sermon, taking place in India, at the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni (*Śākyamuni*),<sup>8</sup> near the ancient city of Shravasti (*Śrāvastī*). But the implicit setting is a cosmos of many world systems, of many forms of rebirth. The discourse itself, moreover, creates an image of some of these world systems, in particular the paradise of Amitabha. The location of the sutra is thus both this, our world, and the distant paradise of Amitabha. The time is both the semimythical time of the period when the Buddha Shakyamuni wandered in the Ganges Valley and the mythical time of the eternal light of Amitabha.

### Dramatis Personae

The "buddhas" of our text may be conceptualized provisionally as falling into three categories. First is the "Buddha" known as the founder

of Buddhism, or the "historical Buddha." Second are the myriad buddhas of other worlds, sometimes called "celestial buddhas" in Western literature on Buddhism. Among these we may distinguish a third class, the celestial buddhas that have identifying names, characteristics, and, in many cases, mythical life histories.<sup>9</sup>

The authors of the two sūtras, whoever they may have been, evidently belonged to a community that considered itself Buddhist—that is to say, a community that believed that its most cherished religious values and practices had been taught by "the Buddha," an enlightened being known as Shakyamuni. In the two sūtras, Shakyamuni is the main speaker, and he is also a mouthpiece for religious truth. It is he who, in the Shorter Sūtra, introduces us to the existence of other worlds, distant worlds, each presided over by a different "buddha" (in the second meaning of the term). The most important figure introduced and praised by Shakyamuni is the Buddha Amitābha (category three of "buddhas").

### The Story

The two sūtras, then, are presented as composed mostly of the words of Shakyamuni Buddha. He, as an authoritative figure from the historical but distant past, reveals to us the main message of the two sūtras. This message is, in brief, as follows: Far from our own world is found another world, free of suffering and evil. It is a world that has been made pure, beautiful, and blissful by a buddha named Amitābha, or "Measureless Light," and also known as the Buddha Amitayus, "Measureless Life."<sup>10</sup> This message is presented within a narrative frame, which in the Shorter Sūtra is a dialogue between Shakyamuni and his disciple Śāriputra (*Śāriputra*).

Leaving a detailed discussion of the Longer Sūtra for the introduction that precedes it, we may now look more closely at the structure and content, at the narrative frame and the core message, of the Shorter Sūtra.

### The Shorter Sūtra: A Preview

In the Shorter Sūtra, the frame "story" is an uncomplicated setting: Shakyamuni speaks to his disciple Śāriputra, who barely speaks, and then only in response to Shakyamuni's questions. The sūtra begins and ends with the formulaic opening and closing characteristic of the Mahayana sūtra genre. These formulas frame the rest of the text, composed mostly of Shakyamuni's discourse. This is the core of the text, set off as sacred utterances by the stereotyped formulas.

The core of the text (that is, Shakyamuni's discourse) can be divided into four major parts: (1) without preamble or pretext, Shakyamuni

describes the Land of Bliss and its buddha, the Buddha Amitābha; (2) he names some of the buddhas in other worlds who confirm the truth of Shakyamuni's message as they praise their own perfected worlds; (3) he explains the nature of the trust and commitment required for rebirth in the Land of Bliss, and connects this theme to an alternative title for the sūtra ("Embraced by All Buddhas"); and (4) he explains how difficult it is to attain buddhahood and preach the message of the sūtra in an unbelieving age.

Although the narrative structure of the sūtra is relatively simple and appears to serve mostly as a frame, one can read the text as a weaving of several voices, perspectives, and personae. First, there is the person of Ananda (*Ānanda*), the Buddha's closest disciple, who is the presumed narrator of all sūtras. Second, within the narrative itself is an audience of thousands of monks, arhats, bodhisattvas, and celestial beings. Third, among these is Śāriputra, who often serves as both a stand-in for the sūtra's readers or audiences, and as a sidekick of sorts.<sup>11</sup> Fourth, Shakyamuni Buddha invokes the authority of other buddhas in distant world systems, who form part of this panoply of the most holy and divine of sentient beings. Fifth is Amitābha himself and the inhabitants of the Land of Bliss. No one in this fifth group is properly speaking an actor in the narrative, but their presence in the descriptive passages serves as a different "voice," one that convinces the reader of the reality of the Land of Bliss.

The "characters" in the "story" serve different purposes. Shakyamuni, for instance, is a link between the reader or audience and the tradition of Buddhism. His presence confirms the reader's historical connections to the origins of Buddhism; the sūtra becomes a text rooted in history, and history in religion usually means authority. At the same time, Shakyamuni, together with the celestial buddhas he invokes, creates a point of view that places us in this world looking out into cosmic space, towards the Land of Bliss.

### Behind the Story

The story of the sūtra is set in a world of tradition and myth. Time and location, temporal and spatial dimensions, are without question of a special kind—one that we could perhaps call sacred or mythical, for lack of a better word. Extraordinary rules and boundaries also apply to body and action, spirit and matter, the ideal and the real. Access to these special dimensions of reality is possible through a set of assumptions about the world and the beings that inhabit it and through an accompanying belief and confidence in the spiritual realities and processes embodied in the mythology.

Among many differences between the world view of the two texts

and the world view of contemporary Western secular culture, two stand out as central to understanding the message of the two sūtras. First, existence after death is a given; but it is not simply an extension of human life. Existence after death means the possibility—or rather, the reality—of many lives, in a variety of realms other than our world, and in a variety of roles or “incarnations” that include rebirth as an animal, as a hungry ghost, or in one of many paradises, or rebirth in a hell or purgatory, and rebirth in other world systems as well.

Second, the process of rebirth is for most of us sentient beings an unending cycle of suffering. This cycle would be a desperate, hopeless, and meaningless eternal return if it were not for the possibility of deliverance. The moral and spiritual quality of our lives can have a significant effect on the course of our wandering through the many rounds of rebirth. Human beings who attain moral and spiritual perfection may in fact attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Those who attain liberation through their own spiritual effort are the buddhas of the universe. In turn, the moral and spiritual quality of buddhas can also have a significant effect on the course of our journey through the many stations of rebirth—in other words, the liberation of buddhas facilitates the liberation of other, less perfect sentient beings.

Much of Mahayana Buddhist literature is devoted to these two issues: the manner in which human beings attain the perfection of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the manner in which buddhas and bodhisattvas assist other beings in their quest for liberation from suffering. The concrete manifestations of these two constellations of belief in the Shorter and the Longer Sūtra define their specific doctrine of Buddhist faith. The two sūtras, however, prefer description or depiction over doctrinal exposition. Thus, the “doctrine” of the two sūtras is implicitly defined by the way in which they describe or suggest the nature and the geography of life after death, the physical appearance of buddhas and liberated beings, and by the imagery they use in representing the nature of our relationship to buddhas and their saving powers.

### Buddhas and Buddha-fields

The universe of the classical Buddhist Indian imagination was a system of parallel worlds, all of which shared a similar structure. Although simple worlds could cluster in different ways into more complex world spheres or world systems, each individual world had the same number of continents, with the same shape and the same rivers and mountain ranges.<sup>12</sup> The worlds differed, however, in the degree of happiness and virtue enjoyed by the human beings inhabiting each one of them. Some of these worlds—the most fortunate—were blessed by the presence of a perfectly enlightened buddha.<sup>13</sup> This buddha presided over the spiritual life of his world, making it his own “buddha-

field,” or sphere of spiritual influence.<sup>14</sup> It was believed that in some of these worlds the presiding buddha had “purified” his “field” to the point of transforming his world into a land completely free of evil, suffering, and unhappiness. A “purified field” did not fit the mold of the standard world system—even its topography was often different. It would be replete with beautiful gardens; the air would be permeated by sweet fragrances and enchanting melodies; the land would be endowed with many marvels, and its inhabitants with miraculous powers—in short, these lands were veritable paradises.

In ancient India, and later in East Asia, one such world dominated the faith and captured the imagination of millions. This is the land of the Buddha Amitābha, the buddha-field called the “Land of Bliss.”<sup>15</sup> This is indeed a world very different from other worlds. Not only is it a land of pure bliss, it is also a land of great marvels. Everything there happens as if by magic: rivers and forests are filled with precious jewels; birds sing expositions of the Buddha’s teachings. In this land there is no evil or danger. One will not even find there the storms and inclement weather, or even the rugged mountains and impassable forests, that made life in ancient India so harsh.

### One Buddha, Many Buddhas

Although I am sure most readers will have some notion of what the words “buddha” and “paradise” convey, some may wonder what may be the exact meaning of these terms in the context of our two sūtras. The religion of these texts belongs to a type of religious belief and practice that may seem foreign to readers familiar with other forms of Buddhism, as well as to those familiar with other conceptions of “paradise,” saviors, or savioresses.

Some readers may be wondering what the connection is between the buddha of the Land of Bliss, called the Buddha Amitābha, and “Buddha,” the founder of Buddhism. Furthermore, the idea of many buddhas paired with a clear predilection for one buddha, and for a buddha who is not the founder of Buddhism, may give rise to some confusion. For many of us the expressions “Buddha” or “the Buddha” refer to one presumably historical person. This person is known to us as Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha who lived in India more than two thousand years ago and founded the religion of Buddhism. Another common name for this historical person, Shakyamuni (“The Sage of the Shakra Clan”), may also come to mind when we speak of “Buddha.” But in the mythology of Mahayana Buddhism, Shakyamuni is a buddha, certainly an important figure, and yet one of many buddhas. He may serve as the mouthpiece, and the vehicle for revelation, but he is not unique.

Furthermore, what we may regard as his teachings are seen as only



one of many "teachings of the Buddha(s)." Thus, if we are to understand the message of the Shorter and the Longer Sūtras, we must adjust our vision first to a panorama of many buddhas, a grand vision of a universe populated by many advanced spiritual beings, all making some claim on spiritual authority. Second, we must work with the contradictory claim of a special status for one single buddha, a spiritual *primus inter pares*.

Ultimately, however, our texts appeal to the authority of Shakyamuni. He is still recognized as the founder of Buddhism as we know it, and his historical reality is never open to question. But even then, he is often only the mouthpiece for the beliefs held by various Buddhist communities during the long history of the Buddhist faith. In this sense, it is indeed appropriate to speak, albeit metaphorically, of the existence of many buddhas, each speaking for his own sacred person and holy word, each making a claim on the believer's faith and commitment. It is also appropriate to speak of these buddhas as visions presented to us through the eyes of Shakyamuni and in the historical setting of his audiences. And it is also possible to see Shakyamuni's teachings as only a prototype for the words being spoken in many worlds by many buddhas. The Shorter Sūtra invites us to imagine each buddha in the universe engaged in the same revelatory role assumed by Shakyamuni in the sūtras:

in the same way that I [Shakyamuni] now praise that buddha-field, the Land of Bliss, other buddhas, blessed ones, in the eastern regions of the universe, praise their fields—buddhas equal in number to the grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers in every world, . . . each one of these buddhas covers his own buddha-field with his tongue and then reveals all that is in it. [Sv S21 ff.]<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Shakyamuni opens for us this vista of faraway worlds that echoes and confirms the message of Buddhism. But, in their plurality, each of the many buddhas of other world spheres formulates his *own* teaching and reveals his *own* world of salvation. Standing out among them is Amitābha, whose paradise is implicitly presented in the two sūtras as far superior to any other world. But this superior status places him and his world above our own world and its buddha—in other words, above Shakyamuni himself. We may say, then, that from the perspective of our two texts, the founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni, reveals the many buddhas of the universe, one of whom, Amitābha, then makes his own independent and stronger claim on our faith and devotion.

But what kind of beings are these buddhas from distant world spheres? Our notion of the Buddha as an enlightened human being, as a human being transformed by his own effort, is colored by Western

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notions of what is natural and what is human. We see the Buddha either as an example of what we can become or as a metaphor for spiritual growth. But the Buddha is much more than that. Often, the word "buddha" does not refer to a "natural" or "historical" human being. This other buddha is still a very concrete entity, an individual, not a metaphor; but it is also an impossible ideal, not a model. One may say that this other buddha is an extraordinary human, but only if one thinks of the extraordinary as something in the realm of the fantastic. For the buddha of the two sūtras is not simply an exceptional human being, but a superhuman being. His perfection is such that one easily loses sight of the effort and the gradual path that lead from common humanity to buddhahood. The next step comes easily: The gap between perfect buddha and common human is such that one can easily envision buddhas as semidivine, celestial beings.

### Teacher and Superhuman Being

Again, in the Indian context this digression into the fantastic does not contradict the other image we have of the Buddha as teacher. For the Indian spiritual teacher is often seen as the embodiment of the holy, the presence of the divine in human form. Contrary to the assumption of several generations of Western scholars, in the Indian view a human religious teacher, if he is in the ranks of spiritual masters, may have many superhuman traits and faculties (such as wonder-working powers, omniscience, mind reading). Moreover, his disciples may believe in the presence of such traits even during the master's lifetime.

We are therefore not surprised to see the human teacher, the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, revealing the suprahistorical, the celestial Buddha Amitābha, whose life and paradise he, Shakyamuni, knows directly.

### Faith, Trust, and Resolution

Early Western notions of Buddhism derived for the most part from books, or if not from books, then from the religious practices and ideas of Westerners who likewise relied on their own literacy to learn about Buddhism. These ideas reflected the concern of the authors of those books with the doctrines of canonical Buddhist scriptures or with the speculations of Buddhist intellectuals and meditating yogis. A recent shift in some circles towards the teachings of living Buddhist teachers has acted as a corrective to this perception. Yet even those Westerners who have traveled to Asia and practiced among Asian Buddhists tend to become interested in Buddhism for its theories and practices of self-discipline, especially those connected with the practice of "meditation." Thus, Western images of Buddhism have tended to center on some form of cerebral assimilation of Buddhist ideals. More often than

not, Westerners have concerned themselves with a spirituality that is centered on self-cultivation by means of mental training and discipline, or on the theories of monk-scholars. The end result of this self-cultivation is generally described as the attainment, in this life, of a "direct" spiritual experience that is often conceived of as private and empowering, and as a primarily cognitive grasp of an impersonal reality.

But for millions of Asian Buddhists, this image of Buddhism represents only a fraction of what comes to their minds. For many there is more to Buddhism than meditation, renunciation, serenity, or mental cultivation, and more than the speculations of philosophers and scholars. The other sides of Buddhism take many forms, but if we focus only on the two sutras, we may say that throughout their history they have been valued by Buddhists who believed in a plurality of "transcendent" or "celestial" buddhas and relied on the "saving grace" of these buddhas.<sup>18</sup> Thus, among those who consider themselves Buddhists, there are those who turn to the Buddha, or to many buddhas, as a source of guidance and inspiration, and there are those who base their religious thought and practice on their faith in the saving power of the buddhas. As one moves towards the latter of these two models, one enters the sphere of a Buddhism of faith and devotion.

And yet, trust in the Buddha's grace and the ideals of self-cultivation are connected in at least two important ways. In the first place, the ideal of the saint seeking his own spiritual perfection is the backdrop and the frame for our story. The places and events described in the two sutras are possible only because there are buddhas, that is, human beings who have achieved through their own efforts the highest spiritual perfection—they have *become* buddhas. This is a point clearly emphasized in the Longer Sutra, but is also implicit in the Shorter Sutra's effort to highlight the difficulty of Shakyamuni's mission.

The Buddhism of faith shifts emphasis and tone by setting as paradigm the solemn desire to be reborn in the Land of Bliss and as goal the spiritual perfection that is attained effortlessly in Amitabha's paradise. These two ideals contrast sharply—at least on the surface—with the paradigm set by the vows of those who promise to follow the arduous path to awakening with the goal of gradual self-cultivation through innumerable rebirths. We know the shift is an almost complete reversal when the delights of the Land of Bliss appear as the most important motivation for the vow. In both sutras one detects a certain hesitation between the exaltation of the effort of a buddha like Shakyamuni, the exaltation of the Land of Bliss as a place for the attainment of liberation, and the glorification of the beauties of the Land of Bliss.

## Rebirth

The particular form of the "Buddhism of faith" embodied in the two sutras therefore redefines traditional terms, retaining as the invariant element the basic structure and terminology of the ascetic path of salvation, but allowing ample room for variance in the stated goal and in the mythological expression of the ascetic concepts. Thus, "rebirth" is now less a matter of suffering in the rounds of transmigration and more a matter of attaining birth in the Land of Bliss. Although the same terms may be used, this is a different type of "rebirth."

The two sutras do not deny the possibility of existence after death in a variety of realms other than our world or other than the Land of Bliss. But they are concerned with rebirth in that one last, extraordinary realm, the Land of Bliss. This Buddhism of faith does not abandon the conviction that the moral quality of our actions and the moral and spiritual quality of the actions and character of the buddhas who come to our aid can have a significant effect on the outcome of our wandering through the many rounds of rebirth. But faith takes precedence over effort, and the ideal is not one of imitating the buddhas or deserving rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The general presuppositions of Buddhism are redefined to include the possibility of spiritual progress by reliance on the spiritual power of the buddhas who have already attained perfection and have created a place where one can attain perfection with their assistance.

## Embraced by All Buddhas

It is therefore not surprising that within the Shorter Sutra itself Shakyamuni proposes an alternative title to that sutra, "Embraced by All Buddhas." For the vows of buddhas are now not so much models as sources of a saving power that embraces and surrounds sentient beings. The closest that believers come to imitating the buddhas is with a solemn desire to be reborn in the Land of Bliss that echoes the original resolution of buddhas when they set out on the career of a bodhisattva.

The Shorter Sutra sees the Land of Bliss as its primary theme. Praise of the Land of Bliss and its buddha, Amitabha, are the main topic and intention of the sutra. Still, the alternative title "Embraced by All Buddhas" suggests that many buddhas have powers similar to those of Amitabha. This contrasts sharply with the centrality of Amitabha in the Longer Sutra. One wonders whether this difference does not suggest either a major doctrinal difference, or a historical evolution.<sup>19</sup>



The Shorter Sukhāvatīyūha Sutra  
English Translation  
of the Chinese Version of Kumarajīva

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The Shorter Discourse  
*The Sutra of Amita Buddha*  
*Kumarajīva's Chinese Version, the Amito-jing*

Title

*The Sutra on Buddha Amita*, as preached by the Buddha Shakyamuni.  
Translated by Tripiṭaka Master Kumarajīva of Kucha, in the Yao Qin  
Dynasty.

Preamble: The Setting and the Audience

- §1. This I have heard. At one time, the Buddha was staying in the royal capital city of Shravastī, in Prince Jeta's grove. He was staying in the cloistered park that the generous Anāpindada gave to the Buddhist Order in Prince Jeta's grove.
- §2. At that time the Buddha was surrounded by a large assembly of monks—one thousand two hundred fifty of them. These monks were all great arhats, highly respected among the people for their holiness.
- §3. Among them were the elders Shariputra and Maha-Maudgalyayana, and Maha-Kashyapa, Maha-Katyayana, Maha-Kaushthila, Revata, Chula-Panthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola Bhāradvaja, Kalodayin, Maha-Kapphina, Vakkula, Anuruddha—and other great disciples like these.
- §4. And he was also accompanied by an assembly of bodhisattvas mahasattvas; present were the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, the Prince of Dharma, as well as the future Buddha, the bodhisattva Maitreya, also known as Bodhisattva Ajita. The bodhisattva Gaṇḍhastin, and the bodhisattva Nītyodyukta were also there, with other great bodhisattvas like these.
- §5. And the Buddha was likewise accompanied by a large

crowd of countless gods—Shakra, known as Indra, the King of the gods, and many others.

## The Main Discourse

### The Land of Supreme Bliss

§6. Then, the Buddha spoke to the Venerable Shariputra: "West of here, a hundred billion buddha-fields away, there is a world system called 'Supreme Bliss.' In that field there is a buddha named 'Amīta.' At this very moment he dwells in that faraway land, preaching the Dharma.

§7. "Shariputra, why is that field called 'Supreme Bliss'? Because the living beings in that realm are free from all forms of suffering and they only experience all forms of happiness. Therefore, it is called 'Supreme Bliss.'

§8. "Furthermore, Shariputra, all around this Land of Supreme Bliss, there are seven tiers of railings, seven rows of netting, and seven rows of trees. They are all made of the four precious substances. All around, they encircle the perimeter of this land. Therefore, that land is called 'Supreme Bliss.'

§9. "Furthermore, Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss there are bathing pools made of the seven precious substances.<sup>1</sup> They are filled with the best water, endowed with eight good qualities: their water is always limpid, cool, sweet-tasting, light, soft, placid, healthy, and thirst-quenching. The bottom of these pools is completely covered with golden sand. In each of their four sides, they have steps made of gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, and crystal.

"Above, there are towered pavilions, adorned with gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, crystal, coral, red pearls, and agate.<sup>2</sup> On the surface of the pools, there are lotus blossoms as large as cart wheels. These are blue colored, with a blue sheen; yellow colored, with a yellow sheen; red colored, with a red sheen; white colored, with a white sheen; they are delicate and fragrant.

"Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§10. "Furthermore, Shariputra, in this buddha-field celestial music is constantly heard. And the ground is made of gold. Four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night, mandara flowers rain down from heaven. Early every morning, each living being in this land picks some of those exquisite flowers, places them in the hem of his robe, and travels to worship with these flowers a hundred billion buddhas in other worlds in the other regions of the universe. Immediately thereafter, each of these persons returns, in

time for his forenoon meal, to this, his own world, and takes his meal and afternoon stroll.

"Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§11. "Moreover, Shariputra, in that land you will always see many flocks of rare and exquisite birds of many colors—white egrets, peacocks, parrots, shari and kalavinka birds, and those birds called 'Living-Together.' Doves of these birds gather to sing with soothing, exquisite voices four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night. Their voices proclaim the tenets of the Buddha's teaching—for instance, they sing of the five spiritual faculties, of the five spiritual powers, of the seven aspects of awakening, of the Eightfold Path that is followed by those of spiritual nobility, and of many other aspects of the Buddha's Dharma. When the living beings in that buddha-field hear such song, they all immediately enjoy thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly.

§12. "Shariputra, you should not say that these birds are actually born here as a result of their past evil deeds. Why not? Because the three undesirable courses of rebirth are not found in this buddha-field. Moreover, Shariputra, in this buddha-land even the names of the three undesirable paths of rebirth are not to be found. How then could they exist in fact? The birds that sing in this buddha-field have all been created by the Buddha Amīta himself, by means of his miraculous power, because he wanted to have them broadcast the sound of the Dharma.

§13. "Shariputra, in that buddha-land, a subtle breeze blows, swaying the rows of jeweled trees and the jeweled nets, so that they emit an exquisite sound, like that of hundreds of thousands of diverse kinds of musical instruments playing together at the same time. All those who hear this sound enjoy spontaneously and immediately thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly, bringing to mind the Buddha, bringing to mind his Dharma, bringing to mind his Order.

"Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

### The Buddha Presiding Over the Land of Supreme Bliss

§14. "What do you think, Shariputra? Why is this Buddha called 'Amīta'—'measureless'? Shariputra, this Buddha's beaming light is measureless. It shines without obstruction into buddha-fields in the ten directions. Therefore, he is called 'Amīta.'

§15. "Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha's life-span, and the

life-span of the human beings in his buddha-field as well, has a duration of measureless, boundless, countless, cosmic ages. For this reason too he is called 'measureless,' 'Amita.'

"Shariputra, ten cosmic ages have now passed since the Buddha Amita attained buddhahood.

### The Inhabitants of the Land of Supreme Bliss

§16. "Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha has measureless, inestimable numbers of disciples that are auditors, all of them arhats. Their number cannot be grasped. The same is true also of the community of bodhisattvas in that land.

"Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§17. "Furthermore, Shariputra, all living beings born in the Land of Supreme Bliss will progress irreversibly in the path. Many among them are only one more birth away from the full awakening of a buddha. Their numbers are vast. Their numbers cannot be grasped. One can only speak of their spiritual careers in terms of measureless, boundless, incalculable, cosmic ages.

### Exhortation

§18. "Shariputra, living beings who hear this should generate an earnest desire, wishing to be reborn in that land. Why? Because in that land one will be able to meet in one place persons of such high virtue as the many living beings I have described here. Shariputra, one cannot be reborn in that buddha-field, if one depends on the merit of only a few roots of goodness.

§19. "Shariputra, if good men or good women hear this explanation of the qualities of the Buddha Amita, and embrace his name, and keep it in mind single-mindedly and without distraction, be it for one day, or for two, for three, for four, for five, for six, or for seven days, then, when their lives come to an end, the Buddha Amita, together with his holy entourage, will appear before them. At the time of their death, their minds free of any distorted views, they will be able to be reborn forthwith in Amita Buddha's Land of Supreme Bliss.

§20. "Shariputra, I have seen the benefit of this. Therefore, I say this to you: A living being who hears this discourse should aspire to be reborn in that land.

### Confirmation: All Buddhas Praise Their Lands

§21. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the eastern

regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Akshobhya, the Buddha Sumner's Emblem, the Buddha Great Sumner, the Buddha Sumner's Light, the Buddha Exquisite Voice, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in their three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§22. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the southern regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Beacon of the Sun and Moon, the Buddha Splendor of Fame, the Buddha Great Heap of Flames, the Buddha Sumner's Beacon, the Buddha Inestimable Vigor, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§23. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the western regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Measureless Life-Span, the Buddha Measureless Banner, the Buddha Measureless Pennant, the Buddha Magnificent Sunlight, the Buddha Magnificent Moonlight, the Buddha Jewel Pennant, the Buddha Pure Beaming Light, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: 'O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.'

§24. "Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the northern regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Heap of Flames, the Buddha Voice

of the Invincible, the Buddha Unconquerable, the Buddha Descended from the Sun, the Buddha Netting Moonbeams, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: ‘O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.

§25. “Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the regions in the lower regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Lion, the Buddha Fame, the Buddha Beaming Light of Fame, the Buddha Dharmā, the Buddha Banner of Dharmā, the Buddha Upholder of Dharmā, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: ‘O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.’

§26. “Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable merits of the Buddha Amita, other buddhas, in the regions in the higher regions of the universe, praise him—buddhas as many as the number of grains of sand in the Ganges. Each one of these buddhas—buddhas like the Buddha Voice of Brahma, the Buddha King of the Zodiac, the Buddha Incomparable Fragrance, the Buddha Fragrant Light, the Buddha Heap of Flames, the Buddha Lovely Color of a Jeweled Lotus, the Buddha Jeweled Lotus Virtue, the Buddha Discerning All Meanings, the Buddha Sumner’s Grandeur, and others—each in his own land extends his broad and long tongue, encompassing all the worlds in three thousandfold, great thousandfold, world systems. Then, each of these buddhas makes a solemn declaration, proclaiming these true words: ‘O living beings, you should believe in this discourse, which praises inconceivable virtues—the discourse called Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas.’

### Trust, Commitment, Embracing Exhortation by Shakyamuni

§27. “Shariputra, what do you think? Why is this discourse called The Discourse of Receiving the Protection of All Buddhas?

Shariputra, if good men or good women hear this discourse and keep it in mind, or hear the name of all buddhas, these good men and good women will all be protected and remembered by all buddhas, they will all become irreversible in their progress toward unsurpassable, complete awakening. Therefore, Shariputra, all of you should accept with faith these, my words, and the words pronounced by all buddhas.

### Benefits of the Vow

§28. “Shariputra, those who have made the vow, are now making the vow, or will make the vow, and with it resolve to be reborn in the land of Amita Buddha, they all alike will not fall back from unsurpassable, complete awakening. They are already born, they are being born, or they will be born in that land. Therefore, Shariputra, good men or good women who believe in this should make a vow to be reborn in that land.

### Exhortation by All the Buddhas: The Buddha’s Task

§29. “Shariputra, in the same way that I now praise the inconceivable virtues of all buddhas, all buddhas praise my inconceivable virtues, saying: ‘Shakyamuni Buddha has been able to accomplish this most difficult and marvelous task. In this Saha World, during this evil age plagued by the five corruptions—the corruption of the evil cosmic age, the corruption of views, the corruption of the afflictions, the corruption of living beings, and the corruption of the life span—he has attained unsurpassable, perfect awakening, and has preached, for the sake of living beings, this Dharma that the whole world finds so difficult to believe in.’

§30. “Shariputra, you should know that during this evil age plagued by the five corruptions I have carried out this difficult task. I have attained unsurpassable, perfect awakening, and I have, for the sake of living beings, preached this Dharma that is so difficult to believe in. This was a most difficult task.”

### Coda

§31. As the Buddha finished delivering this discourse, Shariputra, with all the monks, and the gods, humans, asuras, and all the other living beings in the whole world, having heard these words of the Buddha, rejoiced with his words and accepted them with faith. They then paid homage to the Buddha, and went their way.