



*Buddha Preaching.* China, painting from Dunhuang Cave, early 8th c. C.E., ink and colors on silk.

# BUDDHISM IN CHINA

## *Selections from Three Mahāyāna Sūtras*

### **I. Tiantai Buddhism**

A selection from  
*The Lotus Sūtra*  
(*Saddharma puṇḍarīka-Sūtra*)  
(*Sūtra on the Lotus of the True Dharma*)

[Certainly one of the most important and revered scriptures in all of East Asia, the Lotus Sūtra is most famous for its doctrine of *ekayāna*, the “One Vehicle,” which became the distinctive teaching of the Tiantai School of Buddhism as it developed in China (Tendai in Japan). Bewildered by the wide diversity of Indian Buddhist scriptures, and attempting to reconcile the seeming contradictions in the Buddha’s Dharma that arose as a result of the three vehicles of Indian Buddhism, the *Hīnayāna*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna*, the teachers of the Tiantai emphasized that there is really only one vehicle as taught in the Lotus Sūtra. While on the lower levels of knowledge and truth there are different vehicles and different paths, on the highest third level of knowledge and truth there is only one path, one vehicle. All the various teachings found

*in the different scriptures are merely strategies, or ‘expedient means’ (upāya), by which the Buddha adapted his teachings to suit the needs of particular individuals in their own particular situation. This notion of ‘skill-in-means’ emphasized in the Lotus Sūtra is one of the key concepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism.*

*In Chapter Five the famous parable of the medicinal herbs is used to explain the notion of ‘expedient means’ (upāya). Just as there are many different medicinal herbs from a multitude of different plants to treat all the various sicknesses of human beings, the Buddha’s teachings, or Dharma, takes many forms to treat each individual according to his or her needs.]*

#### *The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs*

At that time the World-Honored One said to Mahakashyapa and the other major disciples: "Excellent, excellent, Kashyapa. You have given an excellent description of the true blessings of the Thus Come One. It is just as you have said. The Thus Come One indeed has immeasurable, boundless, asamkhyas of blessings,

and though you and the others were to spend immeasurable millions of kalpas in the effort, you could never finish describing them.

"Kashyapa, you should understand this. The Thus Come One is king of the doctrines. In what he preaches, there is nothing that is vain. With regard to all the various doctrines, he employs wisdom as an expedient means (upāya) in expounding them. Therefore the doctrines that he expounds all extends to the point where there is comprehensive wisdom. The Thus Come One observes and understands the end to which all doctrines tend. And he also understands the workings of the deepest mind of all living beings, penetrating them completely and without hindrance. And with regard to the doctrines he is thoroughly enlightened, and he reveals to living beings the totality of wisdom.

"Kashyapa, it is like the plants and trees, thickets and groves, and the medicinal herbs, widely ranging in variety, each with its own name and hue, that grow in the hills and streams, the valleys and different soils of the thousand-millionfold world. Dense clouds spread over them, covering the entire thousand-millionfold world and in one moment saturating it all. The moisture penetrates to all the plants, trees, thickets and groves, and medicinal herbs equally, to their big roots, big stems, big limbs and big leaves. Each of the trees, big and small, depending upon whether it is superior, middling or inferior in nature, receives its allotment. The rain falling from one blanket of clouds accords with each particular species and nature, causing it to sprout and mature, to blossom and bear fruit. Though all these plants and trees grow in the same earth and moistened by the same rain, each has its differences and particulars.

"Kashyapa, you should understand that the Thus Come One is like this. He appears in the world like a great cloud rising up. With a loud voice he penetrates to all the heavenly and human beings and the asuras of the entire world, like a great cloud spreading over the thousand-millionfold lands. And in the midst of the great assembly, he addresses these words, saying: "I am the Thus Come One, worthy of offerings, of right and universal knowledge, perfect clarity and conduct, well gone, understanding the world, unexcelled worthy, trainer of people, teacher of heavenly and human beings, Buddha, World-Honored One. Those who have not yet crossed over I will cause to cross over, those not yet freed I will free, those not yet at rest I will put to rest, those not yet in nirvana I will cause to attain

nirvana. Of this existence and future existences I understand the true circumstances. I am one who knows all things, sees all things, understands the way, opens up the way, preaches the way. You heavenly and human beings, asuras and others, you must all come here so that I may let you hear the Dharma!"

"At that time living beings of countless thousands, ten thousands, millions of species come to the place where the Buddha is, to listen to the Dharma. The Thus Come One then observes whether they are diligent in their efforts or lazy. And in accordance with each is capable of hearing, he preaches the Law for them in an immeasurable variety of ways so that all of them are delighted and are able to gain excellent benefits therefrom.

"Once these living beings have heard the Law, they will enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences, when they will receive joy through the way and again be able to hear the Law. And having heard the Law, they will escape from obstacles and hindrances, and with regard to the various doctrines will be able to exercise their powers to the fullest, so that gradually they can enter into the way. It is like the rain falling from that great cloud upon all the plants and trees, thickets and groves, and medicinal herbs. Each, depending upon its species and nature, receives its full share of moistening and is enabled to sprout and grow.

"The Law preached by the Thus Come One is of one form, one flavor, namely, the form of emancipation, the form of separation, the form of extinction, which in the end comes down to a wisdom embracing all species. When the living beings hear the law of the Thus Come One, though they may embrace, read and recite it, and practice it as it dictates, they themselves do not realize or understand the blessings they are gaining thereby. Why is this? Because only the Thus Come One understands the species, the form, the substance, the nature of these living beings, he knows what things they dwell on, what things they ponder, that things they practice. He knows what Law they dwell on, what Law they ponder, what Law they practice, through what Law they attain what Law.

"Living beings exist in a variety of environments, but only the Thus Come One sees the true circumstances and fully understands them without hindrance. It is like those plants and trees, thickets and groves, and medicinal herbs which do not themselves know whether they are superior, middling or inferior in

nature. But the Thus Come One knows that this is the Law of one form, one flavor, namely, the form of emancipation, the form of separation, the form of extinction, the form of ultimate nirvana, of constant tranquility and emptiness. The Buddha understands all this. But because he can see the desires that are in the minds of living beings, he guides and protects them, and for this reason does not immediately preach to them the wisdom that embraces all species.

Burton Watson, trans. *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

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## II. Hua-Yen Buddhism

*A selection from the  
The Flower Garland Sutra  
(Avatamsaka Sūtra)*

[*The Flower Garland Sutra is most known for the notion of the mutual interrelationship of all things which is the distinctive teaching of the Hua-yen school of Chinese Buddhism. The teaching is expressed through the metaphor of jeweled net of Indra: "Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each 'eye' of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring."*<sup>1</sup> *The sutra opens with a description of the Buddha's site of enlightenment as consisting of a net of jewels, exquisitely scented by garlands of flowers.*]

<sup>1</sup> Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p.2.

Book 1

*The Wonderful Adornments of the Leaders of the Worlds*

THUS HAVE I HEARD. At one time the Buddha was in the land of Magadha, in a state of purity, at the site of enlightenment, having just realized true awareness. The ground was solid and firm, made of diamond, adorned with exquisite jewel discs and myriad precious flowers, with pure dear crystals. The ocean of characteristics of the various colors appeared over an infinite extent; There were banners of precious stones, constantly emitting shining light and producing beautiful sounds. Nets of myriad gems and garlands of exquisitely scented flowers hung all around. The finest jewels appeared spontaneously, raining inexhaustible quantities of gems and beautiful flowers all over the earth. There were rows of jewel trees, their branches and foliage lustrous and luxuriant. By the Buddha's spiritual power, he caused all the adornments of this enlightenment site to be reflected therein.

The tree of enlightenment was tall and outstanding. Its trunk was diamond, its main boughs were lapis lazuli, its branches and twigs were of various precious elements. The leaves, spreading in all directions, provided shade, like clouds. The precious blossoms were of various colors, the branching twigs spread out their shadows. Also the fruits were jewels containing a blazing radiance. They were together with the flowers in great arrays. The entire circumference of the tree emanated light; within the light there rained precious stones, and within each gem were enlightening beings, in great hosts like clouds, simultaneously appearing.

Also, by virtue of the awesome spiritual power of the Buddha, the tree of enlightenment constantly gave forth sublime sounds speaking various truths without end.

The palace chamber in which the Buddha was situated was spacious and beautifully adorned. It extended throughout the ten directions. It was made of jewels of various colors and was decorated with all kinds of precious flowers. The various adornments emanated lights like clouds; the masses of their reflections from within the palace formed banners.

A boundless host of enlightening beings (*bodhisattvas*), the congregation at the site of enlightenment, were all gathered there: by means of the ability to manifest the lights and inconceivable sounds of the Buddhas, they fashioned nets of the finest jewels, from which came forth all the realms of action of the

spiritual powers of the Buddhas, and in which were reflected images of the abodes of all beings.

Also, by virtue of the aid of the spiritual power of the Buddha, they embraced the entire cosmos in a single thought.

Their lion seats were high, wide, and beautiful. The bases were made of jewels, their nets of lotus blossoms, their tableaux of pure, exquisite gemstones. They were adorned with various flowers of all colors. Their roofs, chambers, steps, and doors were adorned by the images of all things. The branches and fruits of jewel trees surrounded them, arrayed at intervals.

Clouds of radiance of jewels reflected each other: the Buddhas of the ten directions conjured regal pearls, and the exquisite jewels in the topknots of all the enlightening beings all emanated light, which came and illuminated them.

Furthermore, sustained by the spiritual power of all Buddhas, they expounded the vast perspective of the Enlightened Ones, their subtle tones extending afar, there being no place they did not reach.

At that time, the Buddha, the World Honored One, in this setting, attained to supreme, correct awareness of all things. His knowledge entered into all times with complete equanimity; his body filled all worlds; his voice universally accorded with all lands in the ten directions. Like space, which contains all forms, he made no discrimination among all objects. And, as space extends everywhere, he entered all lands with equanimity. His body forever sat omnipresent in all sites of enlightenment. Among the host of enlightening beings, his awesome light shone clearly, like the sun emerging, illumining the world. The ocean of myriad virtues which he practiced in all times was thoroughly pure, and he constantly demonstrated the production of all the buddha-lands, their boundless forms and spheres of light extending throughout the entire cosmos, equally and impartially.

He expounded all truths, like spreading great clouds. Each of his hairtips was able to contain all worlds without interference, in each manifesting immeasurable spiritual powers, teaching and civilizing all sentient beings. His body extended throughout the ten directions, yet without coming or going. His knowledge entered into all forms and realized the emptiness of things. All the miraculous displays of the Buddhas of past, present, and future, were all seen in his light, and all the adornments of inconceivable eons were revealed. . . .

Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 1984).

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### III. Pure Land Buddhism

*The Land of Bliss Sutra*

(*The Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*)

The Shorter Discourse

otherwise known as

*The Sutra of Amita Buddha*

A translation of Kumarajiva's Chinese Version  
(the *Amito-jing*)

[*The two Land of Bliss Sutras, known to Western students of Buddhism as the "Smaller" and "Larger" Sukhāvativyūha Sūtras, are foundational texts for Pure Land Buddhism. The two texts depict an ideal world, a "Land of Bliss" that lies to the west of our own, imperfect world. This distant world is the wondrous paradise of the Buddha Amitabha (Amitābha), the Buddha of Infinite Light. The two texts explain the conditions that lead to rebirth in that land and the manner in which human beings are reborn there. The following selection is a translation of Kumarajiva's (344-413) Chinese translation of the original Sanskrit shorter discourse.*]

#### Preamble: The Setting and the Audience

§1. This I have heard. At one time, the Buddha was staying in the royal capital city of Shravasti, in Prince Jeta's grove. He was staying in the cloistered park that the generous Anathapindada gave to the Buddhist Order in Prince Jeta's grove.

§2. At that time the Buddha was surrounded by a large assembly of monks—one thousand two hundred fifty of them. These monks were all great arhats, highly respected among the people for their holiness.

§3. Among them were the elders Shariputra and Maha-Maudgalyayana, and Maha-Kashyapa, Maha-Katyayana, Maha-Kaushthila, Revata, Chula-Panthaka,

Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola Bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Maha-Kapphina, Vakkula, Anuruddha—and other great disciples like these.

§4. And he was also accompanied by an assembly of bodhisattvas mahasattvas; present were the bodhisattva Manjushri, the Prince of Dharma, as well as the future Buddha, the bodhisattva Maitreya, also known as Bodhisattva Ajita. The bodhisattva Gandhastin, and the bodhisattva Nityodyukta were also there, with other great bodhisattvas like these.

§5. And the Buddha was likewise accompanied by a large crowd of countless gods, Shakra, known as Indra, the King of the gods, and many others.

### The Main Discourse

#### The Land of Supreme Bliss

§6. Then, the Buddha spoke to the Venerable Shariputra: “West of here, a hundred billion buddha-fields away, there is a world system called ‘Supreme Bliss.’ In that field there is a buddha named ‘Amita.’ At this very moment he dwells in that faraway land, preaching the Dharma.

§7. “Shariputra, why is that field called ‘Supreme Bliss’? Because the living beings in that realm are free from all forms of suffering and they only experience all forms of happiness. Therefore, it is called ‘Supreme Bliss.’

§8. “Furthermore, Shariputra, all around this Land of Supreme Bliss, there are seven tiers of railings, seven rows of netting, and seven rows of trees. They are all made of the four precious substances. All around, they encircle the perimeter of this land. Therefore, that land is called ‘Supreme Bliss.’

§9. “Furthermore, Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss there are bathing pools made of the seven precious substances. They are filled with the best water, endowed with eight good qualities: their water is always limpid, cool, sweet-tasting, light, soft, placid, healthy, and thirst-quenching. The bottom of these pools is completely covered with golden sand. In each of their four sides, they have steps made of gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, and crystal.

“Above, there are towered pavilions, adorned with gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, crystal, coral, red pearls, and

agate. On the surface of the pools, there are lotus blossoms as large as cart wheels. These are blue colored, with a blue sheen; yellow colored, with a yellow sheen; red colored, with a red sheen; white colored, with a white sheen; they are delicate and fragrant.

“Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§10. “Furthermore, Shariputra, in this buddha-field celestial music is constantly heard. And the ground is made of gold. Four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night, mandara flowers rain down from heaven. Early every morning, each living being in this land picks some of those exquisite flowers, places them in the hem of his robe, and travels to worship with these flowers a hundred billion buddhas in other worlds in the other regions of the universe.

Immediately thereafter, each of these persons returns, in time for his forenoon meal, to this, his own world, and takes his meal and afternoon stroll.

“Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§11. “Moreover, Shariputra, in that land you will always see many flocks of rare and exquisite birds of many colors—white egrets, peacocks, parrots, shari and kalavinka birds, and those birds called ‘Living-Together.’ Doves of these birds gather to sing with soothing, exquisite voices four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night. Their voices proclaim the tenets of the Buddha’s teaching—for instance, they sing of the five spiritual faculties, of the five spiritual powers, of the seven aspects of awakening, of the Eightfold Path that is followed by those of spiritual nobility, and of many other aspects of the Buddha’s Dharma. When the living beings in that buddha-field hear such song, they all immediately enjoy thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly.

§12. “Shariputra, you should not say that these birds are actually born here as a result of their past evil deeds. Why not? Because the three undesirable courses of rebirth are not found in this buddha-field. Moreover, Shariputra, in this buddha-land even the names of the three undesirable paths of rebirth are not to be found. How then could they exist in fact? The birds that sing in

this buddhafield have all been created by the Buddha Amita himself, by means of his miraculous power, because he wanted to have them broadcast the sound of the Dharma.

§13. “Shariputra, in that buddha-land, a subtle breeze blows, swaying the rows of jeweled trees and the jeweled nets, so that they emit an exquisite sound, like that of hundreds of thousands of diverse kinds of musical instruments playing together at the same time. All those who hear this sound enjoy spontaneously and immediately thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly, bringing to mind the Buddha, bringing to mind his Dharma, bringing to mind his Order.

“Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

#### **The Buddha Presiding Over the Land of Supreme Bliss**

§14. “What do you think, Shariputra? Why is this Buddha called ‘Amita’—‘measureless’? Shariputra, this Buddha’s beaming light is measureless. It shines without obstruction into buddha-fields in the ten directions. Therefore, he is called ‘Amita.’

§15. “Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha’s life-span, and the life-span of the human beings in his buddha-field as well, has a duration of measureless, boundless, countless, cosmic ages. For this reason too he is called ‘measureless,’ Amita.’

“Shariputra, ten cosmic ages have now passed since the Buddha Amita attained buddhahood.

#### **The Inhabitants of the Land of Supreme Bliss**

§16. “Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha has measureless, inestimable numbers of disciples that are auditors, all of them arhats. Their number cannot be grasped. The same is true also of the community of bodhisattvas in that land.

“Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§17. “Furthermore, Shariputra, all living beings born in the Land of Supreme Bliss will progress irreversibly in the path. Many among them are only one more birth away from the full awakening of a buddha. Their numbers are vast. Their numbers cannot be grasped.

One can only speak of their spiritual careers in terms of measureless, boundless, incalculable, cosmic ages.

#### **Exhortation**

§18. “Shariputra, living beings who hear this should generate an earnest desire, wishing to be reborn in that land. Why? Because in that land one will be able to meet in one place persons of such high virtue as the many living beings I have described here. Shariputra, one cannot be reborn in that buddha-field, if one depends on the merit of only a few roots of goodness.

§19. “Shariputra, if good men or good women hear this explanation of the qualities of the Buddha Amita, and embrace his name, and keep it in mind single-mindedly and without distraction, be it for one day, or for two, for three, for four, for five, for six, or for seven days, then, when their lives come to an end, the Buddha Amita, together with his holy entourage, will appear before them. At the time of their death, their minds free of any distorted views, they will be able to be reborn forthwith in Amita Buddha’s Land of Supreme Bliss.

Luis O Gómez, trans. *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light: Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the Sukhāvataīvyūha sūtras* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996).