

fortune to those about to be born, the newly born, as well as the mother and family (*ibid.*: 161–2; cf. 183). Reciting the name of Kṣitigarbha and contemplating his image overcomes poverty and protects while on travel. Indeed, worshipping Kṣitigarbha can even increase intelligence and improve memory (*ibid.*: 211–13). In other words, Kṣitigarbha is of value in everyday life and everyday death, as a good Bodhisattva should be. In particular, he is a Chinese Bodhisattva who offers practical spiritual solutions to the domestic problems of Chinese men and women. To the present day, in the seventh lunar month, the *Dizangbenyijing* is recited, and offerings are made, out of gratitude for Kṣitigarbha's saving of the ancestors.

In Japan probably sometime between 1000 and 1300 another apocryphal scripture was created (based in part on a Chinese model), called the 'Scripture Spoken by the Buddha on the Causes of Bodhisattva Jizō [Kṣitigarbha] Giving Rise to the Thought of Enlightenment and the Ten Kings' (*Bussetsu jizō bosatsu hosshin innen jūō kyō*). This sūtra elaborates further on the different courts of the 10 kings, the horrible sufferings of the dead in hell, and Kṣitigarbha's vows and salvific abilities. It also describes the delights of a Pure Land attributed to Kṣitigarbha (Teiser 1994: 58 ff.). In Japan Kṣitigarbha has the same function as in China, but is also associated with the welfare of children, pregnant women, childbirth and, since the twelfth century, travellers. The basis for these associations can be seen in the *Dizangbenyijing* sūtra itself. In particular Kṣitigarbha (Japanese: Jizō) loves children. If a child dies, say by infanticide (in previous centuries, often connected with grinding poverty), miscarriage or abortion, an appropriate ritual and small image of Jizō may be offered at a local temple in the hope that Jizō will help the dead child and also in order to avoid any unpleasant effects from the child's spirit.<sup>81</sup>

Pictures of Kṣitigarbha carrying out his salvific functions may be found used in Buddhist funerary rituals. In art he is commonly represented as a shaven-headed monk, an exception to the general depiction of Bodhisattvas as princes or princesses. In this form Kṣitigarbha appears as a guide of the dead from the lower realms to higher states. In a tenth-century wall painting from Bezeklik in Central Asia, Kṣitigarbha is depicted with a patched robe, and a staff with which to strike open the gates of hell.<sup>82</sup> He has almost exactly the same appearance – a dignified yet kindly monk, floating in the air with feet on a lotus, in robes, perhaps even rich robes, with a staff, a small medicine bowl, and halo – in numerous Japanese paintings, where the descent of Jizō to save beings is an important artistic theme. His staff is that of a wandering mendicant. The metal frame at the end, like an upside-down heart of wire, contains six rings which tinkle as he moves. He is surrounded by wispy vapour rising from the cauldrons of hell, as he compassionately descends to save those who suffer unspeakable torments.<sup>83</sup>

## Some Buddhas

### *Akṣobhya*

Our principal literary source for the mythology of Akṣobhya and any cult it might have involved is the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra*, although further information is found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*

*Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*. The *Akṣobhyavyūha* exists in more than one recension, of which the earliest was translated into Chinese towards the end of the second century CE. In terms of antiquity of translation, therefore, this makes it one of the earliest datable Mahāyāna sūtras. As such it may well show an early textual stage in the development of the Pure Land tradition, a stage subsequently extended and elaborated in connection with the traditions centred on Amitābha/Amitāyus and Sukhāvātī that gradually eclipsed it (see Nattier 2000: 73, 79–80). The *Akṣobhyavyūha* was possibly written originally not in Sanskrit but in Gāndhārī, the local language of north-west India under the Kuṣāṇas (Dantinne 1983: 1).

According to the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra* there is in the east, far, far away, a Buddha Field named Abhirati.<sup>84</sup> In that world-system, long ago, a monk vowed to follow the path to full Buddhahood. In so doing he made, as is the custom, a series of great vows which are very difficult to fulfil, stressing his future Bodhisattva practices. In following the path he would never in any way bear malice, never retreat into the lower Vehicles, never engage in even the slightest immorality. As a monk he would always be the most perfect monk, austere, eloquent, dignified, mindful in the presence of women, not listening to non-Buddhist doctrines and so on. This applies not just to the present life but to all lives, with body, speech and mind. He would always save criminals about to be punished, even at the cost of his own life.<sup>85</sup> This account of the Bodhisattva's vows, particularly his perfect morality, is important. First, it indicates the scope of Akṣobhya's aspirations. Second, through adhering to mighty vows the Bodhisattva, and eventual Buddha, gains great, immeasurable merit, and as a direct consequence immense power to help others. Finally, as the text itself makes clear, the purity of the Bodhisattva's morality has a direct bearing on the purity of his eventual Buddha Field. Akṣobhya's realm of Abhirati is, after all, a fully-qualified Pure Land.

As a consequence of his great aspiration and vows this Bodhisattva was predicted to full enlightenment, a prediction accompanied by suitably wonderful miracles. After extraordinary exertions over a phenomenal length of time all has now come to pass, and he is indeed the Buddha Akṣobhya, who reigns over that land of Abhirati far, far distant in the east.<sup>86</sup> At Akṣobhya's enlightenment Māra did not even bother to try and hinder him. The sūtra devotes some time to describing the delights of Akṣobhya's Buddha Field, for this indicates the greatness of Akṣobhya, tempts devotees, and serves as a basis for visualization and recollection of the Buddha Akṣobhya. In that land there is an enormous tree under which the Buddha sits on a raised platform:

Around the bodhi-tree are rows of palm trees and jasmine trees, which in the gentle breeze, [gives] forth a harmonious and elegant sound surpassing all worldly music. Furthermore . . . that Buddha-land does not have the three miserable planes of existence. . . . All the sentient beings in that Buddha-land have accomplished the ten good deeds. The ground is as flat as a palm and the colour of gold, with no gullies, brambles, or gravel; it is as soft as cotton, sinking as soon as one's foot steps on it and returning to its original state as soon as the foot is lifted.

(Chang 1983: 322; cf. Dantinne 1983: 189–90)

In Abhirati there are no illnesses, no lying, no ugliness or smelly things. There are no jails. No non-Buddhists. Trees are laden with flowers and fruit, and there are also trees which produce fragrant and beautiful garments. Food and drink appear as wished: 'There are . . . many gardens and pavilions, all pure and clean. The sentient beings there all live with joy in the Dharma' (Chang 1983: 322). There is no jealousy, women there are wonderfully beautiful, and they are freed from the curse of menstruation (*ibid.*: 323, 319; Dantinne 1983: 97, 194 ff.):

Furthermore, in that land, mother and child are safe and unsullied from conception to birth. How can this be? All this is due to the power of Tathāgata Akṣobhya's original vows. . . . [I]n that Buddha-land there is such peace and bliss. . . . [T]here is neither trade nor trader, neither farms nor farming; there is happiness at all times. . . . [I]n that Buddha-land, singing and playing do not involve sexual desire. The sentient-beings there derive their joy exclusively from the Dharma.

(Chang 1983: 325; cf. Dantinne 1983: 201–2)

According to the Tibetan version, in Abhirati there is no physical sexuality. As soon as a man approaches a woman with carnal thought and sees her, the carnal thought ceases and he enters a meditative absorption on detachment from impurity. She, on the other hand, by virtue of the mere glance becomes pregnant. The pregnancy is apparently no problem (Dantinne 1983: 196).<sup>87</sup> Clearly, Abhirati is a wonderful world of happiness, free of all danger, a world which is the exact opposite of our dirty polluted world, where people toil with little reward but poverty and starvation, followed by a mean death. All these splendid things are the results, we are repeatedly told, of Akṣobhya's great vows and compassion. There are sun and moon in Abhirati, but they have no function, for they are completely eclipsed by the light of Akṣobhya (Chang 1983: 324).

One cannot be reborn in the Pure Land by greedily desiring it, for 'one with any passion or attachment cannot be reborn in that Buddha-land. Only those who have planted good roots and cultivated pure conduct can be born there' (*ibid.*: 323; Dantinne 1983: 199). In fact, the principal purpose of being reborn in Abhirati is to follow the Buddhist path in the presence of Akṣobhya, under optimum facilities for spiritual growth. Not all in the Pure Land follow the Mahāyāna, however, for there are also Hearers and Arhats present. Still, with these facilities becoming an Arhat can be obtained very quickly. In Abhirati, '[t]hey are said to be indolent because they fail to end all their defilements at one sitting'.<sup>88</sup>

How is the aspirant then to be reborn in this wonderful land? It is made clear that in general such a rebirth is quite difficult.<sup>89</sup> It is through strenuous moral and spiritual cultivation. Broadly, first, if the aspirant is able to do so then they should follow the Bodhisattva path, and vow to be reborn in that land of Abhirati. Second, all merit obtained through good works should be dedicated to the future rebirth there. Nevertheless, one should not be selfish. The motive power for this rebirth is in order to attain enlightenment and then 'illuminate the whole world' (Chang 1983: 332). The practitioner should learn meditation and frequent holy people. Significantly it is also important to visualize the Buddhas in their

Buddha Fields expounding the Doctrine, and vow to be like them. By such means one can be reborn in the Pure Land of Buddha Akṣobhya in the future, and even now, immediately, fall under his divine protection (*ibid.*: 332–5).<sup>90</sup>

One noteworthy feature of Akṣobhya and his Pure Land is that this Buddha will eventually enter final nirvāṇa, having arranged for his successor, in the same way that Śākyamuni arranged for Maitreya. Akṣobhya's final act will be self-cremation, apparently through internal combustion generated by the force of meditation.<sup>91</sup> The Doctrine preached by Akṣobhya will endure for many aeons after his passing, but will eventually decline. All this will happen because of the declining merit of people in Abhirati: 'It is because people of that time will lack interest in learning the Dharma that those who can expound the Dharma will go away from them' (Chang 1983: 332). People will hear little of the teaching, and will cease to practise. The learned monks will therefore withdraw into seclusion, and eventually the Dharma will be no more.

It is clear throughout this discussion that the land of Abhirati and the Tathāgata Akṣobhya are modelled on Śākyamuni and this world – but raised in all respects to a higher plane of loveliness and spirituality. It is our world *as it ought to be*, the world of dreams.<sup>92</sup> This very fact suggests the antiquity of interest in the Buddha Akṣobhya, although we have no idea now what concrete form any cult may have taken. Akṣobhya was clearly important in certain circles during the early centuries CE, although any cult seems not to have survived, or to have been transmitted in any identifiable form as a separate cult to other Buddhist countries. This may be because it was eclipsed early on by other forms of Buddhism in India, and the development of a Sukhāvati cult of Amitāyus in Central and East Asia. Nevertheless, Akṣobhya does become an important Buddha in a rather different context, the tantric traditions of late Indian Buddhism (ninth to twelfth centuries). Through these traditions he is also important in Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhism. As a tantric Buddha, Akṣobhya is often the principal Buddha of the *maṇḍala*, the cosmogram which is so important in tantric ritual and meditation. In such a context he is coloured blue, and associated with four other Buddhas: Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi.<sup>93</sup>

### *Bhaiṣajyaguru*

Bhaiṣajyaguru is the Medicine Buddha. We have seen that other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas include among their functions the preventing and curing of illness, but Bhaiṣajyaguru represents an incarnation of the dimension of healing in all its aspects – from the curing of a cold through that of mental disease to enlightenment itself, a healing of the human condition. In Tibet, Bhaiṣajyaguru serves as the patron saint of medicine, most of which is carried out by monk-physicians. Meditative generation of Bhaiṣajyaguru, together with the recitation of his mantra, can be used to empower and enrich the medicines themselves.<sup>94</sup>

There are two sūtras particularly devoted to the topic of Bhaiṣajyaguru – the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra*, and a sūtra which is best known by the short title of *Saptabuddha* (or

*Saptatathāgata*) *Sūtra*. The latter text incorporates much of the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra*, but adds a further six Buddhas to Bhaiṣajyaguru, giving a set of seven. Both sūtras are available in Tibetan, and the Sanskrit *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra* was discovered at Gilgit. In spite of this we should not assume that the presence of a Sanskrit and a Tibetan version means that the sūtra was necessarily composed in India. Raoul Birnbaum (1980) has noted that there are no images of Bhaiṣajyaguru in India predating the transmission of the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra* to China, and none of the Chinese pilgrims to India mentions a cult of Bhaiṣajyaguru. The oldest Chinese translation of the sūtra (early fourth century) is contained in a composite sūtra the authenticity of which has been doubted from early times.<sup>95</sup> By the fourth century, on the other hand, Bhaiṣajyaguru had already become an important figure in other sūtras translated into Chinese, and appears to have been significant in Central Asia. It has been argued (Birnbaum 1980: 52ff.; cf. Soper 1959: 176–8) that the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra* was composed in Central Asia, and then introduced into India, where it became sufficiently known to be quote extensively by Śāntideva in the 7th or the 8th century, although the point remains controversial. The most popular version in East Asia is that translated by Xuanzang in the seventh century, and this corresponds closely with the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions.<sup>96</sup>

The *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra* is much like other sūtras of its type. It describes the great vows of Bhaiṣajyaguru as a Bodhisattva, devotes a brief note to his Buddha Field, which, suffice to say, is just wonderful, and describes at length, with details for ritual, the benefits which flow from worshipping Bhaiṣajyaguru and in particular invoking his name. In setting out on the Bodhisattva path, Bhaiṣajyaguru is said to have made 12 great vows, namely that when he becomes a Buddha, according to Birnbaum's version from the Chinese: (i) he will have an extensive radiance, the 112 marks of a superior being, and will cause all sentient beings to resemble him; (ii) his body will be like flawless beryl, surpassing the sun and moon in radiance; (iii) he will enable all beings to have whatever is needed; (iv) he will cause non-Buddhists to enter the path of enlightenment, and those who follow the lower Vehicles to adopt the Mahāyāna; (v) he will enable his followers to have perfect morality and aspirations, and through the salvific power of his name he will purify those who transgress and prevent them from falling into the lower realms; (vi) he will cure those with deformities, 'leprous, convulsive, insane', again through the power of his name; (vii)

[W]hen I attain enlightenment . . . if there are any sentient beings who are ill and oppressed, who have nowhere to go and nothing to return to, who have neither doctor nor medicine, neither relatives nor immediate family, who are destitute and whose sufferings are acute – as soon as my name passes through their ears, they will be cured of all their diseases and they will be peaceful and joyous in body and mind. They will have plentiful families and property, and they will personally experience the supreme enlightenment.

(Birnbaum 1980: 153–4)

(viii) women who are weary of their female state (in primitive conditions a state of constant pregnancy with poor medical facilities) can be reborn as males through his name (the

*Saptabuddha Sūtra* states this can occur in the *present* life); (ix) all will escape the net of Māra, abandon false views and progress on the Bodhisattva path; (x) all who are confronted by fears and pains, particularly due to royal punishment, may be relieved through hearing his name; (xi) those who transgress through hunger or thirst will attain excellent food and drink, then afterwards the Doctrine, once more through the name of Bhaiṣajyaguru; and finally, (xii) those who are too poor to afford clothes, and are tormented by cold, heat, flies and mosquitoes, will obtain through the power of recollecting the Buddha's name not just clothing but ornaments, garlands, incense, music and entertainment (Birnbaum 1980: 152–5). How can all this happen simply through hearing the name of Bhaiṣajyaguru? The *Saptabuddha Sūtra* implies that it is due to the great vows of these Buddhas, and their consequential immense power.

The Buddha Field of Bhaiṣajyaguru is, like that of Akṣobhya, in the east. Its description is very brief, for it is said to be just like Sukhāvātī, with the ground of beryl and roads marked with gold. There are no women in that land, for women are reborn there in the superior state of men. In his own Pure Land Bhaiṣajyaguru is accompanied by two Bodhisattvas, as is Amitābha, known as Sūryaprabha and Candraprabha. These Bodhisattvas lead the dead into the presence of Bhaiṣajyaguru. There appear to be no non-Mahāyāna practitioners in this Pure Land.

The benefits of worshipping Bhaiṣajyaguru, or the sūtra, are strikingly 'this-worldly'. First, Bhaiṣajyaguru saves those who would otherwise go straight to the lower realms, even the most vicious. He can also save those who have already reached the lower realms but who, as with a distant echo, remember for some reason his name. Through his power they then attain favourable rebirths, including, under certain conditions, rebirth in Sukhāvātī itself – although strangely no mention is made in this context of his own Pure Land.<sup>97</sup> The best method of worshipping Bhaiṣajyaguru is to set up an image of the Buddha on a throne, scatter flowers, burn incense, and adorn the area with banners and pennants:

For seven days and seven nights they should accept and hold to the eight-fold vows, eat pure food, bathe in fragrant and pure water, and wear new and clean clothing. They should give birth to the unstained, single-minded state, with no thought of anger or harm. Towards all sentient beings there should arise the thoughts of blessings and benefits, peace, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. They should play musical instruments and sing praises while circumambulating to the right of the Buddha image. Furthermore, they should recall the merits of that Tathāgata's fundamental vows and study and recite this sūtra. They should think only of its principles and lecture on the sūtra, elucidating its main points.<sup>98</sup>

According to the sūtra, through practices like these one can attain longevity, wealth, an official position, sons, daughters, freedom from nightmares or whatever is required (Birnbaum 1980: 162). Concentration on the name of the Buddha and worshipping him is of value at the time of death, and also for women in childbirth. It can bring back beings who have been



presumed dead, and who have already travelled beyond this world to the court of Yama, the King and Judge of the Dead.<sup>99</sup> Such a person will have witnessed the fruits of good and bad deeds 'like a dream', and will become a reformed person for ever more (*ibid.*: 165). Naturally the sick too can be saved by worshipping Bhaiṣajyaguru (details are given for a special ritual). A king can overcome epidemics, invasions, rebellion, meteorological, astronomical and astrological calamities. The state can be made tranquil. The *Saptabuddha Sūtra* adds a *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* which can be used at times of illness, for longevity and so on. It can also be recited over medicine to increase its efficacy. According to Tibetan sources it is beneficial to recite this *mantra* and also the name of Bhaiṣajyaguru in the ear of a dying person, and even to recite the *mantra* and then blow upon meat or old bones, for this can lead to a lessening of the sufferings of the dead creature, and possibly a favourable rebirth. To those who uphold the worship of Bhaiṣajyaguru and his sūtra 12 *yakṣa* generals (a sort of demigod) and their armies will offer protection. Longevity, health, prosperity, protection of the state – these were the messages that Chinese and Japanese emperors wanted to hear, this was what they wanted from a worthwhile religion.

In Japan in particular the worship of Bhaiṣajyaguru (Japanese: Yakushi) has been especially important. We have seen already that recitation of sūtras to ward off pestilence and disasters and to protect the state was an integral part of Japanese Buddhism from the beginning. In 720 the empress commanded that the *Bhaiṣajyaguru Sūtra* be read in 48 temples for one day and one night in order to save the life of her minister. He died the very next day.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, a general amnesty was declared, one of the meritorious deeds recommended by the sūtra. In the ninth century Bhaiṣajyaguru rites were performed to counter droughts and pestilence. Ceremonies centred on the seven Buddhas were used to repel Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century, and the worship of Bhaiṣajyaguru was often performed when the emperor or one of his family was ill.

In Buddhist iconography Bhaiṣajyaguru is usually represented seated as a Buddha in full lotus posture. He is blue, a colour of beryl, or gold with a halo of blue rays. In his left hand on his lap he holds a bowl containing medicine, although sometimes in Japanese versions Bhaiṣajyaguru holds a small medicine bowl in the palm of his left hand, which rests on his left knee. In Tibetan art the Buddha's right hand is characteristically open and resting on his right knee with the palm facing outwards. He holds the stem of a medicinal myrobalan plant.<sup>101</sup> In artistic representation Bhaiṣajyaguru may be flanked by his two Bodhisattvas, Sūryaprabha and Candraprabha, and perhaps also the 12 *yakṣa* generals. Some of these features can be seen in a large and complex painting on silk from Dunhuang (ninth century) in the British Museum, which also contains side-scenes of the forms of untimely death from which, according to the sūtra, one can be protected by Bhaiṣajyaguru – illness aggravated by lack of proper treatment or through recourse to spirit-mediums, execution, death due to over-indulgence, burning, drowning, wild beasts, falling off a mountain, poisonous herbs, spells or magic, and finally starvation or dehydration. On the other side are depicted the 12 vows of Bhaiṣajyaguru (Zwalf 1985: 217). The Pure Land itself is modelled closely on Amitāyus' Sukhāvātī, as one might expect.

*Amitābha /Amitāyus**The Amitābha sūtras*

The most widespread of the cults devoted to Buddhas is that of Amitābha or Amitāyus.<sup>102</sup> In contemporary Japanese Buddhism it accounts for more practitioners than any other Buddhist tradition. For centuries the sūtras that focus on Amitābha and their exegesis by Chinese and Japanese devotees have formed the vision and the hope of millions of East Asian Buddhists, and their influence on East Asian culture has been correspondingly immense.

In the emergence of a Pure Land tradition in India based on Amitābha or Amitāyus, Kenneth K. Tanaka (1990: 3–13) has detected five chronological stages. First, there was the idea that grew up (he argues) soon after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha that there were previous Buddhas. From this it was inferred that there will also be Buddhas in the future as well, and by the end of the second century BCE this hope had focused on the figure of Maitreya. The second stage, also in the second century BCE, was the development in some circles of the idea of innumerable world realms in each of the 10 directions. Early Buddhism held to the idea that there cannot be more than one Buddha existing at the same time. With the rise of the idea of the Bodhisattva and his career to perfect Buddhahood, and the suggestion that there could be a multiplicity of those pursuing the supreme path of a Bodhisattva, where could these Bodhisattvas become Buddhas? It was posited that at least some of the other-world realms may be inhabited by a Buddha. This gave rise to the concept of Buddha Fields, with the likelihood of Buddhas existing contemporaneously albeit in different Buddha Fields. Hence it became realistic to think of a Bodhisattva becoming a Buddha *somewhere else* even now. Such ways of thinking were criticized by some, such as the Theravādins and Sarvāstivādins, but accepted by, e.g., the Mahāsāṃghika and Lokottaravāda traditions.<sup>103</sup> Tanaka argues that this led eventually to the idea that while there may be no Buddha in this world now, able to help us, elsewhere there are now compassionate Buddhas and indeed their attendant Bodhisattvas able and willing to help and with great stocks of merit that they can transfer for the welfare of their devotees. Tanaka suggests that the evolution of this idea may have occurred in Buddhism in an environment of competition with the emergence of Brāhmanic devotional cults centred on the gods Śiva and Viṣṇu. The third stage of the evolution of an Indian Pure Land tradition lay in the emergence by the latter half of the first century CE of the Buddha Amitābha or Amitāyus as one of these contemporary Buddhas, residing in his Buddha Land of Sukhāvātī. The associated sūtras focusing on this Buddha were compiled round about 100 CE. Fourth, by the early fourth or perhaps even the third century CE enthusiasts for this Buddha had adopted *buddhānusmṛti* practices of visualization and recitation of his name. As we have seen, *buddhānusmṛti* visualization practices were by that time well-established and led to the production particularly in certain areas of north-west Indian and Central Asian Buddhism of a whole series of ‘visualization sūtras’ enthusiastically translated into Chinese during the early fifth century, often by Central Asian translators. The final stage in the evolution of the Pure Land tradition may have been critical commentarial development. Tanaka’s model



looks broadly convincing, although the exact chronology may be questioned.<sup>104</sup> He notes, however, that although many Sanskrit texts refer to Amitābha/Amitāyus or Sukhāvātī very little by way of Pure Land commentarial writing has been discovered in Indian Buddhism: '[D]espite numerous passing references, a Pure Land commentarial tradition in India was virtually nonexistent' (Tanaka 1990: 13). This, it seems to me, is important.

The Indic textual basis for the Japanese Amitābha cult, often known simply as 'Pure Land Buddhism', lies in three sūtras – the Larger and Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtras*, and a sūtra of particularly obscure origin which has been given the Sanskrit title \**Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra* (Chinese: *Guanwuliangshoufojing*; *Kuan-wu-liang-shou-fo Ching*), but if it warrants a Sanskrit title at all should probably more accurately (and significantly) be referred to as the \**Amitāyurbuddhānusr̥ti Sūtra*. We should not assume, however, that this much later linking of these three sūtras corresponds to a link in India itself. The latter sūtra may well have never existed in India, and the exact connection between the other two is very unclear. In India they may not have been directly associated, and as we have seen there were other Mahāyāna sūtras (such as the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra*) that gave a role to Amitāyus and many more that gave one to Sukhāvātī. The association of these three sūtras in particular as the Indian textual basis for some sort of Pure Land school reached its definitive form late in the day in Japan, where they were classed together by Hōnen (1133–1212), on the basis of their use by earlier Chinese masters like Tanluan (see below). In actual fact we have very little evidence (from accounts of Chinese pilgrims, for example) that there ever was much by way of a Pure Land *school* as such, in Indian Buddhism and what sort of Amitābha *cult* there may have been if there was one we simply do not know.<sup>105</sup> The evidence from, e.g., archaeology and epigraphy is scarce, certainly for most of the earlier period. We do not know with any assurance how important these texts were in Indian Buddhism, or even in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India. They have little by way of specific surviving Indian commentaries, which suggests that they were not that significant in Indian Buddhist scholarship, although significance for scholars is not the only sort of significance. Either way, we should be cautious about projecting much later East Asian models and understandings of Buddhism back onto the Indian situation.<sup>106</sup>

The Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* is said to have been translated first into Chinese during the second century CE, although the version most frequently used today by the Pure Land traditions is that traditionally attributed to Saṅghavarman and held to have been translated in 252. This attribution now looks unlikely. Either way, however, there seems little doubt that the Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* is an old sūtra, dating in origins from before the end of the second century. Japanese scholars suggest that it may have originated among monks perhaps of the Mahīśāsaka sect in Gandhāra during the Kuṣāṇa period, possibly influenced by the Lokottaravāda tradition, and like the stylistically similar *Akṣobhyavyūha* it was perhaps originally in the Gāndhārī language or a language very similar to it.<sup>107</sup> The Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* was first translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in about 402 CE, and this version has become the accepted text of the Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūha* among East Asian Buddhists. Western scholars generally accept the Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūha* as the older

of the two sūtras, although in Japan it is often held that the Smaller *Sukhāvativyūha* is the older of the two sūtras, and it has even been suggested that the original form of this sūtra may be as old as the first century BCE. This would identify some form of Pure Land teaching with one of the earliest recognizable streams of Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>108</sup> Such, it seems to me, is quite possible. We have seen the development of the importance of *buddhānumṛti*, and we have also seen that early Mahāyāna was characterized by a number of practices and traditions which may well have been rival and mutually incompatible. That some of these were centred on particular Buddhas is an obvious inference, and therefore Buddha traditions like that of Amitābha were perhaps part of the very fabric of Mahāyāna Buddhism from its inception. Both the *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtras* also survive in Tibetan and Sanskrit, although there are a number of interesting differences between the versions, particularly in the number of vows listed in the different texts of the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*. Indeed it is not impossible that some passages were interpolated into this sūtra in China.

The *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtras* speak of the Buddha Amitābha or Amitāyus (Japanese: Amida). Generally, and for the Pure Land traditions, these are two names of the same Buddha, although in Tibet the two are treated separately. According to the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha*, he is called ‘Amitābha’ – Immeasurable Light – because his light is immeasurable, illuminating myriads of Buddha Fields in every direction with its radiance; Later Pure Land exegetes state that this Immeasurable Light of Amitābha is in fact a reference to his infinite wisdom, his all-illuminating and infinite omniscience. He is called ‘Amitāyus’ – Immeasurable Life – because his life is immeasurable, lasting for innumerable aeons. He remains for the benefit of sentient beings, constantly helping them in many different ways. Thus, corresponding to his infinite light as wisdom, Pure Land scholars refer to Amitābha’s infinite life as an expression of his boundless compassion (Eracle 1973: 33–4).

The Larger *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* tells of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara who, in the presence of a previous Buddha, conceived and set his mind on a most marvellous Buddha Field, embodying all the virtues of myriads of other Buddha Fields, and exceeding them all. He then made a series of vows, as Bodhisattvas are wont to do in such circumstances.<sup>109</sup> The number of these vows differs from version to version, with 47 in the Sanskrit, and 48 in the ‘Saṅghavarman’ translation, which forms the basis of the Pure Land practices and traditions. Common to all of these vows, however, is the condition ‘if this vow is not fulfilled, then may I not become a Fully Enlightened Buddha’. Since the Bodhisattva Dharmākara is now none other than the Buddha Amitābha, reigning in his Pure Land of Sukhāvati in the west, we know that these conditions must indeed have been fulfilled. Thus Dharmākara vows that all who are born in his land will never return to the lower realms.<sup>110</sup> They will all remember their past lives, and have other miraculous abilities (vows 5 ff.). They will be firmly established in a state set on enlightenment.<sup>111</sup> Those in his land will have, if they wish, an unlimited lifespan (vow 15). Innumerable Buddhas will glorify the name of Amitābha and praise him (vow 17). Those who sincerely trust in Amitābha and desire to be reborn in his Pure Land need ‘call on the name’ of Amitābha only 10 times and they will be reborn

there – provided they have not committed any of the five great crimes of murdering father or mother, or an Arhat, harming a Buddha, or causing schism in the *saṃgha*, or have slandered the Dharma.<sup>112</sup> At the time of death Amitābha will appear, together with a ‘multitude of sages’, before his followers, who have awakened *bodhicitta* and practised merit, wishing to be reborn in the Pure Land (vow 19).<sup>113</sup> All those who hear the name of Amitābha and sincerely wish to be reborn in the Pure Land, directing their merits towards such a birth, will indeed be reborn there (vow 20). Moreover, if Bodhisattvas from elsewhere reach Sukhāvātī, they will thus enter the state of ‘one more birth’, which is to say that they will require only one more birth before attaining Buddhahood.<sup>114</sup> This is always supposing, the *sūtra* adds, that such is what they want. If they are among those rare and exceptional ones who desire, out of compassion, to be continually reborn in order in that way to help other sentient beings, then they can continue to do so.<sup>115</sup> And of course from Sukhāvātī beings will very rapidly and easily be able to visit other Buddha Lands to make grand offerings to innumerable Buddhas (vows 23–4).

All has come about as Dharmākara wished. There is indeed a most wonderful Pure Land, and both versions of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* give extensive details of the appearance of Sukhāvātī, doubtless as a prescriptive basis for the visualization of the Buddha Amitābha within his Pure Land.<sup>116</sup> If someone wishes in order to attain enlightenment to be reborn in that Pure Land, he or she should produce *bodhicitta*, hear the name of Amitābha, meditate on him and think of him, pray to be reborn in Sukhāvātī and attain merit as a basis for such a birth. Even those who are not very keen on Amitābha will be led to Sukhāvātī at death – not by Amitābha personally but by a magically-produced Buddha. Within such a framework rebirth in Sukhāvātī and eventual enlightenment is not difficult. It is much easier than trying to attain enlightenment under adverse conditions in this decadent world.<sup>117</sup> At death generally Amitābha will himself conduct someone to his Pure Land, and this descent of Amitābha is the subject of innumerable Japanese paintings. In one example Amitābha, together with his heavenly host, drums and music, is seen descending rapidly across the mountain tops. Trees burst into spring blossom at his approach. He crosses the canvas diagonally towards the monk who awaits the coming of the Lord, peacefully invoking Amitābha’s holy name from his hermitage.<sup>118</sup> In the Pure Land a being is reborn non-sexually. The blessed appear, seated on lotus blossoms, in the presence of Amitābha. A Central Asian wall painting from eighth-century Qočo depicts the reborn as swarms of naked children seated on lotuses or playing in the beautiful garden of Sukhāvātī. One lotus is still closed, however, in a tight bud with the naked child still within (Gaulier *et al.* 1976: plate 49). According to the Larger *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* those who still harbour some doubt concerning Amitābha and his Pure Land are reborn within closed lotuses, where they dwell comfortably for 500 years, seeing the inside of the lotus as a palace with gardens. Nevertheless, being apart from the Buddha and his doctrine, relatively this is not a terribly good or happy rebirth. Eventually overcoming these doubts, such beings are grateful to emerge from this purifying purgatory, wherein they have been deprived of the celestial vision.

The principal concern of the Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* is to describe the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī (a description which does not tally completely with that of the larger sūtra) and give further elucidation of the means to attain such a favourable rebirth. In that Pure Land all is contingent upon the need for spiritual growth. It is clearly not intended merely as a sensual paradise, a place of unrestricted pleasure, alongside the various heavenly realms accepted as occupied by the gods and generally viewed with a certain disdain in the Buddhist traditions. The birds of Sukhāvātī, the result of Amitābha's great power, all proclaim the Dharma, as do the trees when gently stirred in the soft breeze. The particular instrument of rebirth in Sukhāvātī is said by this sūtra to be holding in mind the name of Amitāyus with undistracted thought for a day, or up to seven days, in other words a form of *buddhānusmṛti*. Thereupon Amitāyus will appear at the time of death, and the practitioner will attain to Sukhāvātī. One is reminded here of the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra*, although the recollection of the Buddha in the *Sukhāvātī Sūtra* is much less elaborate, and the *pratyutpanna samādhi* is said to lead in this very life to a vision of Amitāyus. It is possible that there was yet another controversy in India or Central Asia in classical times between advocates of a vision of Amitābha in this life, and those who sought the vision at the time of death.<sup>119</sup>

The *\*Amitāyurbuddhānusmṛti Sūtra* (if it is correct to give it a Sanskrit title) is a rather different type of sūtra. It was supposedly translated into Chinese by Kālayāśas in the earlier part of the fifth century. It is one of a series of sūtras concerned with the visualization of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas which were translated into Chinese at about the same time, and were probably composed during the preceding century (Pas 1977: 200 ff.). Scholars are now inclined to see the *\*Amitāyurbuddhānusmṛti Sūtra* as a text from either Central Asia or from China itself. On the other hand Julian Pas has pointed out that almost all the translators of these visualization sūtras have some connection with the area around Kashmir, and it is possible that the sūtras themselves were composed in that area, or nearby regions of Central Asia. His own view is that the *\*Amitāyurbuddhānusmṛti Sūtra* as it stands contains a series of interpolations, some quite lengthy and some of which are undoubtedly Chinese. Among these interpolations are sections important to subsequent Pure Land thought in East Asia.<sup>120</sup>

As a text the *\*Amitāyurbuddhānusmṛti Sūtra* concentrates less on rebirth in the Pure Land than on *buddhānusmṛti* practices for seeing Amitābha in this present life. It purports to be a teaching given by Śākyamuni Buddha to queen Vaidehī who had been imprisoned by her vicious son Ajātaśatru. The dramatic situation arises out of the sufferings of queen Vaidehī (Inagaki 1995: 95):

[R]eveil to me a land of no sorrow and no affliction where I can be reborn. I do not wish to live in this defiled and evil world . . . where there are hells, realms of hungry spirits, animals and many vile beings. I wish that in the future I shall not hear evil words or see wicked people.

The Buddha, full of compassion, explained that Amitābha is not very far away, and taught her a series of 13 visualization meditations: (i) on the setting sun in the west; (ii) on pure clear water, then visualized as ice, then as beryl, and then gradually visualized as the Pure

Land itself; (iii) this visualization of the ground is fixed in the mind unwaveringly; and then are added (iv) the trees; (v) the ponds; (vi) the jewelled pavilions containing gods playing heavenly music that teaches the Dharma; (vii) the lotus throne of Amitāyus; (viii) with Amitāyus upon it, and to the left of the Buddha is Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, while to the right is Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta; (ix) then one contemplates the form of Amitāyus; (x) then the form of Avalokiteśvara; (xi) and then the form of Mahāsthāmaprāpta; (xii) one prays for rebirth in Sukhāvātī, and visualizes completely, in detail with a fixed mind, oneself born on a lotus in the Pure Land; and finally (xiii) one visualizes Amitāyus and the two Bodhisattvas there in front.

These 13 meditations clearly require some time and ability. They are also placed by the sūtra on a firm moral foundation. The text now continues with a further three meditations, each of which refers to three types of birth in the Pure Land, graded according to superiority. There are thus nine grades of rebirth in Sukhāvātī.<sup>121</sup> Even the lowest person can attain rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land. Even the most immoral people who have committed the five worst deeds may just before death meet a good teacher, who will tell of the Buddha and his Dharma. Even if the miscreant cannot think of Amitāyus he (or she) may call on his name 10 times. This will eradicate immense misdeeds, and he will be reborn inside a lotus bud in Sukhāvātī, staying there for 12 aeons. The lotus will then open. Our reformed miscreant will behold Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta who will preach to them the Doctrine. He will consequently develop *bodhicitta*. Only hearing the names of Amitāyus and his two Bodhisattvas eradicates many misdeeds, let alone remembering and reciting their names (Inagaki 1995: 116–17).

On this sūtra in particular, which teaches help for even the most vicious sinners who are incapable of the complex visualization practices even if they wished to do them, rest the hopes of the Pure Land tradition.<sup>122</sup> If the hopes of those who feel themselves to be helpless sinners, or who cannot practise the more complex teachings, rest on a Chinese interpolation, well then, the interpolation was no doubt inspired by the compassion of the Buddha who neglects no one, no matter how vicious, inferior, or obscure.

#### *Amitābha's Pure Land in China*

It is widely felt in China that the founder of the Chinese Pure Land movement was Huiyuan. In Japan, however, Huiyuan is sometimes excluded from the list of Pure Land patriarchs. This is because from the perspective of the dominant Japanese Pure Land tradition of Shinran (q.v.) Huiyuan's practice was not a mass-movement aimed at the salvation of the common people, but rather a restricted and elitist activity. In addition it was based not on the three Amitābha sūtras that the Japanese Pure Land tradition came to see as central to their faith, but on the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra*. Huiyuan sought to attain Sukhāvātī through his own power, not solely through the compassion of Amitābha and his vows to save those who called upon him. Thus, it was argued, the honour of being the first Chinese patriarch falls to Tanluan.