

Amitābha's Forty-eight Vows

An Excerpt from the *Guan wuliangshoufo jing* (the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtra*).

The (Larger) Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtra is the central text of the Pure Land tradition in China and Japan, containing the vows of the bodhisattva Dharmākara to attain buddhahood and create a purified buddhakṣetra ("buddha field") called Sukhāvatī ("Blissful") for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The structure of all forty-eight vows is of the form

"[If], when I attain buddhahood [such and such conditions are not fulfilled], may I not attain perfect enlightenment."

Since, as the scripture relates, Dharmākara went on to become the buddha Amitābha ("Infinite Light")—alternatively Amitāyus ("Infinite Life")—we know that all these vows have indeed been fulfilled.

The core of Pure Land belief and practice stems from Vow Eighteen, which promises rebirth in Sukhāvatī to all who say Amitābha's name ten times with a sincere heart. Vow Nineteen promises that those who, while awakening the mind aspiring for enlightenment and performing meritorious acts, should desire to be born in his land with sincere aspiration, will be attended by Amitābha and a host of sages at the hour of his death. Birth in Sukhāvatī and the opportunity to hear Amitābha preach the Dharma there will make attaining enlightenment much easier. At the very least, the scripture relates, it will ensure that the devotee will never again experience rebirth as an animal, a "hungry ghost," or a denizen of the hells (Vow Two).

The Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtra is an early Mahāyāna scripture, first translated into Chinese around the year 230. The version that became the normative text of the Pure Land tradition in East Asia, the Guan wuliangshoufo jing, was traditionally held to have been translated in 242 by the Indian monk Saṃghavarman, but critical scholarship has established that it was not translated until 421, by a certain Baoyun. His rendition of the forty-eight vows is included here.

1

"If, when I attain Buddhahood, there should be hell, the realm of hungry spirits, or the realm of animals in my land, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

2

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* (gods) in my land, should, after their death, return once more to the three evil realms, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

3

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not all be the color of genuine gold, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

4

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not all be of the same appearance and should be either beautiful or ugly, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

5

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not remember all their former lives, and thus be unable to know at least the events of the previous hundred thousand *kotis* of *ayutas* (an incalculably large number) of *kalpas* (an incalculably long time), may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

6

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not possess divine eyes, and thus be unable to see at least a hundred thousand *kotis* of *ayutas* of Buddha-lands, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

7

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not possess divine ears, and thus be unable to hear the teachings being expounded by at least a hundred thousand *kotis* of *ayutas* of Buddhas or remember them all, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

8

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not possess the wisdom to see into the minds of others, and thus be unable to know the thoughts of the sentient beings of at least a hundred thousand *kotis* of *ayutas* of Buddha-lands, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

9

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not possess divine feet, and thus be unable to go beyond at least a hundred thousand *kotis* of *ayutas* of Buddha-lands in a thought-moment, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

10

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should give rise to any thought of attachment to their body, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

11

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not dwell in the stage of the truly settled and necessarily attain *nirvāṇa*, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

12

If, when I attain Buddhahood, my light should be finite, not illuminating even a hundred thousand *kotis* of *ayutas* of Buddha-lands, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

13

If, when I attain Buddhahood, my life should be finite, limited even to a hundred thousand *kotis* of *ayutas* of *kalpas*, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

14

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the number of *śrāvakas* (beings pursuing the “lesser” path of arhatship) in my land could be counted and known, even if all the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* (self-enlightened beings) in the triple-thousand great thousand worlds should spend at least a hundred thousand *kalpas* counting them, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

15

When I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land will not have a limited life span, except when they wish to shorten it freely according to their original vows. Should this not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

16

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should even hear that there are names of evil acts, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

17

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the countless Buddhas throughout the worlds in the ten quarters should not all glorify and praise my name, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

18

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters who, with sincere and entrusting heart, aspire to be born in my land and say my name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses¹ and those who slander the right Dharma.

19

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, while awakening the mind aspiring for enlightenment and performing meritorious acts, should desire to be born in my land with sincere aspiration, and yet should I not appear before them at the moment of death surrounded by a host of sages, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

20

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, upon hearing my name, should place their thoughts on my land, cultivate the roots of virtue, and direct their merit with sincere mind desiring to be born in my land, and yet not ultimately attain birth, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

¹ Patricide, matricide, killing an arhat, harming a *buddha*, and causing a schism in the *saṃgha* (the Buddhist church).

21

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not all have the thirty-two major physical characteristics of a great person, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

22

When I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* of other Buddha-lands who come and are born in my land will ultimately and unfailingly attain the stage of succession to Buddhahood after one lifetime. Excepted are those who, in accordance with their original vows to guide others freely to enlightenment, don the armor of universal vows for the sake of sentient beings, accumulate roots of virtue, emancipate all beings, travel to Buddha-lands to perform *bodhisattva* practices, make offerings to all the Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, awaken sentient beings countless as the sands of the Ganges, and bring them to abide firmly in supreme, true enlightenment. Such *bodhisattvas* surpass those in the ordinary *bodhisattva* stages in carrying out practices; in reality, they cultivate the virtue of Samantabhadra. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

23

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land who, upon receiving my transcendental power and making offerings to Buddhas, should not be able to reach all the innumerable and countless *ayutas* of Buddha-lands in the brief period of a single meal, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

24

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land, in accumulating roots of virtue in the presence of Buddhas, should not be able to obtain whatever they wish in order to make offerings to these Buddhas, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

25

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land should not be able to expound the Dharma with all-knowing wisdom, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

26

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land should not possess the diamond-like body of Narayana, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

27

When I attain Buddhahood, all the myriad features enjoyed by the humans and *devas* in my land will be glorious and resplendent with superb, wonderful, and exquisite forms and colors that are beyond description. If, even with the divine eye that they acquire, they should be able to clearly distinguish and enumerate these features, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

28

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land, even those of little virtue, are unable to perceive the bodhi-tree of immeasurable light and countless colors, which is four million *li* in height, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

29

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land should not possess wisdom and eloquence when comprehending, reciting, and expounding sutras, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

30

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land should possess limited wisdom and eloquence, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

31

When I attain Buddhahood, my land will be pure and brilliant, completely illuminating and reflecting all the countless, innumerable, and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters, as if one were looking at one's own face in a clear mirror. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

32

When I attain Buddhahood, all the myriad features in my land, from the ground to the sky, such as palaces, pavilions, ponds, streams, flowers, and trees, will comprise countless precious substances and a hundred thousand kinds of fragrance, which splendidly adorn the land, surpassing anything in the realms of humans and *devas*. Those fragrances will pervade the worlds in the ten quarters, bringing *bodhisattvas* who sense them to perform the practices of the Buddha-way. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

33

When I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings throughout the countless and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters, having received my light and having been touched by it, will become soft and gentle in body and mind, surpassing humans and *devas* in those qualities. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

34

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings throughout the countless and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters, having heard my name, should not attain the *bodhisattva's* insight into the nonorigination of all existence and all the profound *dharanis*, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

35

When I attain Buddhahood, the women throughout the countless and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters, having heard my name, will rejoice in entrusting heart, awaken the

mind aspiring for enlightenment, and wish to renounce the state of being women. If, after the end of their lives, they should be reborn as women, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

36

When I attain Buddhahood, the bodhisattvas throughout the countless and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters, having heard my name, will, after the end of their lives, always perform the sacred practices and fulfill the Buddha-way. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

37

When I attain Buddhahood, the *devas* and humans throughout the countless and inconceivable Buddha-worlds in the ten quarters who, having heard my name, prostrate themselves on the ground and bow to me in reverence, rejoice in entrusting heart, and perform the *bodhisattva* practices, will be revered by *devas* and people of the world. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

38

When I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land will acquire garments as soon as such a desire arises in their minds, and they will naturally be clothed in fine robes as commended and prescribed by the Buddhas. If they should need sewing, bleaching, dyeing or washing, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

39

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the humans and *devas* in my land should not attain happiness and delight comparable to those of a monk whose blind passions have all been exhausted, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

40

When I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land who wish to see innumerable glorious Buddha-lands in the ten quarters, whenever they please, will be able to see them all reflected in the jeweled trees as if one were looking at one's own face in a clear mirror. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

41

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in other lands, having heard my name, should have any disabilities in their physical faculties until they become Buddhas, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

42

When I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in other lands, having heard my name, will all attain the samadhi of pure emancipation. While dwelling in that samadhi, they will make offerings in an instant of thought to the countless and inconceivable number of Buddhas,

World-honored Ones, without losing their concentration of mind. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

43

When I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in other lands, having heard my name, will be reborn into noble families after the end of their lives. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

44

When I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in other lands, having heard my name, will leap and dance with joy and perform the bodhisattva practices, thereby acquiring the roots of virtue. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

45

When I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in other lands, having heard my name, will all attain the samadhi of universal sameness. While dwelling in that samadhi, they will continually behold all the countless and inconceivable numbers of Buddhas until they become Buddhas themselves. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

46

When I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in my land will spontaneously be able to hear, as they wish, the Dharma that they desire to hear. Should it not be so, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

47

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in other lands, upon hearing my name, should not be able to reach the stage of nonretrogression, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.

48

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the *bodhisattvas* in other lands, upon hearing my name, should not be able to attain the first, second, and third dharma-insights, and should they fall back from the pursuit of the teachings of the Buddhas, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.”