

Pratyutpanna buddha saṃmukhāvasthita samādhi sūtra

Ch.: *Banzhou sanmei jing*

“Sūtra on the Meditation in Which the Buddhas of the Present All Stand Before One”

This fascinating text was one of the first Mahāyāna scriptures to be translated into Chinese, by the Indo-Scythian monk Lokakṣema in 179 CE. It describes a practice by which one can “stand before the Buddhas of the present” and hear them preach the Dharma. This practice is based on a form of meditation known as buddhānusmṛti, “calling the Buddha to mind,” or “recollection of the Buddha,” a visualization of the Tathāgata while in deep trance. But the ability to visualize the buddhas, the sūtra points out, is not the product of supernatural powers (the “divine eye” and so forth), nor does it involve rebirth in a buddha’s purified land (buddhakṣetra). No, it is the product of a meditation firmly rooted in the Mahāyāna conception of “emptiness,” śūnyatā. The buddhas encountered as the result of this practice appear “as in a dream.” The encounter is real enough, but like everything, “empty” of substantial own-being (svabhāva). If the buddha one sees came from “nowhere,” so too did the meditator. It is the Mind that creates the Buddha.

Because the scripture focuses on the visualization of the buddha Amitābha, the Pure Land traditions of China and Japan link it with the Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtras that are the core texts of that school, but the buddha to be visualized in this sūtra can be any of the countless buddhas of the present, all resident in their respective buddha-fields. There is nothing particularly sectarian about this scripture. Note also that the meditation is recommended for religious and laity alike, although in practice, it is arduous enough (rapt observance of the precepts and up to seven continuous days and nights visualizing the buddhas) to be too difficult for all but the most observant laypersons.

An excerpt from Book Two appears below.

The Buddha said: "By virtue of these dharmas of conduct one brings about the meditation and then masters the Meditation in Which the Buddhas of the Present All Stand Before One. By what means does one bring about the Meditation in Which the Buddhas of the Present All Stand Before One? In this way, Bhadrupāla: if there are any monks or nuns, laymen or laywomen who keep the precepts in their entirety, they should settle down somewhere all alone and call to mind the presence of the Buddha Amitābha in the western quarter; then, in accordance with what they have learned, they should reflect that a thousand million myriad Buddha-fields away from here, in his land called Sukhāvatī, in the midst of a host of *bodhisattvas*, he is preaching the *sūtras*. Let them all constantly call to mind the Buddha Amitābha."

The Buddha said to Bhadrupāla: "It is like a man who goes to sleep and in a dream sees all his gold, silver, and jewels, his parents, brothers, wife and children, relatives, and friends, and together with them he amuses himself and enjoys himself immensely. When he wakes up he tells others about it, and afterward he even sheds tears thinking about what he saw in the

dream. In the same way, Bhadrapāla, *bodhisattvas*, whether they be ascetics or wearers of white [laymen or laywomen], having learned of the Buddha-field of Amitābha in the western quarter, should call to mind the Buddha in that quarter. They should not break the precepts, and call him to mind singlemindedly, either for one day and one night, or for seven days and seven nights. After seven days they will see the Buddha Amitābha. If they do not see him in the waking state, then they will see him in a dream.

"It is like the things a man sees in a dream—he is not conscious of day or night, nor is he conscious of inside or outside; he does not fail to see because he is in darkness, nor does he fail to see because there are obstructions. It is the same, Bhadrapāla, for the minds of the *bodhisattvas*: when they perform this calling to mind, the famous great mountains and the Mount Sumerus in all the Buddha-realms, and all the places of darkness between them, are laid open to them, so that their vision is not obscured and their minds are not obstructed. These *bodhisattva mahāsattvas* do not see through [the obstructions] with the divine eye, nor hear through them with the divine ear, nor travel to that Buddha-field by means of the supernormal power of motion, nor do they die here to be reborn in that Buddha-field there, and only then see. Rather, while sitting here they see the Buddha Amitābha, hear the *sūtras* which he preaches, and receive them all. Rising from meditation they are able to preach them to others in full."

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When the forms are clear, everything is clear. If one wishes to see the Buddha then one sees him. If one sees him then one asks questions. If one asks then one is answered, one hears the *sūtras* and rejoices greatly. One reflects thus: 'Where did the Buddha come from? Where did I go to?' and one thinks to oneself: 'The Buddha came from nowhere, and I also went nowhere.' One thinks to oneself: 'The Three Realms—the Realm of Desire, the Realm of Form, and the Realm of the Formless—these Three Realms are simply made by thought. Whatever I think, that I see. The mind creates the Buddha. The mind itself sees him. The mind is the Buddha. The mind is the Tathāgata. The mind is my body; the mind sees the Buddha. The mind does not itself know the mind, the mind does not itself see mind. A mind with conceptions is stupidity, a mind without conceptions is *nirvāṇa*.

There is nothing in these *dharma*s which can be enjoyed; they are all made by thinking. If thinking is nothing but empty, then anything which is thought is also utterly nonexistent.'

So it is, Bhadrapāla, such is the vision of the *bodhisattvas* who are established in this meditation."

The Buddha then recited the following verses:

Mind does not know mind;
With mind one cannot see mind.
Mind giving rise to conceptions is stupidity;
Free of conceptions it is *nirvāṇa*.

There is nothing fixed or firm in these *dharmas*;
They are forever located in thinking.
When one understands emptiness,
One is altogether free of conceptual thinking.

[Translated by Paul Harrison]