Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series
Number 3

EDITORIAL BOARD

Heinz Bechert
Gottingen University

Carl Bielefeldt
Stanford University

J. W. de Jong
Australian National University

Luis Gomez
University of Michigan

Hisao Inagaki
Ryōkoku University

P. S. Jaini
University of California, Berkeley

Lewis Lancaster
University of California, Berkeley

D. Seyfort Ruegg
Hamburg University

The Pure Land Tradition:
History and Development

edited by
James Foard, Michael Solomon,
and Richard K. Payne

Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series
1996
REBIRTH IN AMITĀBHA'S SUKHĀVATĪ

John C. Huntington

Author's Note: While I am very pleased to see the publication of this article, it is somewhat to my surprise that it is appearing at all. Originally, the paper was only sketched out in very rough form as an exercise ("Is it possible to do something like this?") and shared with a few friends for discussion only. One of those friends has very generously edited my rough draft into intelligibility and placed it in this publication. I am truly grateful to this individual for his work (editing my papers cannot be considered fun) and for his opinion of the value of the exercise. However, there are two points about which I must caution the reader. First, it was written in 1980-81 and several publications have appeared that bear on the topic. The paper has not been updated to include information from those publications. Second, I still consider the paper a point of departure. (In discussions with readers, it has already been called both an "important contribution" in the positive sense, and "very creative," the latter statement being about as sarcastically rendered as the speaker was able to produce.) As I am still ambivalent myself about this approach to text analysis, I would be grateful for the comments of readers who actually take the time to follow the arguments.
The popular view of rebirth in Sukhāvatī, even among many Buddhist scholars, is that by simple and direct acts of faith and devotion, anyone is assured his own lotus on the lakes of Sukhāvatī, the glorious paradisiacal “pure land” of the Buddha Amitabha. In one set of circumstances this is exactly true, but the texts of the Sukhāvatīvyūha, especially the larger version, detail a number of specific qualifications as to both who is to be reborn and under what circumstances one will be reborn, live, and ultimately pass on from that existence. To a minor degree there are some qualifications in the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha, and there are the well-known nine ranks of rebirth in the last three meditations of Vaidehi of the Amitāyurvedhayana-sūtra. It is my purpose to examine these qualifications, the processes necessary for achieving rebirth, the circumstances for Amitabha’s welcoming and the ultimate condition of rebirth, in order to both gain a clearer understanding of the content of the actual texts, and to be able to postulate some suggestions on the relative ages and developments of the texts. My goal is not to provide “answers” so much as it is to raise certain questions and to build a hypothetical chronology based on variations in the textual material.

The Texts

In the context of modern scholarship, the primary text of the faith form of Buddhism is the so-called Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha. It apparently enjoyed fairly wide distribution in Sanskrit although there is no particular certainty that this was the “original” language of the text. Sanskrit manuscripts have been found in both Nepal and Japan in relatively late copies and have provided the basis for what Lewis R. Lancaster has called the Textus Receptus (after the Erasmus edition of the Greek New Testament). This was done by F. Max Müller and provided the basis for his English translation of the text. However, the text had a long history in China and while there is some disagreement as to just when and who actually first translated it, it was known in substantially the same form as the Sanskrit by the third century and may well have been translated in the second century. Thus, by virtue of being the first text translated into Chinese, there is one school of thinking which argues that it is ipso facto earlier than the closely related Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha. Since it gives a much fuller description of Sukhāvatī, more details of the process of rebirth and more information on the conditions for rebirth, we make it the text of primary concern for this study.

The Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha, also known in Sanskrit from manuscripts recovered in Japan and edited and translated by Müller, was not known in China until it was translated by Kumārajiva sometime after 402. Since it has smaller numbers at the assembly, less elaboration of the glories of Sukhāvatī, and a much shorter, more terse method of description, it is held by many scholars to be the earlier of the two versions. A third possibility which I wish to explore in this paper is that the two texts represent different “families” of development of the same basic prototype or “core” archetypal theme, which originated long before either text came into existence. Recently Lewis R. Lancaster has shown that Kumārajiva’s translations of the Vajracchedika-prajñāparamita-sūtra were not abbreviated as had been thought, but were an accurate translation of a shorter version now known to exist in the Gilgit manuscripts, thus demonstrating that there were different Sanskrit textual tradi-
tions, and that in at least one instance Kumārajīva used a text from a tradition of short versions. This does not, however, answer the question of which came first, or, for that matter, which contain later additions. All we know at this point is that the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha was substantially in its presently known form by the third or possibly the second century, when it was translated into Chinese.

In current practice, it is the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha that holds a very prominent position and is the most commonly recited version of the two, functioning much like a hṛdaya or heart text in relation to the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, although this may or may not be the sense in which it developed.

The third text is the Amitāyurvedhyāna-sūtra, which is known only in the Chinese translation of Kalayaśas (active, 424-442), and is held by some to be a forgery or a “created” text for Chinese consumption, intended perhaps to explain the differences between the two other sutras or to further the cause of the devotional cult by putting the message into a set of contexts more in tune with Chinese attitudes. Others accord it the full status of a sutra, and see it as a major outgrowth of the faith (śrāddha) movement. Due to its being the most richly embellished, it is generally seen as the latest of the three texts in a continuum of the Smaller Sukhāvatī-vyūha → Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha → Amitāyurvedhyāna-sūtra. The Amitāyurvedhyāna-sūtra is also widely read in current practice and is one of the most important texts for the practice of meditation on the visualization of Sukhāvatī.

However, I feel that the problems are much more complex than the above sketch indicates. Both the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha and the Amitāyurvedhyāna-sūtra are easily broken down into three sub-sections. In the case of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, there are the vows of Dharmākara, ranging from twenty-four to forty-eight in various versions, as well as descriptions of the lives of bodhisattvas born in Sukhāvatī. Then the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha provides in the Buddha’s words a description of Sukhāvatī as the achievement and fulfillment of the vow of Dharmākara, who, fully enlightened, becomes the Buddha Amitābha/Amitāyus. This description is given to Ānanda and is a logical conclusion to the vow portion, although there are several inconsistencies between the two. A third portion of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha is the vision of Sukhāvatī, provided by Amitābha himself but discussed with the Bodhisattva Ajita by the Buddha. In this there are several variations as well as a change of personae, suggesting a possible separate development prior to the combination of the three portions. In the Amitāyurvedhyāna-sūtra, the narrative of Vaiḍēhi is quite distinct from the rest of the text and provides only a foil for introducing the meditations. The meditations, then, can be broken into two groups: one of thirteen (or perhaps twelve plus one) on the visualization of Sukhāvatī and three on the ranks of rebirth. The Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha, in contrast, is a single, concise line of description touching only briefly on most of the major issues of the other two texts.

For the sake of clarity in the following discussions the following abbreviations will be used:

LSV Vows, for the section on Dharmākara’s vows;
LSV Ānanda, for the section on the description to Ānanda;
LSV Vision, for the section on the vision;
ADS Vaiḍēhi, for the Vaiḍēhi narrative;
ADS Visualizations, for the section on the thirteen visualizations;
ADS Ranks, for the section on the nine ranks.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Order of Buddh</th>
<th>Number of Buddh</th>
<th>Number of Vows</th>
<th>Astronomical Bodies</th>
<th>Hunger</th>
<th>Nature of Buddha's Existence</th>
<th>Teaching of Dharma</th>
<th>Attainment of Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Han [Lokakṣema]</td>
<td>Dipankara to Lokeshvara-raja</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sun, moon and stars</td>
<td>Eat and drink</td>
<td>Attains nirvana, Avalokitesvara and Mahākāśāya-prapta replace</td>
<td>By Amitāyus</td>
<td>Practice the Buddhist life and, according to ability, attain: Śrūtaṇā, Sakṛgaṁiṇa, Anāgāmin, Arhat, Bodhisattva, Avaivartika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu [Chih Ch'ien]</td>
<td>Dipankara to Lokeshvara-raja</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sun, moon and stars</td>
<td>Eat and drink</td>
<td>As in Han</td>
<td>By Amitāyus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei [Sangha-varman]</td>
<td>Dipankara to Lokeshvara-raja</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Sun, moon and stars</td>
<td>Only need to see and smell</td>
<td>Sambhogākāya</td>
<td>[?]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T'ang [Bodhiruci]</td>
<td>Lokeshvara-raja to Dipankara</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48 [49*]</td>
<td>Denied</td>
<td>Only need to see and smell</td>
<td>Almost beginningless and endless</td>
<td>Not specifically by Amitāyus, but eternally present</td>
<td>Dwell in samyak-tvaniyantarāśih and attain anuttara-samyaksambodhi in one lifetime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sung [Fa hsiien]</td>
<td>Lokeshvara-raja to Dipankara</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Denied</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Two bodies, Dharmakāya and Sambhogakāya</td>
<td>[?]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanskrit</td>
<td>Dipankara to Lokeshvara-raja</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>46 [48*]</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Only need to see and smell</td>
<td>Of infinite life**</td>
<td>Present if wished for, but not specifically by Amitāyus***</td>
<td>As in T'ang</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers in brackets represent alternate countings offered by some authors.

**Some authors have said that the Sanskrit and T'ang texts are alike on the basis that Lokeshvararāja is the first Buddha of the list. This is simply incorrect.
***One specific teaching of Amiptābhā is mentioned (LSV Ananda, p. 49) and it may therefore be understood that the teacher of Sukhāvati is Amiptābhā.
The Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha

In the past, scholars working on the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha have partially concentrated on two aspects of the various translations of the text into Chinese: the number of vows in the vow section and the statement as to whether Amitabha/Amitayus would be the one teaching in his paradise or not. Using both criteria, various chronologies have been suggested for the dating of the various versions of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha. In fact, these and a number of other inconsistencies have been topics of debate and discussion since the sixth century. Since these issues deal primarily with the chronology of minor changes in the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, I have chosen to summarize them here in chart form and to give only the briefest summary of the opinions about them (see table number one, pp. 48-9).

Coupled with the data in the foregoing charts, a detailed analysis of the nature of rebirth and the levels of rebirth in the different versions of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha has been used to corroborate (or in other instances create) a relative chronology. This may be tabulated as follows:

HAN TEXT
1. High class persons, by means of good actions according to ability, 18th vow.
2. Low class persons, by means of good actions according to ability, 19th vow.

WU TEXT
1. Low class persons, by means of good actions according to ability, 5th vow.

WEI TEXT
1. [High class:] those who believe in his name (namadheya), and who desire rebirth in Sukhāvatī [must have absolute faith], 18th vow.
2. [Middle class:] Amitabha/Amitayus promises to appear at the time of death before those who have attained the bodhi-mind and have performed meritorious acts in a desire to attain rebirth in Sukhāvatī [must have good faith], 19th vow.
3. [Low class:] promises rebirth in Sukhāvatī to those who, having heard the name of Amitabha, transfer (parināma) good roots (kuśalamūla) or good actions out of desire to be reborn in Sukhāvatī [may entertain some doubts, but still generally faithful], 20th vow.

T'ANG TEXT
Similar to Wei text except all levels have transfer of good actions.

SUNG TEXT
1. [High class:] Amitabha/Amitayus promises to appear at the moment of death to those who, desiring rebirth in Sukhāvatī, meditate [on Amitabha?] with a firm and sincere mind, 13th vow.
2. [Low class:] rebirth is promised to those who, hearing his name, develop thought of the bodhi-mind and plant good roots for gaining rebirth in Sukhāvatī, 14th vow.
SANSKRIT TEXT
1. [High class:] Amitābha/Amitayus promises to greet those beings who have directed their thought towards the highest bodhi (anuttarasamyak-sambodhi) and who, after hearing his name, meditate on him with serene thoughts, 18th vow.
2. [Low class:]
A. Rebirth is promised to those who bring their stock of merit to fruition while desiring such rebirth,
B. and to those who simply repeat the thought but ten times, 19th vow.

Several scholars have arranged the various Chinese translations of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha and the Sanskrit version into various chronological sequences on the basis of their respective approaches. As noted in the following, some of them have seen cross-development with other text traditions. These will be passed on without comment.

Kimura Taiken:10
Approach: the vows are related to the six pāramitās and, therefore, a multiple of the number six is indicative of appropriate change and relative chronology:
6 vows in Astasāhasrikāprajñāparamitā
12 vows in Aksobhyatathāgatavyūha
18 vows in Aksobhyatathāgatavyūha (2nd version)
24 vows in Han and Wu Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha
30 vows in Pañcavimśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā
36 vows in Sung Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha
48 vows in Wei and T'ang Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha
He disregards both the content of the vows and the Sanskrit version with 46 vows.

Mochizuki Shinkō:11
Approach: numbers of vows.
First seen in the vow of purifying the buddha-field in the Astasāhasrikāprajñāparamitā
20 vows in the Aksobhyatathāgatavyūha
24 vows in the Han and Wu Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha
24 vows of the Pañcavimśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā
36 vows of the Sung Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha
48 vows of the Wei Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha

Akashi Etatsu:12
Approach: Vows, both number and content
24 vows in Han and Wu texts
36 vows in Sung text
46 vows of Sanskrit version
48 vows of the Wei and T'ang translations

Sonoda Kokun:13
Approach: Vows, both number and content
Wu text
Han text
Sung text
Sanskrit text
T'ang text
Wei text

Ogiwara [Wogihara] Unrai:14
Approach: Investigation into the causes of rebirth.
Wu and Han texts
Sanskrit text
T'ang and Wei texts.

Ikemoto Jūshin:15
Approach: Synthesis of all above views.
Wu text
Han text
Wei text
T'ang text
Sanskrit text
Sung (belongs to another Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha tradition)
Beyond the obvious discrepancies in the interpretation of the number of vows, it would seem that, while there is consensus about the Han and Wu texts being earlier than the other four, there is little agreement on the other four. However, one thing is clear: the variations in the Wei, T'ang, and Sanskrit versions are very minor. Further, they are demonstrably the fullest manifestation of the text presently known. The “earlier” versions in the Han and Wu texts both contain all three divisions of the text in the Vows, Ananda and the Vision segments: thus, although there may have been emendations and additions to the basic text, the underlying formulations are complete in both Han and Wu versions. It is also interesting that the Han text of Lokarakṣa (this attribution has been questioned as later by some authors), while still accepting the text as legitimately an early translation, if actually translated by him, would have to have been done in the second half of the second century C.E., as Lokarakṣa was active from 147 to 188 C.E. If not by him, it is probably a later translation rather then earlier, and might well date from the third century C.E. The Wu text of Chih Ch’ien was translated between 223 and 253 C.E., while the Wei version of Samghavarman was translated in 252 C.E. Simply put, nothing can be determined by the date of translation into the Chinese, as all three of the texts were translated within fifty years of each other and maybe even less, if the attribution to Lokarakṣa is false. Thus, it seems to me that the traditional Chinese considerations of earliness of translation must be totally discounted in the case of these texts.

We are then reduced to internal evidence within the content of the sutra in its various versions. After a detailed analysis of the various versions of the vows in the sutra, I am strongly disinclined to attach any chronological importance to the number of vows. Without going into detail I will simply point out that in each case the vows can be divided in the usual traditional arrangement of those pertaining to the qualities of the buddhaksetra, Sukhāvati; those pertaining to the qualities of the Buddha Amitābha/Amitayus; and those pertaining to the beings of Sukhāvati. Although their number increases and decreases depending on the foregoing chronological arrangements, neither content nor number suggests any substantive changes. Rather, they seem to be sectarian differences, suggesting that both versions, i.e., the twenty-four and the forty-eight vow versions, may well have had separate and non-overlapping developments while based on a single common theme. The fact that one number is exactly double the other would seem to be a late “adjustment” to a version of forty-six vows when brought into competition with a version with only twenty-four vows. This may be seen in the “double”-layered nineteenth vow of the Sanskrit version which is clearly the source for both vows nineteen and twenty in the Wei and T’ang versions.

Thus, I would have to venture that there is little to be gained by an analysis of the number of vows, unless they could somehow be connected to specific teachings of early sectarian movements, an approach that is beyond the scope of this study. For the purposes of this study, I have opted to include the fullest version of the vows, as I hold this to be the fullest development of the teaching and it is the purpose of this study to work back in time from the fullest development to previous stages.

Another set of issues does seem to suggest either a major sectarian differentiation during the developmental process, or, possibly, a chronological difference. This is the fact that there seems to be a slightly
less transcendent world-view in the Han and Wu texts, when they are compared to the Wei, T’ang, and Sanskrit texts. In the Wu and Han texts, the Buddha Amitābha ultimately passes on to nirvana, while in the other versions it is indicated that his life is amita, essentially infinite. In addition, beings in the Han and Wu texts must eat and drink while in the others they need only see and smell the food to satisfy their hunger. Also, the sun, moon, and stars occur in the two early translations (as well as the Wei), but are either specifically denied or are not mentioned in the other three (implying that the brilliance of Amitābha outshines them). Further, in the Han and Wu texts there is direct teaching of the dharma by Amitāyus, while in two of the other texts, the T’ang and Sanskrit, the teaching of the dharma is implied to be eternally present. It may be implicit that Amitābha does teach, but it is neither expressly stated nor is the teaching limited to the preaching of the Buddha. As a final example, it should also be noted in the Han and Wu texts the followers of the Buddha Amitābha attain various stages of the šravakamārga and can, if their ability is sufficiently developed, attain the avaiwartika-bodhisattva stage. However, in the T’ang and Sanskrit texts, beings enter samyaktvaniyataraśī and attain anuttarasamyaksambodhi in one lifetime. If one assumes a “core concept” that ultimately gave rise to both sutras, one would have to argue that not only was one less transcendent in outlook, but also that it had a closer linkage to the šravakamārga teachings. I am fully aware that a majority of scholars would see this as a linear chronology rather than parallel development. I fully accept this view and also see it as a possibility; however, I think the apparent divergence and re-convergence of the vows strongly suggests that the two fundamental forms of the text had a period of separate development.

It is very significant for this study, however, that all three portions of the text occur in all versions, indicating that the three portions had been brought together before the divergent development in the vows sections. This would demand both a period before the divergent development, presumably for the Han and Wu source text and the Sanskrit text, then a point of collation and “adjustment” to provide the Sanskrit source text for the Wei and T’ang translations. All of this would have had to have taken place well prior to the translation of the Wei text, as it would have taken some time for the “adjusted” version to have been accepted widely.

The relative chronology may be charted accordingly:

![Diagram of Three-part Larger Sukhavatvyaya]

Although this discussion of the development of the surviving translations in Chinese has occupied considerable space in academic literature for several decades, it is but an aside to the central theme of the overall development of Sukhavatī literature. I feel, however, that the issues of for whom, where, when, and how is there rebirth in Sukhavatī, that is, a study of the relationships of various aspects of the texts as suggested by internal evidence, may provide considerable insight into the development of Sukhavatī literature.

It is clear from the outset of the Larger Sukhavatvyaya that not everyone will be reborn in
Sukhāvatī, even though they may have heard the name of Amitābha. In the vows of the Bhiksu Dharmākara before the Buddha Lokeśvararāja, he specifically describes certain circumstances and conditions of rebirth. This can be seen in the Sanskrit version with 46 vows:

**Vow 18.** Those beings in other worlds who have directed their thought towards the highest perfect knowledge and who, after hearing my name, have meditated on me with serene thoughts, will, at the time of their death, be met by me in the company of an assembly of bhiksuś so that I might be worshipped by them to relieve their troubles (LSV vows p. 15).

**Vow 19.** Those beings in other buddha worlds, after they have heard my name, if they wish to be born in my buddha country, and if they bring their stock of merit to maturity with that purpose in mind, they shall be born there. Even so for those who have repeated the thought only ten times. Barring those who have committed the five anantaryā sins and those who have caused obstruction and abuse of the Law. (LSV Vows p. 15).

From the Samghavaran or Wei translation into the Chinese with 48 vows, we find (LSV Note by Nanjio, pp. 73-75):

**Vow 18.** If beings of the ten quarters believe in me with serene thoughts and wish to be born in my land they shall be born there if they repeat the thought (say my name) ten times.

**Vow 19.** Same as the 18th vow in the Sanskrit version.

**Vow 20.** Those beings of the ten quarters, after they have heard my name, if they direct their thoughts towards my country and should plant the roots of merit and bring them to maturity with serene thoughts and wishes to be born in my country, they shall accomplish this.

Both the Wei and the T'ang versions have divided vow nineteen of the Sanskrit version into two portions, with the latter portion of the nineteenth vow in the Sanskrit becoming vow eighteen of the Wei and T'ang texts. This makes a very great distinction in the nature of rebirth, for in the Sanskrit version, the highest level of rebirth is reserved for those who had directed their thought toward highest bodhi and who meditated on Amitābha with serene thought, clearly and obviously an advanced Mahāyāna practitioner, i.e., a monk. However, in both the Wei and T'ang versions vow eighteen is directed towards beings with faith that is so strong that the thought of rebirth in Sukhāvatī need only be repeated but ten times to assure successful attainment. This is certainly a very different emphasis. Nothing in the Wei and T'ang versions suggests a deliberate change in the order of the sequence of primacy away from technical attainments to direct acts of faith. Internal to this is the statement in the eighteenth vow of the Sanskrit, and in the nineteenth vow of the Wei and T'ang versions, that Amitābha himself would come and greet the successful aspirant in the case of beings who have directed their thought towards highest bodhi. This would seem to be the highest possible honor and one which would be reserved for those of the greatest achievement. Accordingly, it would seem that the Sanskrit version should be given historical primacy over the Wei and T'ang versions.
Vow eighteen of the Sanskrit version is obviously the source for the “welcoming” by Amitābha (pratyudyāna, lai-ying, raigo) configurations, wherein the dying are greeted and escorted to Sukhāvatī by Amitābha, his bodhisattvas and numbers of followers. Known forms of Amitābha/Amitāyus devotionalism are of primary importance both in ritual and art, to the practitioners of the devotional cult of Amitabha pietism. Since the Sanskrit text is clearly the prototypical source of the greater number of versions of the vows in the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, we will primarily use it in our analysis.

As already mentioned, there are three grades of beings who will be born in Sukhāvatī mentioned in the LSV vows:

1. Beings who have directed their thought towards the highest perfection of knowledge who meditate on Amitābha-Amitāyus.
2. Beings who, wishing to be born in Sukhāvatī, bring their stock of merit to fruition.
3. Beings who, wishing to be born in Sukhāvatī, repeat the thought ten times.

The beings of each category can be characterized by their primary approach to Buddhism and religious activity, i.e.,

1. Seeking enlightenment.
2. Performing meritorious deeds.
3. Having faith.

They can be further characterized by the method through which they seek rebirth in Sukhāvatī:

1. Meditation on Amitābha/Amitāyus.
2. Bringing merit to fruition.
3. Repetition of the thought of Sukhāvatī.

In addition, there is another class of beings who, by implication, even though they might fulfill any of the above categories, are barred from rebirth in Sukhāvatī because they have committed one or more of the five anantarya sins or have caused abuse and obstruction of the dharma.

The vow portion of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha returns to the rebirth theme with the vows of Dharmakara concerning those who may hear his name but who will not be born in Sukhāvatī, as follows:

Vow 33. Bodhisattvas in virtually any buddha country will, from the merit arising from hearing my name be delivered from birth and will be strong in the knowledge of dhāranis (LSV vows p. 19).

Vow 34. Women, hearing, will not allow carelessness to arise, will turn their thoughts towards bodhi and, when free from birth, will despise their female nature, and if born again, will not assume a second female form (LSV vows p. 19).

Vow 41. Beings in other buddha countries will, after hearing my name, be born into noble families until they attain bodhi (LSV vows p. 21).

This group of three may be tabulated as follows:

1. Bodhisattvas of other buddha worlds who are freed from rebirth.
2. Women of other worlds who will think of bodhi and who will not assume a second female birth.
3. Beings of other worlds who will be born in noble (i.e., Buddhist) families.
There is a clear distinction between this group of three and the first group. The second has not conceived of being reborn in Sukhāvatī and has made no effort in that direction. Their benefits arise simply from the merit of hearing the name of Amitābha/Amitayus and they are destined to continue on in other realms. The parallel, however, is striking and the distinction is specifically made between bodhisattvas and other beings, with the benefits granted bodhisattvas vastly greater than those of the other two categories.

In the section of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha where the Buddha describes Sukhāvatī to Ānanda, the theme of three classes of beings who will be reborn into Amitābha’s land is reiterated, this time with considerable emphasis on the role of Amitābha at the moment of death, and with specific reference to those who are greeted by Amitābha when being reborn in Sukhāvatī. A summary of the salient features of the passages runs as follows:

Those beings who often think reverently of Amitābha, who make their great stock of good works grow, and who pray to be born in Sukhāvatī will see, at the time of their death, Amitābha, surrounded by many companies of bhikṣus honoring him. These beings, their thoughts filled with joy at having seen the Bhagavant, will, after their death, be born in Sukhāvatī. Any son or daughter of a good family [wishing such a welcome by Amitābha] must raise his thought to the highest perfect knowledge, must think with perseverance and desire towards that buddha country and direct his merit of good works towards being born there.

For those who do not care quite so much for the Tathāgata Amitābha and who are not so energetic in increasing their stock of good works [however, the implication is clear that they still have some faith in Amitābha and do offer some measure of good works], they will see at the time of their death, Amitābha surrounded by many companies of bhikṣus honoring him like the real Tathāgata but only created by thought. By meditation on the vision of the Tathāgata with unfailing memory, they will, upon their death, be reborn in Sukhāvatī.

Those beings who [only] meditate on the Tathāgata with ten thoughts, who direct their desire for rebirth to Sukhāvatī, who feel satisfaction at the teaching of profound doctrines [presumably while not understanding them, however], and who do not fall off, despair, or fail in their meditations, will also see the Tathāgata in a dream. They too will be born in Sukhāvatī and will never turn from the highest perfect knowledge. (LSV Ānanda pp. 45-46)

There are three very significant differences from the first “vow group” of beings. First, the appearance of Amitābha to the dying is graded so that each level receives a visitation according to its level of faith. This may be summarized as follows:

1. Full and real appearance.
2. Thought appearance but appearing similar to above.
3. Dream appearance of Tathāgata only.

Second, the necessity of directing one’s thoughts towards highest perfect knowledge is de-emphasized, and it is clear that the theme of the whole passage emphasizes the relative degree of faith in Amitābha. These may be characterized as:
1. Absolute faith
2. Strong faith
3. Modest faith

And, third, the efforts to be made by the different groups varies, with the description to the Ānanda group being summarized as follows:

1. Often think reverently of Amitābha and increase stock of good works.
2. Less often think reverently of Amitābha and less actively increase good works.
3. Only think of Amitābha ten times, desire rebirth in Sukhāvatī, are satisfied at the teaching of profound doctrines, and do not lose faith.

While the third qualification of action is rather upgraded from the LSV Vows, the first two are very much downgraded. The first thinks reverently in place of meditation, and increases good works rather than bringing the merit to fruition, as the second level of the “vow group” had to do. The second level must bring nothing to fruition but simply do to a lesser degree the actions of the first group. Thus it appears that the two versions of the list of those to be reborn in Sukhāvatī may have originally had different audiences.

At this juncture, just from the nature of the conditions and the qualifications of rebirth in Sukhāvatī, it may be argued that the vow portion was aimed at the community of monks while the description-to-Ānanda section was originally aimed at the lay community. In the vow section we see:

1. The whole text cast in the form of the vows that a monk must make in the presence of a buddha to receive the prediction of enlightenment, which any Mahāyāna practitioner must receive before enlightenment will be attained.
2. In the first level to be reborn in Sukhāvatī, emphasis is placed on attainments and methodology that would normally be the domain of a monk.
3. Laity position of perfecting merit in a secondary role and limited to those who have brought their production of merit to fruition (actually, again, usually monks or advanced members of the bodhisattva path).
4. The third and lowest position is reserved for those with faith, usually the purview of the laity and the lowest rank of novices.

Further, in the vow section on benefits to beings of other worlds it is again the monk who is foremost:

1. The bodhisattva, any monk who has taken the vows of the bodhisattva, is promised but a single rebirth.
2. Being, obviously other than bodhisattvas and therefore either laymen or those who do not follow the bodhisattva path, are promised continued rebirth in a noble family.
3. Women, anathema to monks (especially the younger ones), are simply promised not to be reborn in a female form again.

Throughout the six vows specifically directed at the nature of rebirth, the emphasis is placed on the position of the monk, with the layman and woman placed in clearly subordinate positions. Further, for good measure, those who have committed the five sins or abused or obstructed the dharma are specifically excluded, a feature that seems again concerned with the technical and therefore monastic community’s view of the codes of behavior.
In contrast, the monk’s concerns are simply not at all emphasized in the description-to-Ānanda section. Even the highest level of rebirth is apparently attainable by the layman, and the whole process is one of faith rather than technical levels of achievement, or of having attained the bodhisattva level of involvement.

In a further contrast, it is specifically to the monk that Amitabha appears in the vow section, while in the description-to-Ānanda section he appears either in reality, as a thought, or as in a dream, but he does appear to all levels in a much more egalitarian manner. Thus, at the risk of seeming cynical, it may be suggested that in the vow section the monastic community was also concerned with its prerogatives over any others—an unfortunately common feature in Buddhist literature.

In that both sections were addressed to Ānanda, one would have to concede that it is possible that both were the product of sectarian movements which followed the teaching primacy of Ānanda. But, if that is the case, it then must be suggested that one version, the vow section, was for the consumption of the sangha while the other, the description-to-Ānanda section, was directed to the layman. This certainly has many parallels in other forms of Buddhist literature and iconography. For example, the famous “Litany of Avalokiteśvara,” in which he saves the faithful from a series of eight (or more) perils is seen at two entirely different levels by the monk and the layman. To the layman, being saved from robbers is being saved from robbers, but the monk knows that being saved from robbers is a metaphor for salvation from wrong views, and so on. There is an established duality of levels of meaning in Buddhist literature and, through the literature, in the arts as well. It would seem that we have in the two levels of the first two portions of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha exactly this kind of distinction.

The vision section is of a different nature entirely. It is Ānanda who asks for the vision, Amitabha himself who provides it, but it is to the Bodhisattva Ajita that the Buddha addresses his remarks. Further, the vision is of Sukhāvatī at the time of the teaching and of the beings already there. Thus the fruits of their attainment are detailed as well as the conditions for their rebirth in Sukhāvatī.

There are three clear distinctions in the lifestyles of beings reborn in Sukhāvatī:

1. Beings who have ascended to palaces and who walk about respectfully [and who receive a buddha body at their birth] (LSV Vision pp. 62-63).
3. Beings living in the closed bud of a lotus which remains closed for five hundred years (LSV Vision pp. 62-63). 20

The three levels of beings are separated by their relative levels of faith:

1. Noble-minded bodhisattvas who raise their thought to see Amitabha, never have doubts, believe in the perfect knowledge of buddhas and in their own stock of merit. They receive in one minute a body [of a buddha] which takes others a long time in Sukhāvatī to receive (LSV Vision p. 63). (Not specifically stated to be born into palaces but with a buddha body. Of course, the action of walking about very possibly refers to the actions of a buddha.)
2. Those [bodhisattvas?] who believe in the perfect knowledge of buddhas, are filled with faith, are free from doubt and who amass a stock of merit (LSV Vision p. 63).

3. Bodhisattvas who have doubt about being born in Sukhāvatī but who, even with that thought, still amass a stock of merit. These beings are born in Sukhāvatī by a means of hearing the Buddha’s name and through serenity of thought (LSV Vision pp. 63, 65).

The emphasis of the whole passage and of the subsequent dialogue by the Buddha is a diatribe against doubt on the part of the bodhisattva, and how doubt will destroy any amount of merit that a bodhisattva may have amassed (LSV Vision p. 65).

In this version of the list of beings to be reborn in Sukhāvatī, laymen simply do not enter into the picture at all. In each case, it is the bodhisattva who is laying by stores of merit, and the three degrees of rebirth are determined by relative absence of doubt. While it may be argued that the emphasis is on doubt, one of the five hindrances (nivarana), as simply the antithesis of faith, and therefore the list is similar to that of the description-to-Ānanda section, it must be pointed out that the method of putting the tone in the negative, the strict punishments, and the stern admonitions against doubt are far more in keeping with the usual attitude towards the monk. In fact, it is clear from the reading of the whole somewhat jumbled passage on the beings in Sukhāvatī that the author was concentrating on the feature of doubt rather than that of the levels of rebirth. The main focus in the passage is on the bodhisattva who entertains doubts: the rather poor quality of rebirth he will receive, where he is literally in prison, denied access to the Buddha, Buddhist teachings, bodhisattvas, etc., and the fact that if he has amassed a great store of merit it will be useless if he has doubt. The text goes so far as to say, in the Buddha’s words, “They wish to remove one another [from within the lotus bud], and then they step out behind. And it is not known whether their exit takes place above, below or across” (LSV Vision p. 65). These poor beings who have doubt are even beyond the Buddha’s omniscience! Emphatically, then, the monk is told to be free from doubt.

Although the vision portion begins with the request of Ānanda, it immediately changes to the Buddha questioning Ajita as to what he sees and understands of what the Buddha says. On this basis it may also be suggested that the text was the product of a community whose tradition included Ajita.22

In summary, the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha seems to contain three sections of significantly differing emphasis on the types of individual to be reborn in Sukhāvatī:

1. In the vow section, both monks and laity, with considerable emphasis on the better condition of the monks.
2. In the description-to-Ānanda section, laity according to degree of faith.
3. In the vision section, only monks divided according degree of freedom from doubt.

It may be suggested that the LSV Vows, with their emphasis on the monks, and the LSV Ānanda sections may have had more or less parallel development, while the LSV Vision, with its fearsome penalties for those with doubt seems to be some kind of
response to the monastic community. If so, it may have had a development as an oral teaching of some unknown master prior to its incorporation into the main body of the text. The suggested development may be charted as follows:

```
  core theme
    ├── LSV Vows
    │    ├── LSV Ānanda
    │    └── ? LSV Vision
    └── period of divergence
        ├── Han and Wu
        └── Sanskrit
            └── Wei
```

Finally, it must be suggested that the requirements for attaining rebirth in Sukhāvatī in the LSV Vows, wherein seeking highest bodhi and meditating on Amitābha are the first-level means and bringing merits to fruition are the second-level means; and the LSV Ānanda, wherein it is varying degrees of faith, are so significantly different that in the beginning of the development of Sukhāvatī literature there were two distinct schools of thought on the matter. It may well be that the LSV Vision and the Wei version “adjustments” to the structure of the vows are traces of an attempt to ameliorate the emphasis on merit and attainment of buddhahood in the LSV Vows. Such revisions might have taken place under either of two sets of circumstances, whether as the culmination of a full debate or as the gradual process of the emphasis on faith in the actual practices simply demanding the logic that faith be more important than any actions.

The Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha

The Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha contains a vastly different version of the description of who shall be reborn in Sukhāvatī. There are no ranks and the reason is significantly different:

Who: Any son or daughter of a family.
Method: By hearing the name Amitāyus and keeping it in mind with undisturbed thoughts for anywhere from one to seven nights.
Agency: Amitāyus will stand before them at the time of their death and will be surrounded by an assembly of disciples and followed by a host of bodhisattvas.
Birth status: as a bodhisattva (Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha pp. 98-99).

It is further stipulated that birth is not a reward for merit accumulated in this life (suggesting that merit must be accumulated over many lifetimes or that merit is of no value whatsoever?), but that ultimately rebirth will be a result of hearing the name of the Buddha Amitāyus and keeping it in mind for one to seven nights (Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha pp. 98-99). While the exact meaning of the passage on merit is uncertain, it would seem from the second passage on hearing the name of Amitāyus that accumulation of merit is being de-emphasized, since it is not the specific mechanism that provides entry into Sukhāvatī.

There are ambiguities and statements left out in this text which raise further questions. First, if everyone is going to be born a bodhisattva, where did the śrāvakas come from? Why were they not born
bodhisattvas? Is there any difference in the level of rebirth for those who have kept Amitāyus’ name in mind for one day versus those who have kept it longer? The logic and consistency of Buddhist texts is not always of the utmost precision, but I think that in this case, and given the generally high level of consistency of the other texts in the Sukhāvatī literature, one would have to say that we are seeing a deliberate abbreviation, one done clearly to emphasize the keeping in mind of Amitāyus’ name as the mechanism for achieving rebirth. The tone and mood of the text suggest that it is more closely related to the description of Ānanda, and therefore it may be suggested that it may meet the same needs of the lay community.

It is not, however, a summary of the description section of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha and, in fact, demonstrably comes from a very different text tradition. It is Śāriputra to whom the Buddha addresses his discourse on Sukhāvatī, and it is Śāriputra who is first in the list of arhats accompanying the Buddha at the time of the preaching of the sutra (Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha pp. 89-90); while it is Ānanda who asks the question as to Dharmakara’s attainment that leads to the description-to-Ānanda section in the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha. It is therefore possible that these two texts are rooted in quite different sectarian movements, possibly the Sarvastivādin for the one involving Śāriputra, and it must therefore be suggested that the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha represents an abridgement of an otherwise lost or unknown version.

The Amitayurdhyāna-sūtra

By far the most controversial of the three texts is the Amitayurdhyāna-sūtra. Opinion ranges from an “outright forgery” made essentially for Chinese consumption, to the true words of the Buddha, with many shades of in between. It also breaks down into three very distinct elements: the story of Vaidehi who then requests the teaching, a thirteen step meditation on the visualization of Sukhāvatī and Amitāyus, and a three stage meditation of the nine ranks of rebirth in Sukhāvatī. The introductory narrative of the confinement of Vaidehi and Bimbisara concern us at this point, in that it clearly establishes that the meditation is for the laity rather than the monks (in spite of the fact that Ānanda and Mahamudgalyāyana are present at the teaching, Amitayurdhyāna-sūtra p. 164). Moreover, in a kind of preamble to the meditations, the Buddha states that one of his purposes in explaining the pure actions necessary to attain rebirth in Sukhāvatī is so that “all ordinary persons of the future” (Amitayurdhyāna-sūtra p. 167) will be afforded the opportunity to cultivate them and to attain rebirth in Sukhāvatī.

The Buddha then begins the narrative of the meditations on the visualization by setting forth the conditions of pure actions or merit that a person must fulfill in order to be reborn in Sukhāvatī.

First group:
act filially towards one’s parents,
serve and respect teachers and elders,
be compassionate,
abstain from causing injury, and
cultivate the ten virtuous actions: avoid killing,
stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slander, harsh speech, frivolous talk, covetousness, anger, wrong views.

Second group:
take and observe vow of seeking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha,
fulfill all moral precepts,
not lower dignity, and
not neglect any ceremonial observance [Buddhist].

Third group:
give whole mind to thought of attaining enlightenment,
believe in cause and effect,
study and recite Mahāyāna sutras, and
persuade and encourage others to practice
(ADS Visualization pp. 167-168).

There is no division of the beings to be born into Sukhāvatī into either ranks or levels of rebirth in the visualization section of the Amitayurdhyana-sūtra, however, it is stated in the meditations that there are innumerable devas residing in the storeys and galleries of Sukhāvatī (ADS Visualization p. 186). Thus, it may be inferred that some sort of karmic levels of rebirth were understood to be in operation. However, the three good practices that make up the passport to Sukhāvatī are clearly intended to be necessary to any one individual seeking rebirth there. Further, there is nothing in the visualization section of the Amitayurdhyana-sūtra which even suggests that hearing the name of Amitābha/Amitāyus is of any significance in reaching Sukhāvatī. However, when one has accomplished the visualization meditations, it is specifically stated that, "When one sees the state of happiness of that country ... one greatly rejoices in one's heart and immediately attains anupatika-

\textit{dharmaksanti}” [receptive to the truth that states of existence have no origination] thereby, as Junjirō Takakusu correctly interprets, accepting karmic consequences.\textsuperscript{26} Thus, it is the visualizations which take one the first step in providing the resolve to endure whatever is necessary until the merit accumulation is sufficient for rebirth in Sukhāvatī. In addition, the meditations themselves provide for the expiation of bad karma and promise rebirth in Sukhāvatī:

At the end of the third meditation the sins of eighty million kalpas have been expiated (ADS Visualization p. 172).

At the end of the sixth meditation one has expiated the greatest sinful deeds which would bring about transmigration for numberless millions of kalpas (ADS Visualization p. 175).

At the end of the seventh meditation one has expiated the sins which would cause birth and death for fifty thousand kalpas (ADS Visualizations p. 177).

At the end of the eighth meditation one is freed from sins that would cause transmigrations for innumerable millions of kalpas and, apparently in addition to the promise of rebirth in Sukhavatī, one attains the samādhi due to the remembrance of the Buddha (ADS Visualizations p. 179).

At the end of the ninth meditation one is promised that one will be born in the presence of buddhas and attain \textit{anupatikadharmaksanti}. (ADS Visualizations p. 181).

After the meditation on Avalokiteśvara (at the end of the tenth meditation) one will not suffer any calamity, sins that would produce rebirth for numberless kalpas are expiated, and even
hearing the name of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara will enable one to obtain immeasurable happiness (ADS Visualizations p. 183).

After the meditation on Mahāsthāmaprāpta (at the end of the eleventh meditation) one is freed from sins that would cause rebirth for innumerable (asankhya) kalpas (ADS Visualizations p. 185).

At the end of the twelfth meditation one has attained the state where the innumerable incarnate bodies of Amitayus, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta continuously appear before one.

In this case, then, the mechanism to attain Sukhāvatī is the visualization itself, not hearing the name of Amitābha/Amitāyus, a completely different approach than in the previously discussed texts.

At this point, it is necessary to digress from our theme of rebirth in order to bring in another issue related to the analysis of the Amitāyurdhyanasūtra. It will be noted that in the above discussion the thirteenth meditation of Vaidehi was completely omitted. This is because in my reading of it, I see it as an addenda to a previously extant group of twelve. There are two reasons for my feeling that it is not part of the twelve. First is that the twelve build to a logical conclusion with the inclusion of the meditator in the vision of Sukhāvatī as the final vision. The thirteenth appears to be a kind of concession to those whom the compiler felt would have trouble with the grand visions of the main twelve. This may be easily seen from a list of the visualizations:

1. The setting sun.
2. The lapis lazuli ground as even as clear water.
3. Clarification of the above two perceptions.
4. The seven rows of eight hundred yojana high trees, each tree covered with seven nets with five hundred million palaces between each row, each filled with heavenly children, each child wearing a garland of five hundred million gems, vast arrays of flowers and fruits, everything above consisting of infinitely bright gems.
5. Eight jewel lakes and fourteen streams with beds of gold, birds singing the remembrance of the Buddha and the dharma.
6. The divisions of the country of jewels, each with galleries of five hundred million storeys, each containing devas playing music, and instruments in the sky playing music.
(At this point the Buddha states that this is the perception formed by meditation on the generalities [of Sukhāvatī]. Also at this point Amitabha and the two bodhisattvas appear in the midst of the sky whereupon Vaidehi says that she can see them but asks how beings of the future period will be able to meditate on them.)
7. The lotus throne of nearly infinite complexity and richness, towers of gems and jewelled banners, a jeweled veil with five hundred million gems each with eighty-four thousand rays of light each of eighty-four thousand colors.
8. The Buddha Amitāyus with thirty-two major and eighty minor marks, a lotus equal to that above on the right side of the Buddha on which is Avalokiteśvara and another lotus on the left supporting Mahāsthāmaprāpta; when this image has been gained, one then sees buddhas and bodhisattvas in groups of three filling the country.
9. The bodily light and marks of Amitāyus, the Buddha’s height is six hundred thousand nīyutas of kotos of yojanas, the halo like a hundred million great chilicosms and filled with buddhas, eighty-four thousand signs of perfection each with eighty-four thousand rays; seeing Amitāyus one will also see all the buddhas of the ten directions.

10. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara hundreds of thousands of nīyutas of yojanas high, a crown twenty-five yojanas high, an urna with eighty-four thousand rays each one emanating a bodhisattva, the tip of each finger has eighty-four thousand pictures, each of which has eighty-four thousand colors, each of which has eighty-four thousand rays.

11. The Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta identical to Avalokiteśvara.

12. Imagine one’s self born in a closed lotus bud in Sukhāvatī, then the lotus flower opens, as it opens five hundred rays shine over one’s body and one’s eyes open to the views of Sukhāvatī.

Meditation twelve seems like a logical conclusion to a truly soaring, transcendent, Gandavyūha-like vision of Sukhāvatī. First of all, it is in keeping with a number of other visions of paradisal realms and other expansions of the meditative vision in early Buddhist literature, e.g., Vimalakīrti’s ten foot square hut, etc. Meditation thirteen is, by sharp contrast, totally mundane. Second, the text as it presently stands would have one meditate on one’s self before meditating on the image of the Buddha, something quite different from the usual order of such sequences. In the meditation, the Buddha is “sixteen cubits” high and is seated on a lotus in a lake. There is literally no descriptive elaboration of the images to be meditated on given in the text (ADS Visualizations pp. 186-197). Further, the thirteenth meditation seems to introduce a new element into the condition for being born into Sukhāvatī; it specifically states that it is for those who wish to be born in the western land of serene thought (vipaśyanā) as opposed to active visualization (pravīcaya), although both, of course, are forms of meditation. Lastly, internal to the twelfth meditation is the suggestion that the number twelve is itself an important element. It is stated that one will hear the voices of many buddhas preaching the dharma in accordance with the twelve divisions (ADS Visualizations p. 186), as the final element of the description of the meditation. It may well be that the twelve meditations somehow were correlated to the twelve divisions of the dharma, as such relationships are exceedingly common in Buddhism.

Obviously appended to a narrative of an historical event, the text would seem to have been assembled from the visualization meditations, filled out by the preamble to the meditations, with the addition of the passage on how feeble and inferior Vaidehi’s mind is (ADS Visualizations p. 169). At this point the text was obviously aimed primarily at the laity, although it contained one of the highly universalistic visualizations characteristic of some of the most complex sutras. In its original form, one was admonished to develop the three forms of good actions as a precondition of entrance into Sukhāvatī, and taught that the visualization meditations themselves would expiate bad karma which would retain one in the samsaric realms and prevent rebirth in Sukhāvatī. Although parallel in its concern for the laity to the Larger Sukhavativyūha description-to-Ānanda, the means of attaining rebirth in the LSV Ānanda are hearing or speaking, while the method is visualization in the
ADS Visualization section. This suggests that at least in the early stages of the development of the two texts, they were of widely separate traditions.

I would also point out that there is nothing inherent in the meditation of the sixteen cubit image in the lake that prevents it from being a legitimate traditional teaching. Indeed, since it incorporated another type of meditation, it may be that it is yet another expression of a means for attaining Sukhāvatī.

As an aside, it should be added that the structure of the twelve meditations itself seems to suggest that the first six, after which Amitāyus appears in the sky, may have actually predated the second six, and that seven and eight may have predated the full expansion to twelve. The meditations probably predated the addition of the Vaidehi narrative, as they are highly expansive visualizations more characteristic of the monks’ community than of the laity. The hypothetical development of the first two sections of the *Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra* may be charted as follows:

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meditations</th>
<th>Vaidehi Legend</th>
<th>16 cubit Buddha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-6 (perhaps lacking</td>
<td>[historical event]</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third meditation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>? 7, 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>? 9-12 (Added to make</td>
<td>“Feeble mind” statement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a total of twelve)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

The third and distinctly separate section of the *Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra* is a group of three meditations involving nine levels of rebirth. The basic are upper, middle, and lower birth. The rank levels form the meditations so that each meditation is on the three birth levels in each rank. The division is clearly arbitrary and is very out of keeping with the orderliness of the rest of the meditations, so much so, in fact, that there is little doubt that the ranks are an artificial construction which has been attempted to be cast in the meditation format of the visualizations.

A summary of each level follows:

**Upper Rank, highest birth:**

**Conditions:**

1. beings who cherish the threefold thought:
   (1) true thought, (2) deep believing thought, (3) desire to be born in Sukhāvatī by bringing one’s stock of merit to maturity.
2. Those who:
   A. Possess a compassionate mind,
   B. Do no injury to any living beings,
   C. Accomplish all virtuous actions according to the Buddha’s precepts.
3. Those who study and recite the Mahāyāna doctrine.
4. Those who practice the sixfold remembrance.

**Welcome:** By Amitāyus, Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, numberless created buddhas, one hundred million bhikṣus and śravakas, whole retinue, innumerable gods, palaces of seven jewels.

**Throne:** vajrāsana offered by both bodhisattvas.

**Rays of Prabha:** Sent by Amitāyus.

**Birth:** Seated on vajrāsana.

**Life:** Seeing Buddha’s form and body; instantly be aware of anutpatikadharmakṣaṇī; soon will serve every buddha of ten quarters; each will prophesy his future destiny [to become enlightened]; will obtain hundreds of thousands of dhāranī.
Upper Rank, middle birth:

*Conditions:* Those who do not necessarily learn, study or recite the *vaipulya* sutras but who know their truth, do not speak evil of Mahāyāna doctrine, believe in cause and effect, seek to be born in Sukhāvatī by bringing these qualities to maturity.

*Welcome:* Amitāyus, Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, one thousand created buddhas.

*Throne:* Purple-gold throne-jewel-flower, offered by both bodhisattvas and a retinue of innumerable dependents.

*Birth:* Flower opens after one night.

*Life:* Buddha and the bodhisattvas send rays to open eyes; descends from seat to worship Buddha; in seven days attains *anuttarasanyāsambodhi*; serves buddhas in all ten regions; obtains prophecy [of future buddha-hood] from each; after lapse of a lesser *kalpa* attains *anupatikadharmakṣānti.*

Upper Rank, lower birth:

*Conditions:* Those who believe in cause and effect; do not slander Mahāyāna; cherish the thought of obtaining highest bodhi; seek to be born in Sukhāvatī by bringing these good qualities to maturity.

*Welcome:* Amitāyus, Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, all dependents, five hundred created buddhas.

*Throne:* Golden lotus flower [offered by both bodhisattvas?]; sees self seated on and enclosed in a lotus at death.

*Birth:* Flower opens after one day and one night.

*Life:* Within seven days may see Buddha’s body but not perfectly clearly; sees perfectly within three weeks; worships buddhas of all ten quarters; learns deep significance of dharma from them; after three

lesser kalpas gains entrance to *satadharma-vidyadvara* (clear understanding of the one hundred dharmas); becomes settled in the first *bhūmi.*

(End of the fourteenth meditation.)

Middle Rank, highest birth:

*Conditions:* Those who observe the five prohibitive precepts; eight prohibitive precepts; fasting; practice of all moral precepts; do not commit the five *ānantarya* sins; bring no blame or trouble on any being; seek to be born in Sukhāvatī by bringing these good qualities to maturity.

*Welcome:* Amitāyus surrounded by dependents and bhikṣus; preaches the laws of suffering, non-existence, impermanence and non-self, and praises the virtues of homelessness that can liberate one from all sufferings.

*Throne:* Lotus flower [offered by whom?].

*Birth:* In closed bud of lotus which opens “soon.”

*Life:* When flower opens hears sounds glorifying the four noble truths; immediately attains Arhatship, the threefold knowledge, the six supernatural facilities and complete eightfold emancipation.

Middle Rank, middle birth:

*Conditions:* Those who observe one of the following for one day and one night: eight prohibitive precepts and fasting, the prohibitive precept for Śrāmanera, the perfect moral precepts, not lowering their dignity nor neglecting any ceremonial observance; and seek to be born in Sukhāvatī by bringing their respective merits to maturity.

*Welcome:* Amitāyus and all retinues will praise for being an excellent man.
Throne: Lotus flower offered by Amitāyus on which one sees oneself seated and then which closes around one.

Birth: After seven days the flower unfolds.

Life: Praises the Buddha with aŋjali-mudrā; hearing the dharma, he attains Śrōta-apanna (entering the stream [leading to buddhahood]).

Middle Rank, lowest birth:

Conditions: Either a son or a daughter of a noble family who is filial to their parents and supports them, and who exercises compassion and benevolence; they will meet a good teacher at the time of their death.

Teacher explains: State of Sukhāvatī happiness and forty-eight vows of Dharmakara.

Welcome: [None described].

Throne: [No throne mentioned].

Birth: Simply, “will be born.”

Life: After seven days will meet the two bodhisattvas who will teach the dharma to him. After one lesser kalpa he will attain Arhatship.

(End of fifteenth meditation.)

Lower Rank, highest birth:

Conditions: Commits evil deeds, does not speak evil of mahāvaipulya sutras, may meet a good teacher at the time of his death.

Teacher explains: Recites and lauds the headings and titles of the twelve divisions of the Mahāyāna scriptures (frees from greatest sins); how to make aŋjali-mudrā; how to recite “Namomitabhaya Buddhayā.”

Welcome: Created Buddha, created Avalokiteśvara and created Mahāsthāmaprāpta; rays of light flood death chamber; departs on a lotus flower.

Birth: Lotus bud opens after seven weeks.

Life: Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta teach the twelve divisions of the Mahāyāna scriptures in their deepest meaning; understands, believes and cherishes thought of attaining highest bodhi; after ten lesser kalpas attains the first bhūmi and satadharmavidyaādvāra.

(The text interjects at this point that one who has heard the name of the Buddha, the name of the Dharma and the name of the Sangha may also be born [presumably at this level].)

Lower Rank, Middle birth:

Conditions: Those who transgress the five and eight prohibitive precepts and all the moral precepts; who steals from the sangha and from bhikṣus; teaches wrong views, he [may?] will meet a good teacher.

Teacher explains: Power and virtue of the ten faculties of Amitāyus, the supernatural powers and prabha of the Buddha; the moral virtue, meditation, wisdom, emancipation and knowledge that follows emancipation (frees from sins and turns fires of hell into cool winds).

Welcome: Created buddhas and created bodhisattvas on flowers borne by the winds (above).

Throne: [none described].

Birth: In a moment in a lotus which opens after six kalpas.

Life: Avalokitaśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta soothe, encourage and teach the deep significance of the Mahāyāna sutras; instantaneously turns thought towards the attainment of highest bodhi.

Lower Rank, Lowest birth:

Condition: Commits evil deeds, completes the ten wicked actions, commits the anantarya sins, [if?] he will meet a good teacher at the time of his death.
Teacher explains: Soothes and encourages him, explains the Law and remembrance of the Buddha (even so he will be in such difficulty that he will not remember the Buddha).
Friend reminds him: utter the name “Buddha Amitāyus,” which he must do serenely and uninterruptedly until he has completed the thought ten times.
Welcome: [none described].
Throne: A golden lotus like the disc of the sun appears before his eyes.
Birth: In a moment born in Sukhāvatī; lotus bud opens after twelve greater kalpas.
Life: Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta preach the real state of all elements of nature and the law of the expiation of sins; rejoices and immediately directs his thought toward the attainment of highest bodhi.
(End of the sixteenth meditation.)
(ADS Ranks pp. 188-199).

The first thing that is obviously apparent is a real discrepancy in the welcomes given to those beings in the lower rank and those in the upper and middle ranks. In the upper and middle ranks the degree of elaboration in the welcome is an orderly reduction in both number and quality down to the lower birth of the middle rank, where there is neither welcome nor throne provided by the beings of Sukhāvatī. The much more elaborate welcomes of the lower rank suggests that this whole set is an addition made at a time when the Sukhāvatī teachings were being disseminated into cultures that did not have the same beliefs in karmic retribution for evil or, at least, held such retribution to be not quite as inexorable as it is in Indian belief. The whole process of welcome for the first two levels of birth in the lower rank is placed into a kind of perspective by the statement that the welcoming vision is of created beings rather than the actual buddhas, but even the being who commits the five anantarya sins is greeted by the vision of a sun-like lotus. How then could the being of the middle rank, lower birth be so denied?

In addition, the teacher to the being of the lower birth of the middle rank is told to explain the forty-eight vows of Dharmakara to the dying individual. Both forty-eight vow versions expressly exclude those beings who have committed the five anantarya sins, as does the Sanskrit version with forty-six vows, and although faith has replaced merit as the primary element leading to rebirth, it is still very clear that it is the accumulation of merit that is an important key to entry into Sukhāvatī. Further, it seems unlikely that the initial compilation of ranks would have included the three evil doer ranks directly after a specific reference to the very text which denies them entrance to Sukhāvatī.

Yet another inconsistency is in the nature of the beings who are attempting to gain rebirth in Sukhāvatī. Of the first six levels it may be seen that the first three are decidedly Mahāyānist, the next two are śrāvakamarga, while the sixth is clearly a good person who is a non-Buddhist, whom, one notes, Amitābha does not greet. But in the lower rank births, it is very unclear as to who the upper birth belongs, since all one has to do is not speak evil of the vaipulya sutras, while the middle birth is clearly intended to be a śrāvaka monk who has transgressed the codes and offered false teachings [by slandering Mahāyana?]. By following the logic of the upper and middle rank
order, the upper birth of the lower rank should be a fallen Mahāyāna monk but such an interpretation is impossible from the information given.

On the basis of the three foregoing considerations, it may be suggested that the initial formulation of the ranks may have been very likely simply numbered and listed, rather than "ranked." Thus, the present structure does not reflect the "original" concept.

However, one thing that is apparent from an analysis of the nine ranks of rebirth is that they are aimed at the Mahāyāna practitioner, the śrāvakamārga practitioner and the laity as the main division of ranks. All those who will be born in the highest rank demonstrate in some manner their will to achieve (bodhicitta) the highest enlightenment (anuttara-samyaksambodhi) as a condition of their birth in Sukhāvati. Also, each is assured that they will be able to serve the buddhas of the ten quarters, a purely Mahāyāna activity, while the attainment at the end of their described period of time (presumably their advancement continues until such time as they attain full enlightenment) is in the bodhisattva path, i.e., anutpattikadharmaksanti is characteristic of the eighth bhumi while the upper rank, lower birth individual is specifically promised the first bhumi. In the second or middle rank of birth the threefold division is for monks of the śrāvakamārga, lay followers of the śrāvakamārga and what are apparently non-Buddhist laymen. These latter are somehow associated with the śrāvakamārga goals, for all are promised Arhatship in varying lengths of time. The non-Buddhist layman is separated from the others by the necessity of having a teacher present at the time of his death and by the fact that there is no welcome described nor any throne. It is unclear if the lower rank, upper birth is intended to have been a Mahāyāna monk or not, but with the emphasis on the precepts and the teaching it seems that the middle birth of the lower rank is aimed at an erring śrāvakamārga monk, while the lower rank, low birth is the penultimate sinner. Thus, we get the following list:

Upper rank, upper birth: highly advanced Mahāyāna practitioner in any of three classes:
1. highly advanced monk having mastered compassion
2. monk or lay practitioner mastering wisdom
3. lay person having mastered faith.
Upper rank, middle birth: less fully developed Mahāyāna practitioner.
Upper rank, lower birth: unaccomplished Mahāyāna follower (layman?).
Middle rank, upper birth: śrāvakamārga monk.
Middle rank, middle birth: śrāvakamārga lay follower.
Middle rank, lower birth: non-Buddhist good person.
Lower rank, upper birth: uncertain (one who does not speak evil of vaipulya sutras).
Lower rank, middle birth: śrāvakamārga monk who offers wrong teachings.
Lower rank, lower birth: anyone who commits the five anantaryya sins.

By the addition of the lower rank one gets a group of three threes, thus emphasizing the number three which characterizes the beings and birth levels in the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha. Further, the concerns of the conditions leading to the various birth levels are completely within the Buddhist context and there is no emphasis on singularly Chinese concerns. It is, therefore, hard to see any portion of the ADS Ranks as other than coincidentally parallel to the nine rank
system of the Chinese court; the use of the same terminology as was used by the court was simply a translation device. It is clear from the context of the attainments of the beings born into Sukhāvatī that upper rank means rebirth as a bodhisattva, middle rank means rebirth as a śrāvaka, and lower rank means rebirth as a lay follower. This corresponds exactly to the three conditions set forth by the Buddha in the opening passage of the visualizations (cf. supra pp. 62-3) which are necessary to achieve rebirth in Sukhāvatī. The first is a description of the activities of a layman, the second the activities of a śrāvaka, and the third describes the activities of a bodhisattva practitioner. These concerns correlate closely to the interests of the LSV Vow portion to which the ADS Ranks section actually refers. The teacher of the dying person in the preparation for middle rank, lower birth is charged with explaining the forty-eight vows of Dharmākara to the person. Thus it is possible to suggest that at least the first six ranks of the ADS Ranks section were an ancillary text to the Vows section of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, and that the admonition by the Buddha on the three moral activities, presently in the beginning of the ADS Visualization, may have once been a kind of preamble to the ADS Ranks section.

There is, in fact, internal evidence to suggest that the first six ranks may have been formulated at a time when the assembly of the three portions of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha had not yet been completed and that it is not particularly related to the ADS Vaidehi and visualization sections. It seems that the ADS Ranks section emphasizes the Vows section of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, uses and expands the welcome to each level of the LSV Ānanda section, but does not contain either the punishments for doubts or the emphasis on faith contained in the LSV Vision section. Indeed, in the first six ranks, faith is only mentioned in the upper rank, upper birth in a description of what is essentially a tenth kind of rebirth (cf. supra), in a statement that beings who cherish the threefold thought will attain upper rank, upper birth. This statement seems very intrusive and again would seem to be an attempt to ameliorate the emphasis on the attainments of buddhahood by slipping into first position a demand for absolute faith (even so, the statement still insists that one should bring one's stock of merit to maturity). Thus, it may be suggested that the ADS Ranks section, without the faith statement in upper rank, upper birth, came into existence at a time when the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha consisted of only the Vows and Ānanda sections. Further, it contains a clear exposition on how śrāvakas came into being, born in Sukhāvatī; thus it must be suggested that the LSV Vows and Ānanda sections were in existence by the time the ADS Ranks were compiled.

In addition, the whole mechanism of being relieved from sin by the expiation resulting from the visualization, which is a key feature of the ADS Visualization section, is absent from the first six ranks portion. This suggests that the compiler of ADS Ranks 1–6 was either unaware of the ADS Visualizations or unconcerned with them. In contrast a rather tenuous connection seems to tie the three births of the lower rank to the visualization meditations. It is not the actual Buddha, but created visions of Amitāyus and of buddhas and bodhisattvas on lotuses that appear to those about to be reborn into the lower rank. Thus, because it is the visualizations in the ADS Visualization section that expiate the sins that cause
unfortunate rebirths and rebirths in the lower realms, it may be suggested that the lower rank was created in response to the need to explain the position of sinners after their sins had been expiated by the visualization. Further, the lower rank may have been added either at the time of the integration of the ranks with the ADS Vaidehī and ADS Visualizations sections or very shortly after. Since the benefits of the expiation of sins by visualization of Sukhāvatī are most strongly emphasized there, and the visualizations of Amitāyus and the two bodhisattvas are in the second half of the visualizations, it would seem that the development of the lower rank came after the full form of the visualizations, or, after at least the first twelve.

Interrelationships of Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha, and Amitāyurdhyana-sūtra

If the content of the texts themselves provides suggestions as to their internal development, then it may be possible to derive further suggestions about their development from a comparative evaluation. Initially, I think we will have to assume that there was a single core concept which germinated all of the text variations. It may have run something like this: “Those lay followers of the Buddha who accumulate merit and who have a profound desire to do so, will be reborn in the Sukhāvatī of Amitābha/Amitāyus Buddha.” For a short period of time the teachings were transmitted simply by word of mouth until at least two versions acquired the status of sutra, i.e., the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha “source” text and some version of the LSV Ānanda section. With the rise of the importance of the movement the LSV Vows were developed. These were joined with LSV Ānanda into a single work, at a time before the compilation of ADS Ranks 1–6.

Because of the concern for doubt is so strongly pronounced in the LSV Vision section, it must be suggested that it is a response to skepticism against the rest of the other two portions of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha. If this is the case it can then be suggested that the LSV Vow and Ānanda sections precipitated the development of the ADS Ranks 1-6 when that school (presumably one that emphasized the teaching lineage of Ānanda) came in contact with the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha as an explanation and integration of the various types of rebirth in Sukhāvatī.

Since the Vaidehī narrative is based in a corroborated historical event, the imprisonment and ultimate starvation of King Bimbisāra by his son and heir Ajātasatru, the basic principle of the story goes back to the time of the Buddha. But the imprisonment of Vaidehī is known only from the Amitāyurdhyana-sūtra. Further, miracles aside, since Ajātasatru was said to have been a supporter of the Buddha’s cousin Devadatta at the time of the imprisoning of his father, and to have forbidden worship of the Buddha by women of the palace at this time, it would seem very unlikely that the Buddha or any of his disciples would have actually had the opportunity to teach Vaidehī. The reason for the placement of the Vaidehī narrative into the context of the meditations would seem to be that, in the fifth century B.C., women whose sons were evil were held partly responsible for the actions of their sons. Indeed, in the Amitāyurdhyana-sūtra, Vaidehī questions the Buddha directly on this issue by asking, “What former sin of mine has produced such a wicked son?” (ADS Vaidehī, p. 165). The Bud-
dha never answers this question, but the point of the inclusion of Vaidehi is clearly made—even someone with such bad karma as to be born a woman who produces a wicked son will be able to visualize Sukhvāvatī and through the visualizations be able to expiate her bad karma. Further, it is Vaidehi who, after the sixth meditation, sees the manifestation of Amitāyus and the two bodhisattvas, implicitly through the merit received by direct communication with the Buddha and thus not open to others removed from contact with the Buddha. It is thus to the core of an actual historical event that the process of visualization is attached.

That Vaidehi is a lay-follower of the Buddha would also seem to be extremely significant. While it has long been recognized that the Mahāyāna movement has deep historical roots (there is even a tradition of a Bodhisattva-pitaka having been compiled at the council of Rajagrha which took place under Ajātasatru’s patronage or support), it has only recently become recognized that the lay or popular forms of Buddhism were highly complex movements early in Buddhism as well. The laity probably accounted for the beginning and rise of image worship in early Indian Buddhism, and it seems to have been a popular movement in India that gave rise to both the Kṛṣṇa and Sukhvāvatī cults. Many authors still see the development of Sukhvāvatī as a development at the Indo-Iranian interface in Gandhāra-Bactria, but new archaeological evidence in the form of the pedestal of an image of Amitābha, inscribed and dedicated as such and dated in the year twenty-six of the reign of Huviska in the Kushan era, shifts the emphasis back to Indian developments although not denying possible Indo-Iranian influences. However, it may be suggested that Indian popular movements form the core of the Amitābha/Amitāyus devotionalism. If this is the case, it is possible to argue that the popular forms of the texts and the basic theme of rebirth in Amitābha’s Sukhvāvatī developed without monastic concerns and must have predated the more precisely doctrinal versions. Accordingly, the following chronological relationships may be suggested.

Throughout we have avoided reference to absolute chronology, and frankly, until some future period in which more definitive criteria are found I wish I could avoid the often circular discussions that grow out of such concerns. However, at the assured risk of starting just such a debate I would like to offer a few brief observations relative to the development of the Sukhvāvatī body of literature. The Lotus Sutra is accepted by many as having been developed into its present form by no later than the end of the first century C.E. It is composed of two very distinct layers, the verse and the prose, with the verse being held to be the earlier of the two. Several elements in the Lotus Sutra strongly suggest that the Sukhvāvatī developments had taken place prior to the final form of the Lotus, which, allowing even the most modest periods of time for the exchange of ideas, must push the development of most of the main Sukhvāvatī literature into the pre-Christian era.

One obvious key feature is the chapter on Avalokiteśvara. In the Lotus, faith and the benefits of that faith are very fully developed, yet in the Smaller Sukhvāvatīvyuha the two bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, are not even mentioned, and in the Larger Sukhvāvatīvyuha Avalokiteśvara occurs only twice. Once, in a very brief passage in which he asks a question of Amitābha (LSV Ānanda p. 48), and in another very brief passage, he along
with Mahāsthāmaprāpta are simply named as the two bodhisattvas whose light shines everywhere with eternal splendor. Certainly, it is a foregone conclusion in the Ānanda section of the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha* that they are important bodhisattvas, but they do not play a role in any other of the earliest portions of the texts, i.e., the *Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha*, the LSV Vows, and in the LSV Vision. In the first six meditations of the ADS Visualizations the two bodhisattvas are simply named as appearing in the sky with Amitāyus with no particular emphasis (ADS Visualizations pp. 175-176), and in meditation eight they are visualized to either side of the Buddha in a very simple passage. As this meditation was apparently at one time the end of the visualizations—it even mentions ceasing the meditation (ADS Visualizations p. 179)—it must be assumed that the emphasis on Avalokiteśvara in the earliest forms of the meditations was not strong. On the basis of the foregoing, it may be suggested that the early formulations of the texts on Sukhāvatī—indeed, everything except the ADS Visualizations nine, ten, and eleven, and the ADS Ranks portion—had taken place prior to such strong emphasis being placed on Avalokiteśvara. If we take 100 C.E. as the date by which the *Lotus sutra* was formed, and subtruct from that sufficient time for devotion to Avalokiteśvara to grow into a strong enough cult that it would be axiomatically included in a "new" sutra, then it must be suggested that the latest possible date for the texts of the Sukhāvatī tradition to have been in more or less complete form would be at about the beginning of the Christian era.

As I have suggested previously, the ADS Visualizations and the LSV Ānanda have a very different character than either the *Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha* or the other two portions of the *Amitāyurdhyāna-sutra*: they seem to be aimed at the laity. As we have said, there seems to have been a popular or lay movement of image devotionalism, literally, *Buddhadarśanapuṇya*, “merit [gained by means of] seeing the Buddha,” which would explain the emphasis on the visualizations that take place in the two early sections, and, possibly, why the visualization of the forms of the three figures does not appear in the more technical sections.

Another feature of the *Lotus* that demonstrates that rebirth in Sukhāvatī was a fully developed concept prior to the formulation of the *Lotus* is that Sukhāvatī and rebirth in Sukhāvatī is specifically mentioned in the *Lotus*. Amitābha is specifically mentioned as the Buddha of the west in the parable of the conjured city\(^{37}\) and in another section a woman is promised rebirth in Amitabha’s Sukhāvatī and an end to her female body in all future rebirths, if she but practices the teachings (apparently those of the Medicine King Bodhisattva). Here is proof that the teaching of attaining rebirth in Sukhāvatī had been around long enough and had become so well accepted that it was appropriate to offer such rebirth as a major incentive for following the teachings of the new text. Simply, this means that the entire Mahayana movement had already accepted the basic premise of rebirth in a paradisiel land presided over by the Buddha Amitabha/Amitāyus. That being the case, it must be argued that the “core” idea is of considerable antiquity relative to the formulation of the text. It also demonstrates that the idea of rebirth was appropriate to the laity and that it was a major concern of women, thus reinforcing the idea of the lay origin of the whole Sukhāvatī rebirth premise.
No length of time can reasonably be ascribed to the period of acceptance of this concept into the Mahayana tradition and, although it is my opinion that it was already old in the lay tradition before the monks had much to do with it, all we can do is recognize that the core concept probably had very early origins, thus allowing sufficient time for the several text traditions to develop and for the interrelationships between the texts to develop.

A hint of the relative point in time at which the LSV Vision section develops may be found in the fact that the śrāvakas are almost infinitely subordinate to bodhisattvas. The śrāvakas are said to have auras that send light out one fathom, while the light radiated by bodhisattvas radiates over a hundred thousand kotis of yojanas (LSV Vision, pp. 60-61), thus signifying that the strong schism between the Mahayana and the followers of the śrāvakamarga was current at the time of the formulation of the LSV Vision section. Since it is highly likely that this section is a reaction to the skepticism on the part of the monks about the authenticity of other aspects of the Sukhavati teaching, then it must fall between the development of the schism and the development of the ekāyana movements. It must be noted that the portions of the texts that we have suggested to be early, i.e., Smaller Sukhavatīvyūha, LSV Vows, LSV Ānanda, ADS Visualization (1–6), and ADS Visualization (13), are completely free of any suggestion of this down-playing of the śrāvaka. That is not the case, however, with the ADS Ranks (1–6), which places all forms of śrāvakamarga below that of any form of bodhisattva practice. Now, in the Lotus, the earlier verse layers of the text are full of the exposition of ekāyana in a fully developed form. If the verse layers of the Lotus are the early basic text and the prose layers mainly a commentary on them, then it must be argued that the verse layer is substantially older than the 100 C.E. date of the final form of the text. This would put the verse layers in the middle of the first century B.C.E. and put the development of the LSV Vision and ADS Ranks (1–6) into the first half of that same century. This in turn puts the texts to which it was responding into the second century B.C.E. Since the LSV Vows would seem to be a kind of monastic community response to an already extant lay theme, with the LSV Vision and its concern for the doubting bodhisattva a response to lack of acceptance in the monastic community, we would have to put the LSV Vows into the second century B.C. and the lay literature, i.e., the LSV Ānanda, the Smaller Sukhavatīvyūha, and the ADS Vision (1–6) at least as early as 200 B.C.E. This would push the “core concept” well into the middle of the third century B.C.E. If one is looking for Indo-Iranian influences there could hardly be a better time than this for an Indian response to influences from that area.

A Final Note on Methodology and Some Thoughts on Epistemological Aesthetics in the Analysis of Buddhist Texts

Discussions of Buddhist literature abound with the idea of “forged,” “faked” and “false” texts. Yet the literature itself abounds with statements to the effect that the words of the Buddha must be transmitted in as perfect and literal form as possible. Now, there is no denying the fact that there is very definite apparent chronology to the development of Buddhist literature. Yet, I do not believe that anyone ever sat down
at his writing desk with the overt intention of faking or forging a sutra, not even in China. This is not to say that things were not added to texts or that minor modifications, perhaps "corrections," were not made. There is ample documentation of just such a process, although wherever we know about it, it seems to have been done in the most sincere and diligent manner. I would hypothesize the formulation of sutras in the following manner: Given a basic or "core concept" either derived from the time of the Buddha or shortly thereafter, a succession of teachers will expand and elaborate with commentaries on the subject. In time and over several generations of transmissions, divergent forms of the text will occur, then at some latter point these divergent forms may be combined into a single work, either by means of editing the works of the Buddha into a more consistent form, or by means of a teacher putting two related texts together. This would be the process that I see happening with the LSV Vows and Ānanda sections, for example. Other teachers might expound on the problem of doubt, and over the period of several transmissions this too would be added to the first two texts. I do not think that given a few doubting practitioners, a teacher would have disappeared for a few days and come out with an entirely new edition of the sutra under attack; rather, he would have explained that doubt was a bad thing and that the hindrance of doubt caused great loss of merit, and over several generations of teachers this commentary would have been incorporated into the main text.

I am also of the opinion that the early sangha was a bit on the skeptical side when it came to "new" teachings, and that there was a substantial period of time prior to a general acceptance of any particular teaching. This is the reason that I would place the development of the Sukhāvati literature into the first and second centuries prior to the Christian era, rather than have them developed just before the final form of the Lotus Sutra. It was a slow, evolutionary process rather than a revolutionary process. This was in fact recognized early in Buddhist studies by Kern, but many would seem to ignore this view for a "date of composition" approach.38

Another approach, in which I have very little faith, is the "bigger-the-number-the-later-the-date" as it is applied to whole texts. I would agree in so far as it is applied specifically to the numbers themselves, reflecting a kind of simple minded one-upsmanship on the part of recites of certain texts, but not in regards to the content of the ideas in the text. I think that one has to be alert to the possibility of early, even germinal ideas in the context of texts with huge, astronomical numbers of bodhisattvas, śrāvakas, etc. In the end, it will be analysis of the ideas of the text that provides its historical place and developmental position, not how many grains of sand on how many hundreds of millions of nyutis of kotos of Ganges' banks the author could enumerate.

In terms of epistemological aesthetics, I am fully aware that this approach is far more speculative than some other authors on the subject would like. I fully accept this criticism. However, other work that I have done, which is far less speculative39 has led me to formulate some of the opinions that are shared in this study. Until such time as the entire Indra's net of early Mahayana sutras can be analyzed in detail, thus providing a full understanding of their development, it is my hope that these kinds of hypothetical studies will stimulate others to refine, correct and add to our understanding of this most important body of literature.
Notes

1 My interest in this material arose as the result of a number of discussions with Masatoshi Nagatomi in June of 1979 while we were both teaching at the American Institute of Buddhist Studies. I am most indebted to Professor Nagatomi for both his outgoing generosity with his time and knowledge, and for his profound understanding of Buddhism which he so willingly shares.

2 For the sake of convenience to the reader who wishes to follow the passages of the texts in parallel with this article, all citations to the texts are to F. Max Müller, ed., Sacred Books of the East, vol. XLIX, Buddhist Mahayana Texts, part II, Oxford, 1894, reprinted, Delhi, 1968. Occasional emendations, corrections, and references to other versions are noted as necessary. [Ed. For additional information regarding the Meditation Sutra, see Kōtatsu Fujita, "The Textual Origins of the Kuan Wu-liang-Shou ching: A Canonical Scripture of Pure Land Buddhism," tr. Kenneth K. Tanaka, in Robert E. Buswell, tr., ed., Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), pp. 149-73.]

3 Hodgson's Nepalese manuscript, although of unknown date, is in Newari characters which would place it at the earliest in the fifteenth century. Rajendralal Mitra, The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal, p. 1882 (Calcutta, 1971), p. 231. The date of the Japanese mss., however, is uncertain but undoubtedly 8-9th century or later, possibly much later.


5 See note 2.

6 For a list of the early translations, cf. Bunyiu Nanjio, A Catalogue of the Chinese Translation of the Buddhist Tripitika, f.p. Oxford, 1883 (Taiwan, 1975), pp. 10-11. The An Shih-kao (active 148-171) version is generally held to be a later attribution, and although such attribution is not axiomatically incorrect, the lost text is usually discounted as a true early version by most scholars. Since it is no longer extant, there is little to be gained from it other than the possibility that some version of the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha was known in the third quarter of the second century of the Christian era. A version by Lu-

7 See note 2.

8 Interestingly, it is generally Chinese and Japanese scholars who see the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha as earlier, while it is Western scholars who find the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha earlier. The reason for this seems to reside in the traditional views of the Asians, contrasted with the prejudice of the early European scholars which still permeates Western Buddhological scholarship. Neither view is particularly suited to deriving any kind of "objective" solution to the problem.

9 Lancaster, op. cit., passim. The publisher regrettably has omitted the asterisks necessary for a full understanding of the text presented on page 149. Professor Lancaster very kindly provided me with a corrected version. It should be noted that Dutt's edition of the Gilgit mss. "corrected" all omitted Sanskrit without footnoting the changes and is therefore absolutely useless as a text critical tool.

16 I do not intend to cite every example, only those most salient to the discussion.

17 The citations are not quotes but a close paraphrase put into the present tense and relieved of the conditionals and double negatives which make for difficult reading. I have also cast the pronouns and verbs of Müller’s “Biblical style” into modern English.

18 There is the possibility that the idea of levels or ranks of rebirth is more a Chinese concern that an Indian one. However, the other portions of the text also specifically discuss levels. Therefore, there is no doubt that various levels of birth were of the original conception and that Sukhāvati literature was concerned with such levels from the outset.

19 Art-historically speaking, this is a theme that could be developed at voluminous length for most of Asia. Not only Japan and China, but Tibet, Inner Asia, Gandhara and Southeast Asia have all had extensive artistic developments on this theme.

20 The order of the text seems confused at this point as subjects, except for doubt, change in a very illogical manner.

21 The other four are desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, and excitement and a sense of guilt.

22 According to Bu-ston, Ajita was a disciple of Ānanda and thus might have been responsible for a lineage from Ānanda through himself. However, this is strictly hypothetical and has been impossible to identify.

23 Müller finds difficulty with this passage (LSV p. 98, n. 2) and the Chinese conveys the one meaning to one translator and the opposite meaning to another. Cf. Rev. Kyojo Ananda Vergara’s translation in Buddha Tells of the Infinite, Tokyo, 1973, pp. 50-51, for a translation which agrees with Müller. Upasaka I Kuo-jung translates the passage, “One cannot have few good roots, blessings, and causal connections to attain birth in that land,” giving exactly the opposite sense to the passage, in Hsüan Hua, A General Explanation of the Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra, San Francisco, 1974, p. 134.

24 The Chinese simply has “Holy ones” and does not describe the śrāvaka and bodhisattva assembly.

25 A very curious feature of this section is that the Buddha never answers her question as to why she had so evil a son. It may be possible that the meditations were attached to some early legend of the events that went on to explain the cause of her bad karma. However, I have been unable to locate any such narrative (cf. Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra pp. 165 and 168).


27 Takakusu footnotes that this level is that of a buddha (which may be a traditional teaching in connection with the passage). However, the text makes it clear that there are still attenuations to be made (cf. infra).

28 In light of subsequent activities this seems out of order at this point.

29 Pramudita of the dasabhūmi path of the bodhisattva.

30 Takakusu inserts “in that country,” which does not take into account that everyone mentioned is being described as being born in Sukhāvati; the interjection refers to the upper birth of low rank.

31 Since there is a conditional in the upper birth of the low rank a conditional seems appropriate here, but there is not one in either the text or the translation.

32 A conditional seems even more appropriate here.

33 Namōmitāyashe Buddhāya. Cf. Takakusu’s note 1, Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra p. 198.

34 For an overview of the events and a bibliography, see “Bimbisāra” and “Ajātasattu” articles in the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism.


39 Ibid.