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Summary

This article provides information about Amita Buddha and some of the principle Ariya Bodhisattva deities referred to and used in Mahayana Buddhist practice. Amita Buddha's Western Pureland is discussed, and how in various countries, particularly China and other parts of Asia, view the function of the Bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara.

BODHISATTVA ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

KSITIGARBHA (TI-TSANG in Chinese)

The Bodhisattva of the Great Vow.

Ti-tsang can be called "Instructor of the Region of Darkness.

Incalculable ages ago, Ti-tsang was a young Brahman who was converted by the Buddha of that time. He took a Vow for himself to be a Buddha one day, but not before he had saved all beings and had led them to the happy lands.

In one of his existence's, he was a girl whose mother delighted in killing human beings to eat them. When her mother died she prayed for her salvation that she fell into a trance. A demon disclosed that her prayers had released her mother from the deepest hell.

Ti-tsang has many different forms and by supernatural powers can be present in many different places at the same time.

He generally holds in his right hand the Khakkara, a metal rod having little tingling rings which the Buddha ordered his monks to carry and shake at house doors to announce their presence when they go begging for their food. It serves 'Ti-tsang to open the doors of the other world.

In his left hand he holds the pearl of price which lights up the darkness of hell and stops pain of the damned. The Chinese like to regard him as continually going to and fro throughout the underworlds. Each time, he visits, he delivers the damned so that they can be born again. The ministers of the Underworld are under his orders and must obey him.

His Birthday is the last day of the seventh month on the Chinese calendar (about 30th July).

Forms of KUAN- YIN.

Just as there are many forms of Ti-tsang, there are 32 forms of Avalokitesvara. Each is specially concerned with loving beings engaged in ways of birth and death. These forms are not distinct or separate beings. They are shapes which arise by Kuan-yin

employing supernatural powers for giving great compassion for all beings. He takes many other shapes. The most popular Buddhist of the 32 forms is called Kuan-Yin. Bringing children (SUNG-TSI- KUAN-YIN) or The Lady who Brings Children (SUNG-TSI NIANG-NIANG).

The Chinese name of the mild aspect of Tara (who the Tibetans call the White Tara) has the Sanskrit name of PANDARAVISINI (Meaning clad in white). The Chinese had translated this exactly. Images of her were represented as clad in a white dress and holding a white lotus flower to symbolise pureness of the heart.

Kuan-Yin Clad in White was introduced in the middle of the 8th century and became very popular, to become the Kuan-Yin Who Brings Children. The image is rarely seen in Temples but representations of it are very popular.

It may be said that the form taken by the Bodhisattva depends on the nature of the problem to be solved and the nature of the person seeking the help of the Bodhisattva.

Kuan-yin is also known as Kuan-shin-yin. Kuan-yin or Kuan-shin-yin is a Chinese translation of that of Avalokitesvara. Avalokitesvara is one of the two assistants of the Buddha Amitabha - the Sovereign of the Pure Land in the West. The other assistant, Mahasthamaprepta (Ta-she-che in Chinese) plays no part in the popular religion.

Avalokitesvara is the Sanskrit name of the Bodhisattva who is the personification of Compassion (Karuna in Sanskrit). His main activity is to survey the world in order to find out beings who need his help.

It is said none of the Buddhas possess Clairvoyance equal to his. He enters into various hells and relieves the sufferers of their suffering. It is thought Kuan-Yin was not recognised in female form until the 12th Century, although there are Chinese paintings belonging to the 7th and 8th Centuries which are markedly feminine. The forms are many.

Avaloketesvara's translated name varies, although the Sanskrit words are clear when taken separately. Some of the translations are: "Lord of what we see", "Lord of the view" "Lord who sees" "Lord who is seen or manifested or is everywhere visible", "Lord of the Compassionate glances", The Lord who is seen from on high".

However, none of these are accepted as final. Therefore each person has to consider the possible meaning for himself or herself.

THE VARIOUS TITLES OF AMITA

In full, the original Sanskrit name is assumed to have been AMITAYUS - BUDDHA. "Buddha of the Infinite Life". The Tibetan word equivalent has the meaning "Immeasurable Life". The name "Wu-Liang-chuang-fu" for Amita Buddha appears in the titles of various Chinese translations around the century. Other Chinese titles translate as "Amita Buddha of Immeasurable Purity", and the "Immeasurably Enlightened One" and the "Immeasurably Honoured One".

As Amita Buddha's light outshines that of other Buddhas, many titles are given which have to do with light. For this reason the "Buddha of Infinite Life" is called the "Buddha

of Infinite Light", or the "Buddha of Boundless Light", "the Buddha of Incomparable Light", the "Buddha of Pure Light", the "Buddha of Joyful Light", the "Buddha of Wisdom's Light" the "Buddha of Unceasing Light", the "Buddha of Unthinkable Light", the "Buddha of Inexpressible Light", the "Buddha of Light that Outshines the Sun and the Moon".

The translation by Kumarajive of the smaller Sukhavativyuna Sutra simply uses A-mi-t'o as the transcription of the Sanskrit terms for infinite life and infinite light.

There are so many titles given to Amita Buddha that they probably run into hundreds.

Western scholars have proposed theories that the cult of Amita Buddhism originated outside India, perhaps in Persia.

Besides Amita, numerous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are conceived in Mahayana Buddhism. There are theories which consider that Amita Buddha is the Dhamma itself recollected by Buddha Sakyamuni in his perfect enlightenment.

The particular vows of Amita are divisible into three groups. Vows about Buddha Virtues, about the Pure Land and about Sentient Beings. The central idea of all the particular vows, 48 in number in their most developed form, is revealed in the Gatha. Amita is described as a Buddha of Bliss - (Sambhogakaya) who took the original vows in his career as a Bodhisattva named Dharmasara. He performed for enormous times various practices, and obtained the reward of Buddhahood some 10 kalpas ago. A kalpa is about 10 to the power of 27 years. His life is also immeasurable and immense. Some scholars contend that it is not that Amita's life is actually immeasurable, but it is not measured by any ordinary timescale'.

AMIDA (AMITIBA or AMITABHA or AMITAYUS)

Amida is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese transcript O-mi-t'o of the Sanskrit Amitabha. O-mi-T'o-fo is Chinese for Amida Buddha.

The Paradise to which the souls delivered by Ti-tsang go is the World of Delights of the Western region, Si-fang ki-lo shi-kiai (in Sanskrit: Sukhavari, the happy) or the Pure Earth, Ts'ing-tsing t'u, where the Buddha Amitabha reigns.

The worship of Amida (Sanskrit: Amitabha/Amitayus) is difficult to trace but before the 1st century A.D. books appeared dealing with the Western Paradise. In the oldest Buddhist text of India, Amitabha is unknown and when he does appear, his importance is not stressed. Knowledge of Amitabha was introduced in China at an early date. He dwelt in a Western Paradise and he was identified with long life. Hui-yian is credited with the real founding of the Pure Land Sect, as it is called. About the 4th Century a definite school is said to have been organised by Hui-yian.

AMIDA' S WESTERN PARADISE - THE PURE LAND.

There were in the Pure Land, Amida' s Western Paradise, beings who all enjoyed wonderful powers of body and mind. Sometimes the Pure Land is considered as a place where beings dwell for all eternity, although this is a later popular concept. In the

Sutra, (the Buddhist texts) it is a place of peaceful and blissful holiday on the way towards Nirvana or even Buddhahood.

There are three main Sutras dealing with the Western Paradise. Sutras are teachings of the Buddha written down after his death.

One of these Sutras is called the Smaller Sukhavati-Vyuha and tells of a world called Sukhavati (meaning the happy country) where lives Amitayus, a Tathagata (a Sanskrit word meaning a fully enlightened being).

The reason it is called the happy country is that there is neither bodily nor mental pain for living beings. It is adorned with terraces, gems, lotus-lakes and there are heavenly musical instruments playing. It rains flower petals three times a day.

Those born in the Buddha country of the Tathagata Amitayus are purified Bodhisattvas who are bound by one birth only. To enter this country, it is necessary for a person to hear the name of Amitayus, and having heard it, keep it in mind with thoughts undisturbed for seven nights. If this is done, the person shall depart this life with a tranquil mind and be reborn in the world Sukhavati. By mental prayer for the Buddha country, it can be entered after death. The same Sutra mentions there are other Buddha countries in the East, South, North, in the Nadir and in the zenith.

The Sutra explains the reason for the name in Sanskrit, Amitayus, is actually two words in one. One word refer to the length of life (Ayus) while the first word refers to immeasurable (Amita). The word Amitayus is therefore connected with the idea of very long life. His other name, Amitabha, is explained by the word splendour (Abha) and is therefore connected with the idea of very great brightness.

THE INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM INTO CHINA.

The following information is from a Chinese text "The History of Chinese Buddhism Volume 1 by Chiang We Chio". This text has not been translated into English but is considered to be the best history of Chinese Buddhism according to the Chinese Buddhist nun, Venerable Shig Hui Wan, who is with the China Academy Institute for the Study of Buddhist Culture, Taiwan. The psychic manifestations written of in this text have similar phenomena in all religions.

In the Han Dynasty, during the third year of the reign of the emperor Ming Di, he dreamed that a golden sixteen-foot-tall man with a bright halo around his head flew past the Imperial Palace. The emperor asked the meaning of this dream of his staff. One member of his staff, Fu Ye, advised him that the man had come from India. As a result, the emperor sent a mission of eighteen persons headed by Lt. General Chai, Dr. Kin and Dr. Wong to India. They returned to China with the Buddhist texts that they were given there, carried on a white horse. Two Buddhist monks, Saman Chei Yem Ton and Tsu Fa Lan returned with the mission. A Buddhist temple was built, originally called the Tzu Ti Temple which later became known as "The White Horse Temple". An order of Monks known as the "High Quality" Order was begun. In later times a book on this Order was written. The name of this book was "History of the High-Quality Monks".

Eighteen Tao priests wrote to the emperor seeking permission to have a discussion

debate with the Buddhist Monks. The emperor agreed and it was arranged that the debate should take place in the White Horse Temple. Three pavilions to house the six hundred and ninety -six Taoist priests were constructed. One pavilion built on the south side of the White Horse Temple contained charms to dispel evil. A second pavilion housed the Taoist books of Whong Liou. The third contained food and utensils. Before the debate and after much prayer the Taoist priests tested the outcome of the debate by placing bones in a fire. The oracle bones, which the Chinese call Chia Ku, were mostly made from plastron or the scapulae of cattle. Their use goes back as far as the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th Century B.C.) roughly 100,000 genuine oracle bones have been excavated and analysed. The Taoist priests reasoned that if the bones stood up in the fire the books (meaning the Taoist Doctrine) would be safe. The bones did not stand up in the fire. The Buddhist monks were judged to have won the debate after they had exhausted all the arguments presented by the Taoists. The sky became a brilliant colour and one of the Buddhist monks levitated into the sky. From that time many persons followed the Buddhist teachings, including about two hundred and thirty person from the Imperial Court. Ten temples were built, seven for monks and three for nuns. Buddhism was now established in China.