

**THE AMITABHA SUTRA**  
**Introduction and Translation by**  
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**[Note: In order to make this text available on the Internet more quickly, Chinese characters and Sanskrit diacritical marks have been omitted. Hopefully they will be added at a later date. Please send any corrections to the translator: namof@jps.net]**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The present translation is of the small SUKHAVATI-VYUHA, Two sutras, the large and the small, have this title, both taking as subject Amitabha Buddha, his pure Buddhaland to the West, and the means to rebirth therein. Sukhavati, or, as translated from the Chinese, Ultimate Bliss, is the name of this land.

A third sutra also describes Sukhavati: the AMITURDHYANA-SUTRA. Together, these three comprise the basic texts of the Pure Land Sect.

The translated text, the small SUKHAVATI-VYUHA, although it is the shortest of the three, is by no means unimportant. Nor is it just a summary recapitulation of the doctrine set forth in the other two.

The large SUKHAVATI-VYUHA explains the causal connections resulting in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. It deals with Amitabha's vows of former lives and their realization in Sukhavati.

The AMITURDHYANA-SUTRA is concerned with quite another matter. It is a guide to cultivation and describes a series of sixteen meditations which lead to various grades of transformation rebirth in Sukhavati. Summaries of both sutras are readily found in the literature and so are not given here.

Both sutras contain dharmas preached in specific response to the requests of sentient beings: the large SUKHAVATI-VYUHA at the request of Ananda, "who had still to be advanced on the path of disciples"; the AMITURDHYANA-SUTRA at the request of Vardehi, queen mother of the wicked Prince Ajatasatru:

'My only prayer,' she continued, 'is this: O World-Honored One, mayest thou preach to me in detail of all the places where there is no sorrow or trouble, and where I ought to go to be born anew. I am not satisfied with this world of depravities, with Jambudvipa, which is full of hells, full of hungry ghosts (pretax), and of the brute creation. In this world of depravities there is many an assemblage-of-the wicked. May I not hear, I pray, the voice of the wicked in the future; and may I not see any wicked person.'

The small SUKHAVATI-VYUHA, in contradistinction, is unique because the entire Sutra belongs to the "self--spoken" division.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Buddha himself spontaneously preached the Dharma, overstepping the usual practice of speaking Dharma on request. The very fact that no one in the Great Assembly knew to ask shows the extreme importance and inconceivability of this specific Dharma. Thus, the Buddha clearly warns, "You should know that I, in the evil time of the five turbidities...for all the world speak this Dharma, difficult to believe, extremely difficult."<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, it is not now possible to publish a full discussion of the doctrine of the sutra and its ramifications. Notes and other explanatory materials, although a necessity for accurate presentation of the translation, can by no stretch of the imagination be considered a replacement for the traditionally accompanying commentary. It is hoped that this lacuna may soon be filled by the appearance in Vajra Bodhi Sea of Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua's sublime lectures on this Sutra.

The original draft of the translation was made as a text to be used in conjunction with spontaneous oral translations of these lectures. It was felt that an accurate and fairly literal translation was needed to do justice to the subtleties of the commentary.

Afterwards, it was decided to chant the Sutra as part of the daily activities at the Buddhist Lecture Hall. In order to produce an English version suitable for chanting, some revision of the literal translation was necessary; however, great care has been taken to preserve the meaning, even at the cost of "chantability". Although the product presented here is a long way from Kumarajiva's pristine clarity, it is hoped that a step has been made in that direction. And perhaps with growing familiarity and cultivation, progress will be rapid.

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**TRANSLATION**

Namo to the Lotus Pool Assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as Vast as the Sea. (3x)

**THE BUDDHA SPEAKS ABOUT AMITABHA SUTRA**

Translated from Sanskrit to Chinese by the Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva at Yao Ch'in  
Thus I have heard, at one time Buddha dwelt at Sravasti in the Jeta grove in the garden of the Bene-factor of Orphans and the Solitary together with a gathering of great Bhiksus, 1250 in all, all great Arhats whom the assembly knew and recognized: Elders Sari-putra, Mahamaudgalyayana, Mahakasyapa, Mahakatyayana, Mahakausthila, Revata, Suddhipanthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola-bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Mahakaphina, Vakkula, Aniruddha, and others such as these, all great disciples; together with all the Bodhisattvas, Mahasattvas: Dharma Prince Manjusri, Ajita Bodhisattva, Gandhastin Bodhisattva, Nityodyukta Bodhisattva, and others such as these, all great Bodhisattvas; and together with Sakra, chief among gods, and the numberless great multitudes from all the heavens.

At that time the Buddha told the Elder Sariputra, "Passing from here through hundreds of thousands of millions of Buddhalands to the West, there is a world called Ultimate Bliss. In this land a Buddha called Amitabha right now teaches the Dharma. Sariputra, for what reason is this land called Ultimate Bliss? All living beings of this country endure none of the sufferings, but enjoy every bliss. Therefore, it is called 'Ultimate Bliss'.

Moreover, Sariputra, this Land of Ultimate Bliss is everywhere surrounded by seven tiers of railings, seven layers of netting, and seven rows of trees, all formed from the four treasures and for this reason named 'Ultimate Bliss'.

Moreover, Sariputra, the Land of Ultimate Bliss has pools of the seven jewels, filled with the eight waters of merit and virtue. The bottom of each pool is pure, spread over with golden sand. On the four sides are stairs of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, and crystal; above are raised pavilions adorned with gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, mother-of-pearl, red pearls, and carnelian.

In the pools are lotuses as large as carriage wheels: green colored of green light; yellow colored of yellow light; red colored of red light; white colored of white light; subtly, wonderfully, fragrant and pure.

Sariputra, the realization of the Land of Ultimate Bliss is thus meritoriously adorned. Moreover Sariputra, in that Buddhahood there is always heavenly music, and the ground is yellow gold. In the six periods of the day and night a heavenly rain of mandarava flowers falls, and throughout the clear morning each living being of this Land, with sacks full of the myriads of wonderful flowers, makes offerings to the hundreds of thousands of millions of Buddhas of the other directions. At mealtime they return to their own country, and having eaten, they stroll around,

Sariputra, the realization of the Land of Ultimate Bliss is thus meritoriously adorned. Moreover Sariputra, in this country there are always rare and wonderful varicolored birds: white cranes; peacocks, parrots and egrets; kalavinkas and two-headed birds. In the six periods of the day and night the flocks of birds sing forth harmonious and elegant sounds. Their clear and joyful sounds proclaim the five roots,<sup>29</sup> the five powers the seven Bodhi shares, the eight sage-like way shares,<sup>30</sup> and dharmas such as these. When living beings of this land hear these sounds, they are altogether mindful<sup>31</sup> of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha.

Sariputra, do not say that these birds are born as retribution for their karmic offenses. For what reason? In this Buddhahood there are no three evil ways of re-birth.<sup>32</sup> Sariputra, in this Buddhahood not even the names of the three evil ways exist, how much the less their actuality! Desiring that the Dharma sound be widely proclaimed, Amitabha Buddha by transformation made this multitude of birds.

Sariputra, in that Buddhahood, when the soft wind blows, the rows of jewelled trees and jewelled nets give forth subtle and wonderful sounds, like one hundred thousand kinds of music played at the same time. All those who hear this sound naturally bring forth in their hearts mindfulness of the Buddha, mindfulness of the Dharma, and mindfulness of the Sangha.

Sariputra, the realization of the Land of Ultimate Bliss is thus meritoriously adorned. Sariputra, what do you think? Why is this Buddha called Amitabha? Sariputra, the brilliance of that Buddha's light is measureless, illumining the lands of the ten directions everywhere without obstruction; for this reason he is called Amitabha.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover Sariputra, the life of that Buddha and that of his people extends for measureless limitless asankhyeya kalpas; for this reason he is called Amitayus.<sup>34</sup> And Sariputra, since Amitabha realized Buddhahood, ten kalpas have passed.

Moreover Sariputra, that Buddha has measureless limitless "sound-hearer" disciples,<sup>35</sup> all Arhats, their number incalculable; thus also is the assembly of Bodhi-sattvas.

Sariputra, the realization of the Land of Ultimate Bliss is thus meritoriously adorned. Moreover Sariputra, those living beings born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss are all avaiartika.<sup>36</sup> Among them are many who in this very life will dwell in Buddhahood.<sup>37</sup>

Their number is extremely many, it is incalculable and only in measureless, limitless asankhyeya<sup>37</sup> kalpas could it be spoken.

Sariputra, those living beings who hear should vow, 'I wish to be born in that country.' And why? Those who thus attain are all superior and good people, all coming together in one place. Sariputra, one cannot have few good roots, blessings, virtues, and causal connections to attain birth in that Land.

Sariputra, if there is a good man or good woman who hears spoken 'Amitabha Buddha' and holds the name, whether for one day, two days, three, four, five days, six days, as long as seven days, with one heart uncon-fused, when this person approaches the end of life, be-fore him will appear Amitabha Buddha and all the assem-bly of Holy Ones. When the end comes, his heart is without inversion; in Amitabha Buddha's Land of Ultimate Bliss he will attain rebirth. Sariputra, because I see this benefit, I speak these words: If living beings hear this spoken they should make the vow, 'I will be born in that land.'

Sariputra, as I now praise the inconceivable bene-fit from the merit and virtue of Amitabha Buddha, thus in the East are also Aksothya Buddha,<sup>38</sup> Sumeru Appearance Buddha,<sup>39</sup> Great Sumeru Buddha,<sup>40</sup> Sumeru Light Buddha,<sup>41</sup> Won-derful Sound Buddha,<sup>42</sup> all Buddhas such as these, number-less as Ganges' sands. In his own country each brings forth the appearance of a vast and long tongue, every-where covering the three thousand great thousand worlds,<sup>43</sup> and speaks the sincere and actual words, 'All you living beings should believe, praise, and hold in reverence the inconceivable merit and virtue<sup>44</sup> of this Sutra of the Mindful One of Whom All Buddhas Are Protective.'<sup>45</sup> Sariputra, in the Southern world are Sun Moon Lamp Buddha,<sup>46</sup> Well-Known Light Buddha,<sup>47</sup> Great Blazing Shoulders Buddha,<sup>48</sup> Sumeru Lamp Buddha,<sup>49</sup> Measureless Vigor Buddha,<sup>50</sup> all Buddhas such as these, numberless as Ganges sands. In his own country each brings forth the appearance of a vast and long tongue, everywhere covering the three thousand great thousand worlds, and speaks the sincere and actual words, 'All you living beings should believe, praise, and hold in reverence the inconceivable merit and virtue of this Sutra of the Mindful One of Whom All Buddhas Are Protective.'

Sariputra, in the Western world are Measureless Life Buddha,<sup>51</sup> Measureless Appearance Buddha,<sup>52</sup> Measureless Curtain Buddha,<sup>53</sup> Great Light Buddha,<sup>54</sup> Great Brightness Buddha,<sup>55</sup> Jewelled Appearance Buddha,<sup>56</sup> Pure Light Buddha,<sup>57</sup> all Buddhas such as these, numberless as Ganges sands. In his own country each brings forth the appearance of a vast and long tongue, everywhere covering the three thousand great thousand worlds, and speaks the sincere and actual words, 'All you living beings should believe, praise, and hold in reverence the inconceivable merit and virtue of this Sutra of the Mindful One of Whom All Buddhas Are Protective.'

Sariputra, in the Northern world are Blazing Shoulders Buddha,<sup>58</sup> Most Victorious Sound Buddha,<sup>59</sup> Hard to Injure Buddha,<sup>60</sup> Sun Birth Buddha,<sup>61</sup> Net Brightness Buddha,<sup>62</sup> all Buddhas such as these, numberless as Ganges sands. In his own country each brings forth the appearance of a vast and long tongue, everywhere covering the three thousand great thousand worlds, and speaks the sincere and actual words, 'All you living beings should believe, praise, and hold in reverence the inconceivable merit and virtue of this Sutra of the Mindful One of Whom All Buddhas Are Protective.'

Sariputra, in the world below are Lion Buddha,<sup>63</sup> Well-Known Buddha,<sup>64</sup> Famous Light Buddha,<sup>65</sup> Dharma Buddha,<sup>66</sup> Dharma Curtain Buddha,<sup>67</sup> Dharma Maintaining

Buddha,<sup>68</sup> all Buddhas such as these, numberless as Ganges sands. In his own country each brings forth the appearance of a vast and long tongue, everywhere covering the three thousand great thousand worlds, and speaks the sincere and actual words, 'All you living beings should believe, praise, and hold in reverence the inconceivable merit and virtue of this Sutra of the Mindful One of Whom All Buddhas Are Protective.'

Sariputra, in the world above are Pure Sound Buddha,<sup>69</sup> King of Past Lives Buddha,<sup>70</sup> Superior Fragrance Buddha, <sup>71</sup> Fragrant Light Buddha,<sup>72</sup> Great Blazing Shoulders Buddha,<sup>73</sup> Vari-colored Jewels and Flower Adornment Body Buddha,<sup>74</sup> Sala Tree King Buddha,<sup>75</sup> Jewelled Flower Virtue Buddha,<sup>76</sup> Vision of all Meaning Buddha,<sup>77</sup> Such as Mt. Sumeru Buddha,<sup>78</sup> all Buddhas such as these, numberless as Ganges sands. In his own country each brings forth the appearance of a vast and long tongue, everywhere covering the three thousand great thousand worlds, and speaks the sincere and actual words, 'All you living beings should believe, praise, and hold in reverence the inconceivable merit and virtue of this Sutra of the Mindful One of Whom All Buddhas Are Protective.'

Sariputra, what do you think? Why is it called Sutra of the Mindful One of Whom All Buddhas Are Protective? Sariputra, if a good man or good woman hears this Sutra and holds to it, and hears the names of all these Buddhas, this good man or woman will be the Mind-ful One of whom all Buddhas are protective, and will irreversibly attain to anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. There-fore, Sariputra, all of you should believe and accept my words, and those which all Buddhas speak.

Sariputra, if there are people who have already made the vow, who now make the vow, or who are about to make the vow, 'I desire to be born in Amitabha's Country', these people whether born in the past, now being born, or to be born in the future, all will irreversibly attain to anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. Therefore, Sariputra, all good men and good women, if they are among those who have faith, should make the vow, 'I will be born in that country.'

Sariputra, just as I am now one who praises the merit and virtue of all Buddhas, all those Buddhas equally praise my inconceivable merit and virtue saying these words, 'Sakyamuni Buddha can complete extremely rare and difficult deeds. In the Saha Land, in the evil time of the five turbidities,<sup>79</sup> in the midst of the kalpa turbidity, the view turbidity, the affliction turbidity, the living beings turbidity, and the life turbidity, he can attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi and for the sake of living beings, speak this Dharma which in the whole world is hard to believe.'

Sariputra, you should know that I, in the evil time of the five turbidities, practice these difficult deeds, attain anuttara-samak-sambodhi and for all the world speak this dharma, difficult to believe, extremely difficult!"

After the Buddha spoke this Sutra, Sariputra and all the Bhiksus, all the gods, men, and asuras, and others from all the worlds, hearing what the Buddha had said, joyously welcomed, faithfully accepted, bowed and withdrew.

END OF THE BUDDHA SPEAKS OF AMITABHA SUTRA

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## NOTES

### NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

- 1.
- 2 is one of the more important of Chinese Buddhist sects.

- 3.
4. In China the Sutra is also known as
5. Conze (1958) translates from the Sanskrit 'miraculously born': "Those who are miraculously born, and appear all at once, without conception or embryonic growth, with all their limbs fully grown from the very start. Miraculous or ap-paritional birth is the lot of gods, infernal beings, beings in the in-termediary world and Never-returners." (p. 25) The DIAMOND SUTRA lists ten different kinds of birth, the SURANGAMA SUTRA, twelve. In Sukhavati transformation birth is in a lotus. There are only males, for females reborn there have male transformation bodies.
6. Muller (1894, p. 2).
7. Takakusu (1894, p. 165).
8. is one of the twelve sutra division`. Most sutras contain most or all of the twelve divisions. To my knowledge, only the small SUKHAVATI-VYUHA is entirely composed of the "self-spoken" division.
9. See the last lines of the Sutra text.
10. In both India and China sutras and other 'sacred' texts were almost always printed and studied with an authoritative commentary. Study-ing such texts without a commentary was practically unheard of. Un-fortunately, none of the previous Western publications on the Sutra have made much of a beginning in this direction. However, nothing is to be gained in dwelling on the shortcomings of pioneering effort. For information on previous editions see Appendix A.

#### **NOTES TO THE TRANSLATION**

1. 'The Buddha speaks of (about)' is included as part of the title to indicate that the Sutra was spoken by Sakyamuni Buddha about Amitabha Buddha. It is then clear that Ami-tabha Buddha did not speak the Sutra.
- 2.
3. Anattapindika, the Chinese is
4. The Chinese can also be interpreted as meaning 'those in the Assembly who had 'knowledge'.
5. The text gives (Constant Vig-or). All the rest of the list of Arhats and Bodhisattvas is given in Sanskrit transliteration.
6. sakro-devanam-indra.
7. means either heavens or gods (devas).
8. Sukhavati.
9. Sattva.
10. is usually equivalent to the Sanskrit vedana (feeling), here it is translated as .
11. Vedika.
12. Kimkinijala.
13. Talapamkti.
14. Puskarini.
15. Most Chinese editions list gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, mother of pearl, red pearl, and carnelian. There is some controversy about the identification of these items. The Sanskrit list is suvarna, rupya, vaidurya, sphatika, musaragalva, rohita-mukta, and asmagarbha.
16. The eight waters of merit and vir-tue are listed in the Hsuan Tsang

edition:

(pure; cool; sweet; soft; moist; peaceful; when drunk get rid of hunger, thirst, etc., measureless calamities, after drinking one is able to make grow and nourish all roots). See also Muller (1894, p. 93), Beal (1871, p. 379).

17. is usually translated simply merit, however, since the two characters are often explained separately, they are individually translated

18. . The Sanskrit text has hamsa.

19. Mayura.

20. Suka.

21. Sari, often identified with the maina bird, probably the Indian egret.

22. Kalavinka; its sound is said to be heard even in the egg.

23. Jivajivaka; the Chinese is literally "birds with collective lives."

24. ; Sanskrit indriya (faculties). The five are faith, vigour, mindfulness, samadhi, and wisdom.

25. The five powers are simply the powers of faith, vigour, mindfulness samadhi, and wisdom.

26. are better known as the 'seven wings of enlightenment', a translation from the Sanskrit. They are mindfulness, investigation into dharmas, vigour, joy, tranquillity, samadhi, and relinquishing.

27. Also known as the Eightfold Noble Path: right views, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi.

The five roots, the five powers, the seven Bodhi shares and the eight sagely way shares are part of the 37 limbs of enlightenment. The 'fours' are not mentioned here: four applications of mindfulness; four right efforts; four bases of psychic power.

28. means mindfulness, thought, and/or recitation.

29. Animals, hungry ghosts and hells—the lower three gati.

30. .

31. I.e., measureless light.

32. I.e., measureless life.

33. Sravakas; they heard the sound of the Buddha and awakened to the Way.

34. They were 'irreversible', i.e., beyond the seventh bhumi.

35. The Chinese is ambiguous.

36. Asankhyeya also means limitless,

37.

38. The following names are all translated rather than transliterated.

39. Merudhvaja.

40 Mahameru.

41 Meruprabhasa.

42. Sughosa.

43. The three thousand means a thousand cubed, i.e., the great trichiliocosm. Edward Conze (1961, p. 3) has a similar passage: "Thereupon the Lord on that occasion put out his tongue. With it he covered the great trichiliocosm and many hundreds of thousands of nyutas of kotis of rays issued from it."

44. See note #17

45.

46. Candrasuryapradipa.

47. Yasahprabha.
48. Mahaciskamdha.
49. Merupradipa.
50. Arantavirya.
51. Amitayus.
52. Amitaskamdha.
53. Amitadhavaja.
54. Mahaprabha.
55. Maharasmiprabha.
56. Maharatnaketu.
57. Suddharasmi.
58. Maharcislcamdha.
59. Dumdubhisvaranirghosa.
60. Duspradharsa.
61. Adityasambhava.
62. Jalemiprabha.
63. Simha.
64. Yasas.
65. Yasahprabha.
66. Dharma.
67. Dharmadhvaja.
68. Dharmadhara.
69. Brahmaghosa.
70. Naksatraraja.
71. Gamdhottama.
72. Gamdhaprabhasa.
73. Maharciskamdha.
74. Ratnakusumasampuspitagatra.
75. Salendraraga.
  
76. Ratnotpalasri.
77. Sarvarthadarsa.
78. Sumerukalpa.
79. .

## **EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS**

### **A. Sanskrit**

There are several Sanskrit editions extant, however, all are palm-leaf texts in poor condition. Miller (1880, 1894) has translated and edited a Nepalese palm-leaf text. This and several other palm-leaf manuscripts found in Japan are discussed further in Muller (1880), Watters (1881-82), Muller and Nanjio (1883), Wogthara, et. al. (1932), Kimura (1943). The only other translation from the San-skrit is that of Ymaizoumi and Yamata (1881) into French.

There is, of course the problem of the accuracy of the manuscripts in question. Because a manuscript is Sanskrit certainly does not mean that it is older or more accurate than the editions from which the Chinese translations were taken. (Muller himself discusses the enormity of the problem: Muller (1880) Muller and Nanjio (1883).



## **B. Chinese**

Three Chinese translations from the Sanskrit are known. By far the most popular is that upon which the present and all previous translations have been based, that of Kumarajiva THE BUDDHA SPEAKS ABOUT AMITABHA SUTRA, (Hobogirin #366, Nanjio #200). Hsuan Tsang also translated the Sutra under the title THE SUTRA OF THE BUDDHA ATTRACTING AND ACCEPTING THE ONE WHO PRAISES AND HOLDS IN REVERENCE THE PURE LAND (Hobo-girin #367, Nanjio #199).

Hsuan Tsang's translation is of special interest because it clearly represents a Sanskrit edition which is different from both that used by Kumara-jiva and those used by Muller. According to Nanjio (1883), it does agree with the extant Tibetan edition.

It might be well to note here the scholarly efforts of Watters (1881-82) who early did an excellent job of comparing Kumarajiva's translation with both the Sanskrit manuscripts available in Japan and Muller's translation. His article is not only a comparison of Kumarajiva's translation with Muller's manuscript and translation, but also contains notes from another Japanese Sanskrit edition in the author's possession. Although the author is occasionally wrong in his interpretations, the textual differences are set out so that the reader can judge for himself. He also had the sense to avail himself of one of the finest Chinese commentaries on the Sutra by the Great Master Lien Ch'ih

Listed in the first extant catalog (Hobogirin #2145, Nanjio #1476) is a third translation by Gunabhadra (?) under the title MEASURELESS LIFE SUTRA. It was no longer extant in 730 A.D.

## **C. English**

Kumarajiva's version of the Sutra has previously been translated into English in the following editions: Beal (1886 1871), Landis (1894, from the Korean), Utsuki (1924), Wang (1932), Sie (1941), and Lee (1960).

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