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Evidence for Mahāyāna Buddhism and Sukhāvatī cult in India in the middle period

Early fifth to late sixth century
Nepalese inscriptions

Diwakar Acharya

During the last three decades, the perception of Indian Buddhism in the middle period has drastically changed. A few scholars have significantly contributed to bring about this change, and Gregory SCHOPEN is the foremost of them. He has surveyed and analysed large bodies of textual and epigraphical data. He has singled out inscriptions significant for the history of Indian Buddhism in India in the period from the beginning of the Common Era to the fifth/sixth century, reflected upon them carefully, and matched the inscriptive evidence with textual evidence. In this way, he has convincingly demonstrated that “it is virtually impossible to characterise Indian Buddhism in the middle period … as in any meaningful sense Mahāyāna” (p. 12). As he remarks, “the Mahāyāna in India, 

* An abridged version of this paper was presented as a special lecture under the title “Mahāyāna Buddhism and Sukhāvatī Cult in Ancient Nepal” at the 14th biennial conference of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies held at Ryokoku University, Kyoto, in June 2009. I am grateful to Paul HARRISON, Shoryu KATSURA, Werner KNOBL, Jan NATTIER, Vincent TOURNIER, and Yuko YOKOCHI for their comments and valuable suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. I would like to thank Arlo GRIFFITHS for improving my English and making valuable remarks on the final draft.

2 If not specified otherwise, all references to Schopen are from his 2005 collection Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India.
however, appears to have continued very much on the margins” (p. 11), and “however mainstream the early Mahāyāna was in China, it was in India constituted of a number of differentially marginalized minority groups” (p. 17). This clearly suggests that we need to pay proper attention to the Buddhist communities living in the marginal areas, including Nepal, while dealing with the history of Indian Buddhism of this period. However, Licchavi inscriptions from Nepal, many of them Buddhist, have not been carefully studied, though they have been published several times. SCHOPEN himself refers to two undated Nepalese inscriptions from the seventh century but misses other important ones. So, in this article, I will present some inscriptions from the early fifth to the late sixth century that have not been rightly read and interpreted until now, and make a few observations here and there, attempting to analyse the data in the light of textual evidence.

The earliest inscription from India which clearly refers to Amitābha Buddha is the Govindnagar inscription from the time of Huvīṣka, dated 26 of the Kaniska era (equivalent to 104 or 153 CE), inscribed on the pedestal of an image of Buddha Amitābha. This

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2 After the publication of Dhanavajra VAJRACHARYA’s Nepali book on Licchavi inscriptions, all books on the topic are unoriginal; they rely on him for the reading and interpretation of inscriptions. REGMI (1983) who published these inscriptions with an English translation and notes has heavily relied on him. RICCARDI (1980) has tried in an article to study all available Licchavi inscriptions which have to do with the history of Buddhism but, materials being muddled, his study reveals very little and confuses more. Recently LEWIS (2004) has published a study on traces of the Sukhāvatī cult in Newar society but, his starting point being SCHOPEN’s conclusions, the historical aspect of Sukhāvatī has remained beyond his scope. In the same way, while writing the entry on Nepal in Encyclopedia of Buddhism, he has relied on earlier publications.

3 Though published several times, this inscription was not edited and interpreted properly before SCHOPEN. He reread and translated it in his 1987 paper (now included in his 2005 collection, pp. 247–277). In 1999, FUSSMAN published his own reading of the inscription with a translation which is different in a few places. FUSSMAN’s understanding of the date of the inscription is better than SCHOPEN’s; unlike the latter, he has not
is the first indirect evidence to the early phase of the Mahāyāna,

ignored ‘va’ before ‘2,’ in the first line, and has rightly interpreted it as an abbreviation for varṣāmāsa, the rainy season. Otherwise, I find SCHOPEN’S reading more accurate.

However, I am bothered with one thing in the second line of the inscription: the reading p[I][i-x][a]-x and its interpretation as an instrumental singular of pītr. As SCHOPEN has stated, the upper parts of the aṃśaśas are broken, leaving only the consonants certain, but the vowel sign on top of the first aṃśa is still partially visible. So, SCHOPEN has conjectured the first aṃśa as pi and suggested to read the word as pīṭrṇā. He himself, however, has noted a negative point against his suggestion: “pīṭrṇā in epigraphical sources has generally been interpreted as genitive plural” (p. 252). FUSSMAN has tried to get rid of this negative point by suggesting another reading, pītena, keeping the meaning unchanged.

On logical, contextual and palaeographical grounds, I see problems in accepting either one of these conjectures. I find it less likely that the donor is first introduced as the father of his son, and then as the grandson and son of his ancestors. We do not have any parallel for such a description. Instead, what is logically likely is that he is introduced as someone’s great-grandson, grandson and son successively. We have parallels for such a description even from one of the Kūṣāṇa inscriptions from Mathurā (Lüders 1961: 194–195, § 162). However, this parallel is not from an inscription in Buddhist Sanskrit but standard Sanskrit, and so, it does not help us to conjecture the word we need. Nevertheless, I propose that the donor is not the father of Sāx-caka/Sañcaka but a great-grandson.

If we look at the undamaged pi in line 3, we can see that the sign of i starts on the top of the frontal bar of pa, extends to the right, curves in, and rises up turning counterclockwise and making a shape resembling to a swan’s neck. Now if we look at the proposed pi in line 2, what we see is a stroke starting at the frontal bar of pa and extending to the left without rising up. This sign is very close to the sign of o, so the aṃśa at issue must be po. I present here both of these aṃśas:

Altogether the word in the inscription seems to be potreṇa which only means grandson, but the proper term in the language of the inscription should be papaṭreṇa. I see two possibilities: either we have a case of haplology, I mean, the first pa is dropped, or potra- itself is used here to
which is not referred to by name in Indian inscriptions until the late fifth and early sixth centuries.⁴

According to SCHOPEN, “the earliest known [inscriptional] reference to Amitābha prior to the Govindnagar inscription occurred in a fragmentary slab inscription from Sānci … dated to the end of the seventh century” (p. 247). This is not true. About a century before the Sānci inscription, a Nepalese inscription refers not only to Amitābha in Sukhāvati but also to his attendant Bodhisattvas Lokeśa and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. Following the proper chronological order, I will deal with this inscription in detail as the last item in this article.

I

A lady wants to get rid of her female nature

In front of the Dhamdo caitya/Bhagavānthān in Chabahil (Kathmandu), there lies an important inscription which contains some clues hinting at the nature of Buddhism practiced in Nepal at the very beginning of the fifth century. This is the first half of an original inscription inscribed on the lotus base⁵ pedestal of a lost image of Mahāmuni.⁶ Unfortunately, the other half of the lotus is missing.

mean great-grandson, when its original meaning is conveyed by another equivalent term nāttika.

⁴ Schopen 2005: 11. However, in a mixed Indian and Chinese context such an inscriptive reference is found one century earlier (ibid. 13).

⁵ This inscribed base, which was placed earlier facing downward, serving as a support to a stone pillar used for offering lamps, in front of the west face of the caitya, is now turned into the right position since 2003, the time of renovation of the caitya. Now that the base was turned into the right position, it is possible to see part of a lotus rising above the base which was under the ground before. See photo on p. 27.

⁶ Mahāmuni is generally regarded as an epithet of the historical Buddha, but the situation might be different in our inscription, and it might have been used as an independent substantive, like Śākyamuni, referring to the historical Buddha. When some donation is made to a newly consecrated temple and recorded in an inscription, the proper designation of the de-
It contained the other half of the inscription with the second half of each line including the year of the religious gift as well as the name of the then ruling king. On palaeographical grounds, VAJRACHARYA

Mahāyāna Buddhism and Sukhāvatī cult in India

It appears clear to me that the lime-washed caitya surrounded by several votive caityas and more than one Buddha image was in the south end of a larger vihāra complex. The vihāra in an inverted U-shape opening to the caitya, which must have suffered damage and got repaired several times in later periods, is now occupied by the Pashupati Mitra High School. A narrow motorable road separates the caitya and present-day school. The school has built new buildings in place of the old ones on one side and re-built the old buildings with additional floors on the other sides. Hopefully the original foundation is not yet completely destroyed. The complex also suffered loss to the east side by the construction of the Ring Road; at that
makes this inscription the first inscription in his book of Licchavi inscriptions arranged in chronological order. And more, following late chronicles, he suggests that it can be dated to the time of Mānadeva’s great grandfather Viṣadeva, who is described as ‘siding with Buddhism’ (sugataśāsanapakṣapātī) in an eighth century inscription of King Jayadeva and late chronicles.

There are in fact some clues in the inscription itself which can help us to guess at its time. First, donative formulas in Licchavi inscriptions after King Mānadeva’s time never begin with the expression asyāṃ divasapūrvāyāṃ. So, this can be taken as one clue to assign it in or before the period of Mānadeva. Second, this inscription refers to a Jovian year with the atypical expression māghavārṣe kāle, but such a reference is not found again in any other Licchavi inscription. This system was abandoned in North India earlier than in the rest of India, though it was still in use in the south until the beginning of the sixth century. References to Jovian years appear in Gupta inscriptions only between 475–528 CE where we find them in a standardised expression – a month name prefixed with mahan- and compounded with samvatsara. Two more references appear also in Kadamba inscriptions of about the middle of the fifth century, but there the expression is not standardised. The expression in our inscription is still different but is closer to those found in Kadamba inscriptions. Therefore, it is save enough to place it before Mānadeva, but there is no proper

time, as local people recall, some votive caityas on the track of the road were pushed inside the caitya complex and minor objects were destroyed.

8 Even during Mānadeva’s time, it appears only twice, in inscriptions dated to Śaka 419 (Vajracharya 1973: no. 15, p. 65) and 425 (Vajracharya 1973: no. 16, p. 67).

9 Dikshit 1888: 316, fn. 16.

10 See, Fleet 1888, Dikshit 1888.

11 The expression pause samvatsare occurs in one of the Halsi grants of Mrgēśvaravarman dated in his third regnal year (line 8), and vaiśākhe samvatsare in the other dated in his eighth regnal year (line 10). Fleet (1888: 334, fn. 9) relates the use of the prefix maha- to the heliacal-rising system and absence of it to the mean sign system.
ground to say that this inscription really belonged to the time of Mānadeva’s great grandfather Vṛṣadeva (circa 410 CE) as Vajracharya suggested. The first available inscription of Mānadeva is dated Śaka 381 (459/460 CE) and it does not contain a reference to a Jovian year. Before this date, the Jovian year of Māgha fell in Śaka 371 (449/450 CE), 359 (437/438 CE), 347 (425/426 CE), and 335 (413/414 CE). So, the image of Mahāmuni with this inscription must have been installed in one of these years.

The inscription, except the last line, is composed in twelve Anuṣṭubh stanzas. The metre has helped me to determine the number of missing āksaras in each line.

(1) durddharair indriyaiḥ kṛṣṇā vāhyate yair iyaṃ prajā
dāsavat tāṁ sandhāryya kṛpayā pariśṭhyā tā[m]\[1\]
(1) dānaśīla<ksamāviṣyadhyānaprajañāniṣevaṇaḥ>\[16\]

12 In the mediaeval period, the caitya in front of which our inscription is found was called Dhamdo caitya. This has prompted some scholars to relate the caitya with Mānadeva’s father King Dharmadeva. I think this is a very weak argument in the light of the fact that any stūpa/caitya can be named after dharma/dharmarāja, and we have a few examples of such names, like the Dhammekha stūpa in Sarnath and the Dhārmārājika stūpa in Taxila. No doubt, Dhamdo can be imagined as a Newar rendering of Dharmadeva, but it is much more likely that as a name of caitya it refers to the Dharma-god, the Buddha.

13 My calculation of these years with the Jovian year of Māgha is based on Ketkar’s table (1923: 195, table 20).

14 An allusion to the Buddha’s identity as a Bodhisattva in our inscription can be considered as yet another clue for assigning it to a relatively early date. As Buddhologists and historians have noted, early Buddhist cult images are overwhelmingly referred to as Bodhisattva in their accompanying inscriptions, even when they iconographically represent Buddhas. See Schopen 2005: 116.

15 Vajracharya reads tā and interprets that as a plural, obviously assuming that the visarga has been dropped by irregularly observing sandhi between two verses.

16 The acts of the Buddha are described here incorporating the essential components of the Bodhisattva path: restraint of the senses, cultivation
of compassion and the six perfections, attainment of the ultimate knowledge, release of all people from sorrow, and departure. The Mahāvastu describes it and says that these acts of the Buddha are purposeful:

\[
\text{kalpakotisahasrāni aprameyam acintyāḥ | carito bhoti arthāya sarvajjho dvipadottamo | dānam śīlam ca kṣānti ca dhyānāni ca nisevītā | prajña ca caritā pārvam kalpakotisatām bahūṁ} \quad (\text{Senart 1890: 296}).
\]

17 The language of this inscription is colloquial and structurally loose. In the third stanza, when two successive actions are stated in two verse-halves, the first action stated with a finite verb form in the first half is narrated in concatenation in the other half with an absolutive form together with its object. The writing style suggests that the same was true in the lost second half of the second stanza and the first half of the third. The latter, which has survived, states the second action 'released people from the sorrow' narrating the previous action in absolutive 'having obtained the ultimate knowledge.' Therefore, the last pāda of the second stanza can be reconstructed as <\text{prāptam jīnānam anuttaram}>, on the basis of the narrating phrase in the next stanza.

18 The 9th stanza below tells us that the Buddha image the lady donated was named Mahāmuni, and we can judge from the context that stanzas 1–4 are dedicated to praise the inaugurated Buddha, the Mahāmuni. Whether these opening verses were written in the form of veneration of the Buddha or blessing to the folks, the name of the god is expected here, most likely in the nominative case like in the first verse of Mānadeva’s Chāṅgūnārāyaṇa inscription (Vajracharya 1973: inscription no.2). Another possibility is the dative case. In any case it is most likely that the name of Mahāmuni appeared here.

19 Normally it should be \text{“kīrtan”}. In Nepalese manuscripts and sometimes even in Licchavi inscriptions a homorganic nasal before a sibilant is written as guttural \text{n}, but guttural \text{n} before nasal is a rarity. Vajracharya misses to record this irregularity.
+20 ++ ++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ [6]

(4) catvāriṁśat sapāṇeṣaḥ yatra dhāṁyasya mānikiḥ
varṣe varṣe 'tha jāyante kṣetraṁ tat tādṛśaṁ dadau [7]
++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ [8]

(5) bhūyāḥ saṁghasya bhaktāṛṇtham pūjāṛtthaṁ ca mahāmuneḥ
kṣetraṁ dattan dattan tayā hy atra aṣṭāvīṁśatimānikiḥ [9]
++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ [10]

(6) vicitra deyadharmmaṁ me kārayitveha vac chubham
stribhāvaṁ hi virāgyāhaṁ puruṣatvam avāpya ca [11]

<samvat> ++ + (7) māghavarse kāle āsādhasudiva 10 242 asyāṁ
divasapūrvvāyāṁ bhaṭṭārakamahārājaśri+ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ [12]

VAJRACHARYA reads śrī here which I cannot see on the stone or photo.

The context asks for an expression meaning ‘of paddy are produced
every year’ in the lost part, something close to dhāṁyasya varṣe varṣe
'tha jāyante' as in stanza 7.

The usage of virāgya here is noteworthy. This peculiar form is at-
tested in the Daśabhaṁika, and other forms of the denominative verbal
stem virāgay are found also in other Mahāyāna sūtras. See EDGERTON, s.v.
virāgayati.

The ligature of tpa is rather clearly visible but VAJRACHARYA does
not read pa. I have completed the word by supplying <ṇkāṭ>. In the
Aṣṭasāhasrikā, all those Bodhisattvas who reach the land of Abhirati are
said to ‘have gone across the mire’ (uttṛṇapāṅkāḥ). For this passage, see
below, pp. 62–63.

VAJRACHARYA misses the symbol of 2 and takes the day as the 10th.

If we wanted to guess at the lost part of this line, adapting to the for-
mula found in the inscription of Śaka 425 mentioned before and using the
possible names of the King Vṛṣadeva and the donor Cārumati, it would
be something closer to this: vṛṣadevasya sāgraṁ varṣaṣataṁ samāṭhā-
Like a slave, having restrained the hardly restrainable senses – by which all these people are carried away – [and] having closely embraced them, [i.e. the people,] with compassion, <through the cultivation of> charity, good conduct, <perseverance, valour, meditation, and wisdom> … <he obtained the supreme knowledge>; after obtaining the supreme knowledge, <he> freed the people from sorrow; [and] after freeing them from all sorrows, he attained the place of peace. That Mahāmuni…

Taking a lot of trouble for quite a long time, [she built] the abode of the destroyer of the worldly existence, [i.e. Mahāmuni,] which

\[payataḥ cārumatयā sthāpi to bhagavān mahāmuniḥ.\]

The comparison ‘like a slave’ can logically be associated either with Mahāmuni or the senses, respectively the subject and object. I feel that our inscription is alluding, here too, to a specific Buddhist concept like in v.11 below. Therefore, I am associating the comparison with the subject following the description of one of the arthacaryās in the Bodhisattva-bhūmī. There, a Bodhisattva, though he is abiding in the best and foremost state of success, is said to be fulfilling the purpose of the beings, like a slave, with his mind lowered (in kindness), and his vanity, pride and ego destroyed: punar bodhisattvah pravarāyāṃ agryāyāṃ api sampadi vartamāno dāsavarat presyavad vaśyaputravac canaladārakavan nīcagito nihatamadamānāhāmārah (Wogihara 1936: 225 reads nihita° = ‘laid aside’) sattvānām artham ācarati (Dutt 1966: 154).

Following Arlo Griffiths’ suggestion, I present the following alternative translation of the first verse: Having restrained them – the senses by which all these people are carried away, and having squeezed these [people], as [one oppresses] a slave, [but] with compassion (rather than stringency). .

The root parīpīd literally means ‘to squeeze properly from all sides’ or more negatively ‘to oppress in all ways.’ As I need something quite positive for the interpretation I favoured, I have taken it in its figurative sense, ‘to embrace closely.’

The statement might have concluded with something like ‘that Mahāmuni excels all’ or ‘that Mahāmuni may show us/you the way.’

The literal meaning, ‘being deeply depressed’ or ‘having forced properly,’ does not work well here. So I take it figuratively with positive implications.
is brilliant with many depictions illustrating [scenes] from the Kinnarījātaka ... [1.3=vv.5–6]

Here [in the same locality] she donated such a piece of land where every year 45 Mānikās of paddy are produced29 ... [1.4=vv.7–8]

Again, for the purpose of [providing] food for the Community and also for the purpose of [financing the daily] worship of Mahāmuni, another piece of land is donated by her where 28 Mānikās <of paddy are produced every year.> ... [1.5=vv.9–10]

Whatsoever merit I have by making here this wonderful religious gift (deyadharmā), <by that> I may lose attachment to womanhood and attain manhood, and <get out of> this <mire> consisting of sorrow and longing, ...30 [1.6=vv.11–12]

<The year>..., the time of ‘the year of Māgha,’ the bright half of Āśādha, the 12th day. On this day the lord great king Illustrious ... [1.7]

The inscription mentions that the Kinnarījātaka was depicted on the walls of the temple of Mahāmuni. The likely candidate for this reference is the Kinnarījātaka of the Mahāvastu. There is another version of this narrative in the Bhaiṣajyavastu of the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, which seems to be followed later in the Divyāvadāna. But in that version, unlike in the Mahāvastu, the narrative is not named “Kinnarījātaka” and the character of the Kinnarī is not highlighted.31

Since the next piece of land is allocated for sustenance of the Community and daily worship of Mahāmuni, it can be said that this piece of land with a larger amount of income was allocated for maintenance and repair of the abode, and probably to finance the annual ceremony (varṣavardhana) which is known from many Licchavi inscriptions.

Following the parallels from the Mahāvastu and the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, we can say that the next thing our lady donor is expected to wish is her rebirth in one of the bodhisattvabhūmis, if not yet in the peaceful abode of Mahāmuni. See below, p. 34.

I am aware of the fact that the Mahāvastu is a composite text and the Kinnarījātaka might not have been part of it from the beginning. However, my supposition is that this jātaka was already integrated in the Mahāvastu by the time of our inscription.
It is interesting that this inscription praises the Buddha as Mahāmuni, alluding to the path of the Bodhisattva, and it is almost certain that the inscription makes a reference to the six pāramitās: two of them appear in the beginning of a compound, and the metre easily allows us to include the rest in the proper order in the same compound. Again, the six pāramitās are present in early Mahāyāna texts and also in the Mahāvastu.\(^{32}\)

The lady donor of the image of Mahāmuni with this inscription first wishes to lose her attachment to womanhood and become a man by the merit of this donation. A woman on the Bodhisattva path is expected to change her gender and become a man at some point prior to the attainment of Buddhahood. Early Buddhist texts indeed hold a strict view on the spiritual limitations of women. Also the Mahāvastu implies this in the Daśabhūmika section, though quite vaguely, when it states that those Dharma followers who are in any of the ten stages are all men, not born again as a woman.\(^{33}\) This idea is found in many of the Mahāyāna sūtras including the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, where Sister Gaṅgadevā is predicted to become a man and reach the land of Akṣobhya to undertake the Bodhi-

\(^{32}\) If, as I suggested in fn. 6 above, a cult which worshipped the Śākyamuni Buddha as Mahāmuni had existed, that possibly had a link with the school of Mahāsāṅghikas whose offshoot, the Lokottaravādins, preserve the Mahāvastu in their Vinaya. Our inscription relates Mahāmuni and the Kinnarījātaka of the Mahāvastu. The name Mahāmuni appears 27 times in the Mahāvastu, more than in any other text (the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka comes second with 11 occurences).

It is worth mentioning here that the presence of the Mahāsāṅghikas in Nepal in the subsequent period has been considered to follow from a fragmentary inscription ascribed to the middle of the seventh century. This is a two line inscription damaged on the right side, first published by Lévi (no. 17, plate 18). It reads the following preceded by an auspicious sign: (1) devadharmo yam śrīdharmarājikāmātya-su[pa] // (2) sānghi-kabhiṣkusamghasa // (Lévi does not read pa.). Unfortunately, the prefix mahā- is missing, which limits the importance of the inscription.

\(^{33}\) Senart 1882: 103: atha khalu sarvāsu daśabhūmiṣu puruṣā bhavanti sarvāngapravargopetāḥ avikalendriyāḥ[h]. (The edition omits visarga, probably because of yaś ca in the following.)
Mahāyāna Buddhism and Sukhāvatī cult in India

sattva vow there, and become finally the Buddha Suvarṇapuṣpa. 34
Even the wording in our inscription reminds us of the phrase in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā. 35

II

It is known that Buddhists were present in Nepal before Mānadeva, i.e. the early fifth century CE, but how strong they were in the society is not known well. No Buddhist inscription has yet been discovered from the time of Mānadeva. 36 However, I would like to draw

34 This idea is found also in the nineteenth chapter of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā (WOGIHARA 1935: 745): seyam ānanda gaṅgadeva bhaginī strībhāvam vivartya puruṣabhāvam pratilabhya tisā cyutvā aksobhyasya tathāgata-syārthataḥ samyaksambuddhasya buddhāṣṭre abhiratyāṁ lokadhātāv upapatsyate.

35 The wording of the inscription, strībhāvam hi virāgyāham puruṣatvam avāpya ca, is very close to the Aṣṭasāhasrikā wording: strībhāvam vivartya (vivarjya in the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā) puruṣabhāvam pratilabhya.

Here are two more statements close to the expression in the inscription: Samādhirāja 32.157cd–158ab: vivartayitvā strībhāvam sa bhaved dharmanākaḥ, na sā piano 'pi strībhāvam itaḥ paścād grahīyati. Ratnaketuparivarta (II.27: KU RU MIYA p. 50): strībhāvam antardhāya puruṣabhāvah samvṛtto. Ratnaketuparivarta speaks also of transformation of marks and organs of women into those of men in the same chapter.

36 Because the major caityas of the Kathmandu valley have been renovated continuously, and since mediaeval times such renovations are done by Tibetan monks or under their guidance, these caityas have taken new components from time to time, reflecting ongoing changes in contemporaneous traditions. That is why we have to rely on personally donated images or caityas of comparatively small size in order to have an idea of Buddhism in the Licchavi period.

No excavation in the vicinity of the major caityas of Kathmandu valley have yet been carried out. It is not easy to excavate a main shrine or stūpa as they are still places of active worship, but it is not impossible to do so in a courtyard. The Buddhist tradition was never discontinued in Nepal. So, such excavations, I must say, would be of great help for the understanding of Buddhism in the middle period and its transformation in later times.
attention to an interesting and exceptional case of the Buddhist donative formula \textit{yad atra punyam}... being blended in a Śaiva inscription from Budhanilakantha (Kathmandu) inscribed on the base of a \textit{śivalinga} and dated in [Śaka] samvat 398 (476/477 CE).\textsuperscript{37} The related portion of the inscription runs this way:

\begin{quote}
\textit{<śrīmānadeva>nrpatiḥ prañato jagāda
tvatsthāpanājanitam asti yad atra punyam
tat sarvvalokasahitasya vīvṛddhamālam
duhkhakṣayāya bhagavan mama sarvathāstu.}
\end{quote}

The king <Illustrious Mānadeva>, bowed to [the god], said: ‘What here is the merit produced from this action of founding you, [i.e. the \textit{śivalinga},] O lord, its roots properly grown, may that be for the complete destruction of sorrow of me together with all [my] people.

This indicates that Buddhist ideas were already popular in Nepal by this period and were even adopted by other religious groups. Furthermore, we know from Anuparama’s Dvaipāyanastotra inscription, installed before 540 CE, that the Buddhists had made good advance by that time, and the orthodox Brahmanical section of society had got alarmed at that development.\textsuperscript{38} The two inscriptions presented below are further evidence for their growing influence.

There are not many inscriptions until the late fifth and early sixth centuries in India which could even indirectly be related to Mahāyāna. So, these inscriptions deserve attention and should be added to the list of inscriptions related to Mahāyāna. First I present a quite damaged inscription from the pedestal of a lost image of Avalokiteśvara\textsuperscript{39} which is dated in [Śaka] samvat 479 (558 CE):

\begin{quote}
(1) \textit{samvat}479dvitīyāśāḍha…….yajīva……(2) ……..bhagavadāryyā-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37} VAJRACHARYA 1973: 41–42, no. 7. The year of this inscription, first read 396, has been corrected to 398 in PANT 1986: 275–276.

\textsuperscript{38} For an elaboration on this, see ACHARYA 2007.

\textsuperscript{39} At present, this pedestal supports an image of Viṣṇu in a small temple located in Brahma Tol, Kathmandu, but the inscription on it clearly suggests that it once supported a Buddhist image.
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<valokitesvara>… mānenārdṛha… (3) sarvajñānānāṃvāptaye bhavatu

The [Śaka] year 479, the second Āṣāḍha … <Pri>yājva … [an image of] the Blessed One, Aryā<valokiteśvara> … half the size of (?) … may that be for the obtaining of the knowledge of the Omniscient.

Though only a few words of this inscription are preserved, it still contains the last part of a variant of the Mahāyāna formula, sarvajñānānāṃvāptaye, and parts of the donor’s and the deity’s names.

There is another similar inscription which has almost everything intact except the date in the beginning. The king’s name is also damaged partially, but GNOLI reads it Rāmadeva (circa 547 CE). VAJRACHARYA reads only -deva, which is clearly visible; nevertheless, he places it before the above inscription of 558 CE in his book on Licchavi inscriptions, obviously following GNOLI’s suggestion. However, as I can read the lower part of the ligature before deva as ga in the rubbing produced by Gno, I am of the opinion that it should be Gangādeva (circa 567 CE). This will make the inscription ten years younger than the one cited above. The place of finding, nature and palaeography suggest that the two inscriptions are somehow related. I present here my reading and translation of the inscription:

(1) om sa<sti samvat> ++++++++ bhattārakama<hārājaśri-gan>[gā]devasya sāgram varṣaśatam samāṅhā<payatah> (2) sarvva-sattvahītāsukkārthrthāya bhagavata āryāvalokitesvaranāthā\[SPACE]\prati-śūpitaḥ [SPAC] deyadharmmo ‘yām paramopāsakamaniguptasya (3) bhāgyaya mahendramatya sama yad attra punyam tad bha[va] tu mātāpitrāpvanām krtvā sarvasattvānāṃ sarvākāra-vrāvopeta(4)+++++sarvajñānānāṃvāptaye

I am unable at present to go and read this inscription on the spot. Therefore I simply reproduce VAJRACHARYA’s reading. See VAJRACHARYA 1973: 185, no. 43.

This sentence is grammatically incorrect. It needs to be either bhagavān āryāvalokitesvaranāthāḥ or bhagavān āryāvalokitesvaranāthā-sya vigrahah.

VAJRACHARYA 1973: 177, no. 40.
Om, good <luck! In the year…,> when the lord great <king Illustrious
gädæva is ruling for hundred years and further, [an image of] the
dlord Áryávalokiteśvara, the Blessed One, has been set up. This is
a charity of Paramopāsaka Manigupta together with his wife Mahen-
dramātī. Whatever merit [is obtained through this action], may that
be for all beings, first and foremost his mother and father, for the
obtaining of the … knowledge of the Omniscient endowed with all
excellent forms.

Both of these inscriptions are special as they contain the term sarva-
jñajñāna, which is attested in many Mahāyāna sūtras including the
Kāśyapaparivarta, Aṣṭasāhasrikā, larger Sukhāvatīvyūha and also in Asaṅga’s Bodhisattvabhiṣ. Compared to sarvajñajñāna,
anuttarajñāna is poorly represented in the sūtras, although it seems
to be the predominant expression in inscriptions (SCHOPEN 2005:
241, fn. 14; 265).

From the second of the two inscriptions we can tell that sarva-
jñajñāna was the last member of a tripartite compound which contained sarvākāra rāropeta as the first and another word of five aksaras as the second member. Sarvākāra rāropeta appears once qualifying śānyatā in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā (WOHIARA 1935: 750), and once in the Lalitavistara qualifying suraśodhitajñāna (VAIDYA 1958: 309). In the Daśabhūmika (KONDO 1936: 61), sarvākāra rāropetasarvajñajñāna is found as a compound without any intervening element, and in the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā (KIMURA 2006: 166), we find sarvākāra rāropeta compounded with sarvā-
kārajñatā. In a seventh century Nepalese inscription, anuttara is combined with sarvajñajñāna in a similar donative formula, and this combination is also attested in the Gaṇḍavyūha. However, in our inscription just anuttara is not possible, because we have space for five aksaras, and -ta- at the end of the first word is intact, which would not have been so if the following aksara had begun with a vowel. I therefore guess that the damaged word was sarvānuttara (‘supremest’) which is attested as an adjective to samyaksambodhi in the Kāśyapaparivarta.44

43 SCHOPEN 2005: 256 and fn. 15.
44 Following STÆL-HOLSTEIN (1926: 8), VOROBYOVA-DESYATOVSKAYA
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III

The inscription on a caturvyūhacaitya from Tyagal

As I mentioned earlier, a Nepalese inscription that mentions the triad of Amitābha and his Buddha world Sukhāvatī comes second chronologically only to the Govindnagar inscription and is to be placed before the Sāñcī slab inscription. This inscription is significant in many respects. It is inscribed on four sides of one of the two stone caityas in a courtyard of Tyagal Tol in Patan district of Kathmandu valley. It is not dated but on palaeographical grounds it is placed about the time of Amśuvarman, i.e. the late sixth or early seventh century, by Vajracharya.

Each side of the square base of the caitya, like the one seen in the photo on the next page, contains a verse, inscribed in two lines, which praises the Tathāgata worshipped on that side together with his two Bodhisattvas. The odd and even pādas of each verse are separated by the niche of each Tathāgata lying in the middle of the wall. In the following pages, as I have placed the photos of the two sides on top of each other, the a and c pādas precede b and d in these photos.

This inscription was published for the first time by the Samśodhana Maṇḍala team in the fifth issue of their Nepali journal

et al. (2002: 5–6) introduce a wrong word division and read “yāś ca satv[ān] paripāca vai tān sarvān uttarasyā(m) samyaksambodh[au].” Since anuttarasajam samyaksambodhau is attested dozens of times in Mahāyāna sūtras, I suggest to read sarvānuttarasyām as a compound.

One more expression found in our inscription, sarvasattvahitasukha-ya, appears in several Mahāyāna sūtras including the Pañcavinśatisāhasrikā and the larger Sukhāvatīvyūha.

I am grateful to Nepali historian and writer Devichandra Shrestha for his help in locating the caitya. I am also grateful to two researchers, Nirajan Kafle and Rajit Bahadur Shrestha, and photographer Yogesh Budhathoki, all from the Nepal Research Centre, for their help in preparing photographs of the caitya and the inscription. As the inscribed part of the caitya was covered with lime and other substances, the photo quality is not so good. I regret the resulting inconvenience involved.

45
Pūrṇimā, and it has been included in Vajracharya’s book. But the valuable information contained in this inscription has yet to be revealed, so it is necessary to read and interpret it again. It consists of four verses in three metres: the first in Upajāti, the second in Śikharinī, and the third and fourth in Vasantatilaka. The first and second verses are in first person singular and the other two are in second person plural. This inscription does not say anything about the donor of the caitya or the context of the donation.

Let me now present my reading of the inscription, which includes five improvements as compared to Vajracharya’s edition, and translate it.

East side:

1) \([\text{siddham}]^{46} \text{akṣobhyam akṣobhyaśītāgramārtin} \text{ tathāgatāṃ staumy abhito bhiratīyām}\)

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46 Vajracharya 1973: inscription no. 98, 387–388. He has misjudged the directions of the Buddhas and placed Akṣobhya in the north, Śākyamuni in the west, Samantakusuma in the south and Amitābha in the east.

47 Vajracharya (1973: 387) reads om.
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2) \textit{samantabhadram bhuvī bhadracārīṇaṅ
tathaiva sannirmalakārīṃlinam
bhiratyāṃ bhiramyam V; bhadracārīṇaṅ \ bhadrakārīṇaṅ V}

South side:

1) \textit{mahāprajñālokakṣatabhavamahāmohatimirm
sukhāvatyaṃ vande satatam amitābhaṅ jinaravim}
2) \textit{salokeśaṃ lokodbhavabhayaharam pāṅkajadharam
mahāsthāmapr[ā]<ptam aniyatakr>pāṃśīgdamana[sam]}
Diwakar Acharya

West side:

1) saddharmaratnakusumastavakācitāṅgam
   buddhaṁ samantakusuman namatābjavatvāṁ

2) mañjuśriyam paramadharmanyadān kumāran
   nityaṁ ca susthitamatin karuṇāikatānam

North side:

1) [yo va]m ~˘~˘~˘~˘~˘˘m
   bhaktyādyta tan namatā sākyamunim mu[nīśam]ṃ

2) maitryādhya ~˘~˘~˘~˘~˘~˘˘pañ
   guhyādhipām vimalavajradharaṁ saha[yām]
   yo va [yāvā V; maitryādhya] maitryārdha V; sahāyām] sahābjam V

Mu[nīndra]ṃ is another possibility.
[East side:] From the front, I praise Akṣobhya Tathāgata [residing] in the world of Abhirati, who is the embodiment of the imperturbable and sharp-pointed [nature]. I praise Samantabha [Bodhisattva], who performs good [deeds] on earth, and in the same way, Sannir-malakūrtimālin [Bodhisattva].

[South Side:] I always venerate Amitābha, the Sun-like Jina, in the world of Sukhāvatī, who has destroyed the darkness of the great illusion of existence with the light of great wisdom; Mahāsthāmaprāpta, whose mind is affectionately disposed due to <unlimited> compassion, and Lokeśa, who holds a lotus and wards off the dangers of arising in the world.

[West Side:] [O people,] you must bow to the Buddha Samantakusuma in the world of Abjavatī, whose limbs are covered with bunches of the precious flowers of the True Dharma, to Mañjuśrī [Bodhisattva], the prince who knows the Dharma best, and to Susthitamati [Bodhisattva], whose mind is fixed on compassion eternally.

[North Side:] [O people,] you must bow now devotedly to Śākyamuni, the lord of ascetics, who …, to the one who is rich in benevolence (maitrīyādhyā) …, [and] to the lord of Guhyas who holds the stainless Vajra, [i.e. Vajrapāṇi]; [all] in the Sahā world.

In this cāitya, the four Tathāgatas are placed on four sides of the square lower level, and the eight Bodhisattvas at the higher level before the dome begins. Even though the inscribed verses place

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49 The original meaning of śita is 'sharpened,' and this meaning fits well here, but VAIrACHARYA (1973: 387) has taken it as 'blue.' Though this wrong interpretation is a result of phonetic confusion of ś and s, one can find its roots in Akṣobhya’s visualisations from Tantric texts which attribute to him a bluish/blackish complexion. Besides, one could also split a compound like ours where akṣobhya and śita appear together into akṣobhy and aśita, and thus, get closer to ‘black’ (asita). Something like this could be lying behind the attributed complexion of Akṣobhya.

50 The inscription reads salokesāṃ, which means ‘together with Lokeśa.’ If we translate it faithfully, the next words in the pāda, which in fact describe Lokeśa, will be adjectives to Amitābha. So I have translated salokesāṃ as ‘and Lokeśa’ following the demand of the context.

51 As an alternative, one can probably take nityam adverbially with the imperative ‘namatha.’
Tathāgatas and Bodhisattvas side by side in their respective worlds, the lower level houses four niches and the higher level eight. This clearly suggests that, in this caitya, the Tathāgatas are placed in the lower level and the Bodhisattvas in the higher. In the lower level, though bodily shapes are still visible in the images of four Tathāgatas, they are damaged beyond recognition; and there is no certainty that these are remains of the original images. The same is true with

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52 As one Bodhisattva is exactly above the Tathāgata, the second Bodhisattva is a little bit to the side. Probably this was not the original way that the Bodhisattvas were placed. If the block of Bodhisattvas is rotated just a little, two Bodhisattvas come in the center of each side. It is possible that at a time of renovation people forgot to fix the upper part rightly.

53 This appears a bit odd, but it is also true that in early images the Buddha is depicted in human/ascetic form, while the attending Bodhisattvas are depicted in godly or rather royal forms. Anyway, the fact that sometimes Bodhisattvas seem to supplant the Buddha in importance and stature is not new. To some extent, Schopen (2005: 278–279) has dealt with this problem while identifying a Mahāyāna scene painted at Ajañṭā.
the niches in the higher level, but four of them now contain late images of the Buddha, Mañjuśrī, Padmapāṇi, and probably Tārā, which are already damaged to some extent, and the other four are either empty or contain pieces of defaced stones (see photo on p. 44). So, we do not know how these Tathāgatas and Bodhisattvas were originally represented. The original top structure above the dome has been lost, and at present, a rather late and unmatching structure covered with painted metal plates is superimposed on top of the dome (see photo on p. 40).

**Four image cults fitted in the cāitya**

Apart from the evidence it provides for a rather unique form of Mahāyāna practiced in Nepal in the late sixth century, this last inscription provides evidence for early efforts in fitting various Tathāgatas and Bodhisattvas in four directions, and thus producing a cult object acceptable to the followers of specific books, or rather different Mahāyāna models. The set of four triads found here is not found anywhere else.

*The cult of Akṣobhya*

The beginning of the inscription on the east side of the cāitya is indicated by an auspicious symbol, and here is housed Akṣobhya Tathāgata together with Samantabhadra and Sannirmalakirtimālīn in the Abhirati world. We know Akṣobhya’s Abhirati world in the east from several Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sources, but the Bodhisattvas associated with him in Vajrayāna texts are generally Maitreya and Kṣitigarbha. This triad is unique in itself and provides evidence of an archaic cult of Akṣobhya or the eastern/earliest ‘pure land.’

We know from the *Aksobhyavyūha*, one of the early Mahāyāna texts translated into Chinese, which is also made part of the Mahā-

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54 As Alsop has argued, the Licchavi stone cāityas were originally built with empty niches. It is highly probable that this was the case with our cāitya, and whatever we see now under the niches, defaced stones or recognisable images, are unoriginal.
ratnakūṭa collection, and the portions of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā regarded as additions (but made before the second century CE) that the cult of Akṣobhya predated the cult of Amitābha, though we do not have epigraphical evidence for it. Akṣobhya appears in the Mahāvastu as one of the irreversible (avaivartika) Bodhisattvas in the ninth bhūmi. The Aṣṭasāhasrikā describes how a Bodhisattva attained Buddhahood to become the Buddha Akṣobhya; however, in added portions of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, he is already the Buddha of the east in Abhirati.

The Bodhisattva Samantabhadra is generally associated with Śākyamuni in mediaeval Mahāyāna sources. However, he is said to be coming from the east, the direction of Akṣobhya, in the Samantabhadrotsāhāna chapter of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka. This way, there is at least one scriptural indication for Samantabhadra’s association with the east, but except for our inscription we do not have any other scriptural or epigraphical evidence for his direct association with Akṣobhya. He is already associated with Vairocana in the Gāṇḍavyūha, and finally depicted as the primordial Buddha in later Tantric traditions.

The name of the other Bodhisattva, Sannirmalakīrtimālin, is not attested anywhere as a Bodhisattva, if we are to take the name as it features in the verse. We could consider that the real name of this Bodhisattva is Vimalakīrti, who narrates Dharma to Mañjuśrī,

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55 The Bajaur manuscripts in Kharosthi script and Gandhari language also include a large portion of an early Mahāyāna sūtra related with the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, see Strauch 2007: 47–60.
56 For identification of these portions, see Conze 1967: 172–173.
58 Senart 1882: 139.
59 Saddharmapuṇḍarīka 26: atha khalu samantabhadro bodhisattvo mahāsattvah pūrvasyām diśi gaṇanāsmatikrāntair bodhisattvair mahāsattvaiḥ sārdhaṃ pariśrtaḥ …
60 For example, Suzuki & Izumi 1934: 425: yathā cēha sahāyāṃ loka-dhātuv bhagavato vairocanasya pādamālagataḥ samantabhadro bodhisattvo daṅśinaṃ pāṇim prasārya sudhanasya mūrdhni pratiṣṭhāpaya-vāmāsa, tathā sarvalokadhātuṣu …
Śāriputra and others in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and that the name in our verse is a descriptive term, as it is almost parallel in meaning with the original name.\(^{61}\) We in fact have a secure case of an extension of a Bodhisattva’s name with an extra adjective, Vimalavajradhara for Vajradhara, in one of the verses from our inscription. However, the *Sūtramagasamādhi* hints at a greater possibility of this Bodhisattva’s name being a bit longer than Vimalakīrti, something very close to the term in our inscription. This *sūtra* mentions the Bodhisattva *Matyabhimukha who visits Śākyamuni from the Buddha Aksobhya’s world of Abhirati, and is predicted to become the Buddha *Vimalaprabhākīrtirāja in a future aeon.\(^{62}\) As indicated by the application of asterisks, both of these names are reconstructed into Sanskrit from Chinese by Lamotte. If we consider chances of error in such reconstructions, we can presume that the original shape of the name reconstructed as *Vimalaprabhākīrtirāja was not far from the name in our inscription.\(^{63}\) The substitution of vimala- with sannirmala- can be metri causa; the former does not fit anywhere in the verse. I would say, vimalaprabhākīrti- (‘fame of stainless brilliance’) of the reconstruction is not so logical or suitable to Sanskrit word order, but if we correct it to vimalakīrtiprabhā- (‘bril-
liance of stainless fame’), it becomes natural and also equivalent to the metaphorical expression *sannirmalakīrtimālā*. As the last component of the reconstructed name, -rāja means nothing more than the -in suffix. Thus, this much can be said that Vimalakīrti or *Vimalaprabhākīrtirāja* is the closest match for Sannirmalakīrtimālin of our inscription.

Vimalakīrti appears also in the first two chapters of the Tantric *Mañjuśrīmālālakalpa* (Sāstri 1920: 8, 40), and in the second occurrence he is made one of sixteen Mahābodhisattvas. It is noteworthy that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* contains a passage which proves his association with Akṣobhya. When asked by Śāriputra, Vimalakīrti tells that he comes from Abhirati, the world of Akṣobhya Tathāgata, and Sākyamuni confirms his statement. Vimalakīrti further clarifies that he has come to an impure world from a pure world for the sake of purification of all beings. What is more, upon a request of the assembly, he brings the Abhirati world into the Sahā world, i.e. our world.

This way, we can prove an earlier association of Vimalakīrti as well as Samantabhadra with the Buddha Akṣobhya on the basis of these hints from the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*. However, neither of the sūtras can be the source for the triad of Akṣobhya mentioned in our inscription, because both sūtras mention only one of the two Bodhisattvas and lack the other.

The *Akṣobhyavyāha* and *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the earliest sūtras which are related to Akṣobhya, do not even mention either of the two Bodhisattvas from our inscription. However, both of these sūtras relate the Bodhisattva Gandhahasti with the Buddha Akṣobhya, as the one whose future Buddhahood is predicted at the time of Akṣobhya’s departure. If observed properly, it is possible to see that the same motif lies behind the names Gandha-

64 On the identification of *Vimalaprabhākīrtirāja* with Vimalakīrti, see Lamotte, 1998: 170, fn. 181.

65 The concept that the land of Akṣobhya is pure lies behind this statement. It seems that by the time of the composition of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* a general concept of ‘pure land’ was already at work.

hasti and Samantabhadra. Gandhahasti literally means ‘fragrant elephant,’ which is a descriptive adjective to an elephant of the best type. Bhadra is the best of elephant types, and Samantabhadra’s association with elephants is suggested in iconography by placing him on a seat with elephants on all sides (samantabhadra). In this way, both of these names mean almost the same thing. This suggests that Samantabhadra is a metamorphosis of Gandhahasti, which took place after the Aksobhya and the ‘additions’ to the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, and before the longer Sukhāvatīvyūha where Samantabhadra appears. It appears that there existed a tradition that connected Samantabhadra to Aksobhya slightly posterior to the ‘additions’ to the Aṣṭasāhasrikā.

As for the triad of Aksobhya, it must have been formed already along with other triads by the time of composition of the longer Sukhāvatīvyūha which mentions Amitābha’s triad, and the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā which mentions in passing Samantakusuma’s triad in a world-system far away (see below).

The cult of Amitābha

Moving to the south in the path of circumambulation, we find the most famous triad of Amitābha Tathāgata and his two Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara (here spelt Lokeśa possibly for metre’s sake) and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. This set is found in two sūtras of Pure Land Buddhism: the longer version of the Sukhāvatīvyūha and the Contemplation Sutra. The first sūtra says that, in the west in

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67 The three types of elephants are bhadra, manda and mṛga. Three subtypes, bhadramanda, bhadramṛga and mṛgamanda are also mentioned in the Rāmāyana (1.6.22).

68 Apart from these two texts, Gandhahasti appears also in the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa and the shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha as a member of the assembly of Śākyamuni, when the Samādhīrāja makes him visit Śākyamuni from the world of Aksobhya. Samantabhadra does not appear in these texts. Both of these names are used only in the relatively late Karunāṇḍarīka and Mañjuśrīmālākalpa.

69 The other sūtra, the shorter version of the Sukhāvatīvyūha, spells the name of the Tathāgata Amitāyus instead of Amitābha, and does not men-
Sukhāvatī Lokadhātu is Amitābha Tathāgata, the Arhat; he has two Bodhisattvas: the first of them is Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta is the other. The second sūtra states in the same way, for example, in one place, “when these words were spoken, Amitāyus appeared in the air above, attended on his left and right by the two Mahāsattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. So brilliant was their radiance that it was impossible to see them in detail” (Inagaki 1995: 328).

This triad is well known and widespread. It arrived in China in the early phase of transmission of Buddhism and is worshipped today in East Asian countries, but in the Indian context our inscription is the first incontrovertible evidence for the existence of the Sukhāvatī cult proper.

The cult of Samantakusuma

Moving to the west, we find Samantakusuma Tathāgata with Mañjuśrī and Susīdhatamati. In the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā at the end of the introductory section, exactly this triad of the Buddha Samantakusuma is mentioned. As the sūtra describes, ten Bodhisattvas from the Buddha worlds of the ten directions visit Śākyamuni in Sahā, and worship him with jewel lotuses of golden colour as he delivers his sermons. At the end flowers are scattered all around, and he is covered with them and so is his world. It is now com-

70 paścimāyām diśi … sukhāvāryām lokadhātāv amitābho nāma tathā-gato ’rhan … (Asikāga 1965: 26); ekas tayor ānanda avalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ dvitiyo mahāsthāmaprāpto nāma (Asikāga 1965: 49). Vaidya’s edition of the text has Mahāsthāmaprāpto instead of Sthāmaprāpto.

71 The celebrated Mohammad Nari stele of uncertain date (third or fourth century CE or even later?) could serve as such evidence but it has become quite controversial regarding the date and identification. However, its identification as a depiction of Sukhāvatī is rejected by many scholars but accepted by some (e.g. Huntington 1980, Quagliotti et al 1996).
posed of jewels and precious stones, and filled with flowers and fruits “just like the world system Padmāvatī, the Buddha-field of the Tathāgata Samantakusuma, where Mañjuśrī the Crown Prince resides, and the Bodhisattva Susthitamati, and other very powerful Bodhisattvas.”

Though a Buddha of this name does not appear in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, an almost synonymous term, Avakīnākusuma, ‘Scattered Flowers,’ appears there as the name given to a large group of future Buddhas. In the same sūtra, we find yet another Buddha called Suvarṇaṇapuṣpa who is named after a similar concept and described in a similar way. The name Samantakusuma means ‘Flowers All Around’ and Suvarṇaṇapuṣpa means ‘Golden Flowers.’ While the Buddha Samantakusuma is described in our inscription as having his limbs covered with bunches of flowers of True Dharma,

Suvarṇaṇapuṣpa is also described as a future Buddha in a similar fashion in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā: Sākyamuni shines a ‘golden’ smile when Sister Gāṅgadevā appears in his assembly. When Ānanda asks why he is smiling, he tells that Sister Gāṅgadevā will become the Buddha Suvarṇaṇapuṣpa in the future, and relates the name of the future Buddha with the lady’s brahmacarya vow under the Buddha Dīpamkara, and her act of covering the latter with golden flowers.

The world of Samantakusuma is named Abjavatī in our inscription for the sake of metre. The world of Padmāvatī is rarely attested. Beyond the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā and Ajītasenavyākaraṇa (see fn. 80 below), it appears once in the Gāndavyūha (Suzuki & Iizumi 1949: 82) but is spelt Padmavati and the Buddha there is also different.

Ratnakusumasaṃspuspitagātra, a name almost identical in meaning to this attribute of Samantakusuma, appears as the name of one of the Tathāgatas in the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha. In both places the key word ratnakusuma is common. Besides, in the Gāndavyūha (Vaidya p. 66), we find a Bodhisattva situated in the southwest whose long name incorporates the phrase samantakusuma.

See Aṣṭasāhasrikā 19 (Wogihara 1935: 747).
The *Aksobhya*vyūha, however, mentions the same Buddha under the name ‘Golden Lotus’ (as rendered into English from Chinese). The topos is basically the same (though it adds the theme of the preceding Buddha’s *parinirvāṇa*) but the characters involved are different: on the day of his *parinirvāṇa*, the Buddha Aksobhya “will predict Bodhisattva Fragrant Elephant’s attainment of Buddhahood, saying, ‘After my *parinirvāṇa*, you will become a Buddha, named Tathāgata Golden Lotus.’ … At that time, the gods and humans will all scatter over the Buddha garlands of flowers, many kinds of incense, and clothing. The scattered fragrant flowers will pile up around the Buddha to a height of one league” (Chang 1983: 331).

The Buddha figure behind these different names, it appears to me, is the Buddha on the seat of enlightenment (*bodhimaṇḍa*). Let us read the following two representative passages from the *Mahāvastu*, a small portion of a long description of the veneration of the Buddha by the deities:

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75 The *bodhimaṇḍa* was once the most important symbol of Buddhism. It had a status comparable to the *caitya*; or rather, it was the *bodhimaṇḍa* which used to make the *caitya* worthy of veneration. I cite here a passage from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, as quoted by Schopen in one of his articles, which highlights the importance of the *bodhimaṇḍa*:

> “Just Kauśika, as those men and ghosts who have gone to the terrace of enlightenment, or its circumference, or its interior or to the foot of the tree of enlightenment, cannot be hurt by men, or ghosts, or be injured by them, or taken possession of, even with the help of evil animal beings, except as a punishment for former deeds.” … (Conze’s translation quoted in Schopen 2005: 29)

Once Buddha images were introduced, they took the place of the *bodhimaṇḍa* and also of other aniconic symbols. It appears to me that some of the early Buddha figures were held to be connected with certain aniconic symbols which indicated the Buddha’s presence when his images were not yet introduced. So, perhaps, Aksobhya and Samantakusuma have to be connected with the seat of enlightenment, Śākyamuni with the Bodhi tree, and Amitābha with the wheel of Dharma.

76 Other passages of interest from the *Mahāvastu* are: Senart 1890: 303, 309, 352–353, 1897: 277–278.
For seven days while he sat on his solitary seat thousands of kōtis of devas paid him honour. Over that seat they scattered powder of sandal-wood tree and flowers of the coral tree. Above it celestial musical instruments struck up and played. Then devas from above scattered down powder of the celestial sandal-wood tree; of the celestial sandal-wood tree and of the celestial coral tree, of the celestial aloe-wood, of the celestial keśara, of the celestial ramāla. They showered down flowers of the celestial coral tree, of the celestial great coral tree, of the karkārava, of the great karkārava, of the rocamaṇa, of the bhīṣma, of the samantagandha, of the great samantagandha, of the mañjūsaka, of the great mañjūsaka, celestial flowers of the pārijātaka, flowers of gold, of silver, of all precious jewels. There appeared in the sky thirty thousand celestial and bejewelled sunshades shading the Conqueror’s body, which was like a rock overlaid with precious stones, like a tope of gold, blessed with the root of virtue acquired in several kōtis of kalpas (Jones 1952: 269–270).

Again, monks, when the Tathāgata had awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment, for a full seven-days he sat alone cross-legged. Then devas of earth, devas of sky, … and the Akaniṣṭha devas, for a full seven-days honoured, revered, worshipped, and adored the Tathāgata on his noble bodhi throne. And for a full seven-days the whole universe of three thousand worlds became one vision of splendour.

On that occasion the Exalted One uttered these verses:

For a full seven-days the perfect Buddha, the monument of the whole world, after awakening to the supreme enlightenment did
not rise from his seat.

Thousands of koṭis of devas assembled in the sky, and for a full seven-nights poured down a shower of blossoms. Blue lotuses, red lotuses, campaka, and white lotuses, lovely thousand-petalled and brilliant, did the devas pour down (Jones 1952: 317–318).78

The Buddhacarita briefly describes this episode in the second half of the fourteenth canto, while the Lalitavistara elaborates it in four chapters, 19–23, and even beyond in the twenty-fourth. There, different classes of deities and beings are made to venerate the Buddha with various materials: incenses, lights, flowers, jewels and so on. Both the Buddhacarita (15.5) and Lalitavistara (the last paragraph of the prose opening of the twenty-fourth chapter) mention the name Samantakusuma at the end of this episode, though not as the Buddha but as a god who approaches Śākyamuni after the latter’s week-long uninterrupted meditation on the seat of enlightenment.

It seems that the name Samantakusuma can be assigned to the entire episode, or one of the significant figures involved there, particularly to the Buddha being worshipped or the deities worshiping him. Indeed, we have two sets of information, one from the Buddhacarita and Lalitavistara, where this name is given to a representative deity, and the other from our inscription and the Pañcavimśatisāhasrikā (subsequent Prajñāpāramitā sūtras included), where the name is assigned to the Buddha. In this way, we can see

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78 Senart 1890: 348–349: punar aparāṃ bhikṣā tathāgato anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhīṃ abhisambodhītvā saṁtāhapūraṃ ekaparynikenā ati-nāmesī. atha khalu bhāmyavacarā devā antarikṣe carā devā caturmahā-rājikā ca deva ... yāva akanīṣṭhā ca deva saṁtāhapūraṃ tathāgatam bodhimanda varagataṃ satkaraṃti guru karonti mānayantī pujayantī sar-vāvati ca trisāhasramahāsahasrā lokadhātuḥ saṁtāhapūraṃ ekālañkārā abhūṣī. atha khalu bhagavān tāye velāye imāṃ gāthāṃ abhāṣī – saṁtāhapūraṃ sambuddho bodhim buddhītvā uttamāṃ |
asanāto na utthesi sarvalokasya cetīyo ||
devakoṭīsahasrāṇī gaganasmīṃ samāgata |
puspavārṣam pravarsaṃ sapitarātram anūnakam ||
upalām padumām campām puṇḍarikāṃ manoramām |
sahasrāpatrāṃ rucirāṃ tatra devā pravarsiṣu ||
how this name was coined, and realise its antecedents. Anyway, it seems that different names were tried for this Buddha presiding the Padmāvatī world covered with flowers/jewel-flowers/jewels. In the Ajitasenavyākarana, Padmāvatī is retained as the name of one of the cities of the Tathāgatas but the Tathāgata there is named Ratnaśīkhin.

Mañjuśrī is the best-known Bodhisattva. He begins to appear already in earliest Mahāyāna sūtras and his images are widely produced. However, his association with the Buddha Samantakusuma is not known from any other source than the passage from the Pañcavimśatisāhasrikā cited earlier. Fortunately, his association with Sussthitamati, the other Bodhisattva of our triad, is known from one more source. In the Sussthitamatidevaputraparipṛcchā, which makes part of the Mahāratnakūṭa collection, Mañjuśrī teaches Sussthitamati the perfection of wisdom. Sussthitamati as a devaputra/-kanyā in Khotanese materials. Sussthitamati later disappears from the scene but Mañjuśrī rises to prominence.

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79 An association of flowers with the attainment of Buddhahood seems so strong that the Aṣṭasāhasrikā makes Śākyamuni worship the Buddha Dīpamkara with five lotuses in his previous life, so that the latter predicts that he will become the Śākyamuni Buddha. See Aṣṭasāhasrikā 19: WOCHHARA 1935: 747.

81 See HARRISON 2000.
82 This text surviving in Chinese translation is rendered into English in CHANG 1983, pp. 41–72, under the title ‘How to Kill with the Sword of Wisdom.’
83 A reconstruction of the name of this devaputra/-kanyā from Tibetan Blo-rab-brtan into Sanskrit in both THOMAS (1935: 94, 179) and EMMERICK (1967: 9) is Susthiramati, which is very close to the original.
The cult of Śākyamuni

Moving now to the north, we find Śākyamuni Tathāgata with Vajradhara, the king of the Guhyakas, and possibly Maitreya – the one who is richly endowed with maitrī. It is well-known from early textual sources that Vajradhara/Vajrapāni is associated with Śākyamuni. Unfortunately the name of the other Bodhisattva has not survived, but since he is said to be connected with maitrī, it is logical to identify him as Maitreya. He is known as the Buddha’s companion or even as the future Buddha from the Pali sources, and in several Mahāyāna sūtras he appears in the assembly of the Buddha asking questions to the Buddha himself or other fellow Bodhisattvas in the assembly.

The Mahāvastu mentions Indra as Vajravaradha, the holder of a choice Vajra, with Śākyamuni, depicting him as the latter’s protector. However, the Aṣṭasāhasrikā states that Vajrapāni, the great Yakṣa, is the constant companion of the irreversible Bodhisattva. Though identified in this way variously as Indra or a Yakṣa, there is no doubt that ‘the holder of the Vajra’ is associated with Śākyamuni as his protector. I am not aware of any text which brings Maitreya and Vajradhara together as the attendants of Śākyamuni or any

84 The names ending in -eya are in principle metronymic, but one should not forget that there are so many words ending in -eya which do not have metronymic connotations (see Wackernagel 1987: 505–511). All of them, however, can be interpreted as having some specific, mainly causal, relation with the word they are derived from. But still, ‘being rich in X’ is not one of the meanings attested and should be taken as an ‘interpretation.’

85 Senart 1882: 157: agrato vajravaradharo tridaśagurū abaddhama-nīcūdo | indro sahasranayano gacchati purato naravarasya ||

86 Aṣṭasāhasrikā 17 (Wogihara 1935: 683): punar aparām subhūte avinivartanīyasya bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya vajrapānir mahāyakṣo nityānubaddho bhavati | sa durdharo bhavati, anatikramanīyaś ca bha-vati manusyair vā amanusyair vā, durāsadah sarvasattvānām. … ebhir api subhūte ākāraiv ebhir lingair ebhir nimittaḥ samanvāgato bodhisattvo mahāsattvo ‘vinivartanīyo ‘nuttaryāḥ samyaksambodher dhāra-yitavyāḥ. The Daśabhūmika echoes the same idea.
other Buddha, or as one of the interlocutors of Dharma. Since there are no relevant textual sources, they are not identified even in the rare cases that they appear in early images. Vajrapâni is rather the default identification of the first Bodhisattva, but Maitreya always remains unidentified, if he is not misidentified either as Brahmâ or some other Bodhisattva.\(^\text{87}\) As Śākyamuni disappears or is renamed in the scheme of pañcajina-mandala, this triad of Śākyamuni, Maitreya and Vajradhara has further special value.

**The directions of the Buddhas**

It is quite striking that Amitâbha is placed in the south in this inscription, while the Pure Land sûtras, and some other Mahâyâna sûtras too, locate him in the west in Sukhâvatî together with his two Bodhisattvas. This compels me to investigate further the issue of the assignment of the Buddhas in various directions.

The Aksobhyavûha centres on Aksobhya who presides over the world of Abhirati in the east. The sûtra, however, mentions three other Buddhas: Śākyamuni as the narrator of the sûtra, *Suvar-ñana-puspa/-padma as the successor of Buddha Aksobhya, and Buddha *Viśālanetra\(^\text{88}\) under whose guidance the would-be Aksobhya adopted the path of Bodhisattva in the past; but the sûtra does not speak of their directions.

The Aṣṭasâhasrikâ mentions that there are innumerable Buddha-fields with many Buddhas presiding over them in all ten directions but does not name them. However, in the nineteenth chapter, the sûtra implies a set of four Tathâgatas in a successive row: Aksobhya in the world of Abhirati, Dipamkara in the city of Dîpavatî in the distant past (but it is unclear if it was in the Sahâ world itself or somewhere else), and Suvarñana-puspa and Śâkyamuni in their

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\(^{87}\) The figures of the Ramnagar stele, which dates from the year 32 (equivalent to 110 or 159 CE) and is preserved at the National Museum, New Delhi, can be identified as Śâkyamuni with Maitreya and Vajradhara. See the figure numbered 13 in Mîer 1986. For representations of Maitreya and his attributes in different periods, see Bhattacharya 1980.

\(^{88}\) For the name of this Buddha, see Nattier 2000: 85, fn. 45.
Buddha worlds unspecified as regards their name and location in a given direction. Amitābha and his Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, do not appear in this sūtra. Maitreya appears here as a Bodhisattva, but Vajrapāṇi is merely a yakṣa; and the lord of Sahā is still Brahmā, not Śākyamuni.

In the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā, one Buddha with one Bodhisattva is placed in each of the ten directions, but their names are new and arbitrarily created, following an imaginary scheme. For example, the Buddha in the south is Aśokaśrī, his Buddha world is named Sarvaśokāgata, and the Bodhisattva there is named Viggatoka. Apart from this list, the sūtra now and again mentions four Buddhas in their respective worlds, with which its redactor appears to be intimately acquainted: Aśokobhya in Abhirati, Śākyamuni in Sahā, Dīmapkara in Dīpavatī (though only a city, not a Buddha world), and Samantakusuma in Padmapatī with his two Bodhisattva attendants. Amitābha does not appear in this sūtra though Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta show up in the assembly.

All these sūtras look to the east as the direction of Aśokobhya and believe the world of Śākyamuni to be located in the west. Another one of the earliest sūtras which could be grouped together with the above sūtras is the Śūramangalamadhi, which makes a devaputra named *Matyabhimukha come to the assembly of Śākyamuni from the world of Abhirati in the east; otherwise the Buddhas are not assigned to specific directions in this text.

The longer Sukhāvatīvyūha places Amitābha in the west with the two Bodhisattvas, and is not concerned with the direction of other Buddhas. There Śākyamuni is also mentioned, located in Sahā, but Aśokobhya has been completely ignored; he does not feature even in the long list of arbitrary names of Tathāgatas. But, as Schopen has informed us, this sūtra “explicitly refers to a samantabhadracaryā,” suggesting “some kind of linkage between the Bhadracaripraṇidhāna and the cult of Amitābha” (p. 179). Amitābha’s location is fixed also in the Pratyutpannabuddhasammukhāvasthitasamādhi

89 It seems permissible to speculate that the concept of a Buddha city precedes the concept of a Buddha world.

90 See Dutt 1934: 5.
– a relatively early text that mentions Amitābha even though it is not concerned with his cult proper. The other sūtras of the Sukhāvatī cult follow suit. The Bhaisajyagurusūtra, which promotes a new cult of the Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru and shows its affiliation with the cult of Amitābha, assigns the two in the east and the west respectively.

Even after the introduction of the Buddha Amitābha, however, many sūtras are reluctant to fix him in the west. The Samādhīrāja groups innumerable Buddhas in four directions, but does not name them. More than once the sūtra mentions Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Śākyasimha/-muni, and Dīpankara, but locates only Akṣobhya in the east. If we compare these with the four Buddhas known to the redactor of the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā, we can see that the Buddha Samantakusuma of the world of Padmāvatī has been dropped here in order to accommodate the Buddha Amitābha of the world of Sukhāvatī. Similarly, the Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa includes Śākyamuni, Amitābha, Akṣobhya and Prabhūtaratna in a list of thirteen Tathāgatas without specifying their directions.

The Mahāyāna sūtras of the subsequent period present a series of new Tathāgatas and locate them in six, eight, or ten directions. The shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha, like other Mahāyāna sūtras, first mentions that innumerable Tathāgatas exist in ten directions but names only a few of them, and only from six directions. Unlike the longer version, it does not drop Akṣobhya but places him in the east. The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka places sixteen princes of the Buddha Mahābhījñānābhibhū in pairs in eight directions, where Akṣobhya and Amitābha appear in their usual directions. In the Mukta chapter of the Gaṇḍavyūha (SUZUKI & IDZUMI 1949:

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91 Samādhīrāja 28.82f: pūrvayām diṣṭi aprameyān asamkhyaeyān buddhān bhagavataḥ paśyati. evam daksīṇayām pāścimāyām uttarāyām diṣṭi aprameyān asamkhyaeyān buddhān bhagavataḥ paśyati. so 'virahito bhavati buddhadarsanena.

92 Samādhīrāja 14.68–69: gandhahastipurimādiśā gato 'ksobhyaakṣetra diṣṭi lokaviṣrutah bodhisattvanayutaiḥ puraskṛtaḥ sākyasimha dvipadendru prcchanā || sukhāvatīya varalokadhātuto mahāsthāmaprāpta avalokiteśvaraḥ bodhisattvanayutaiḥ puraskṛtaḥ sākyasimha dvipadendru prcchanā ||
81–82), Merchant Muktaka first says that he sees ten Tathāgatas in their Buddha worlds (the names of both Tathāgatas and their lands sound arbitrary and long), and once again (ibid. 82) says that whenever he wants he can see Amitābha in Sukhāvatī, Vajrābha in Candanavatī, Ratnābha in Gandhavatī, Ratnapadmābha in Padmavatī, Sāntābha in Kanakavatī, Akṣobhya in Abhiratī, Simha in Supratiṣṭhā, Candrabuddhi in Ādārṣamandalanirbhāsā, and Vairocana in Ratnaśrīhamsacitrā. This time the number is nine, the order is unusual, and directions are not specified.93

Several mediaeval Mahāyāna sūtras composed subsequently mention Amitābha in the world of Sukhāvatī without specifying the direction. The Ratnaketuparivarta mentions Śākyamuni and Amitāyus without assigning them to specific directions. Instead, it states a promise of Amitāyus that he would be doing this and that in the future (paścime kāle); a reference to time instead of space. The Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā, however, mentions only three Buddhas: Amitāyus, Akṣobhya, and Siddhārthabuddhi (probably an allusion to Śākyamuni) in passing without specifying their directions. The Lankāvatāra mentions Amitābha’s Sukhāvatī as the source of everything including Jinas and Bodhisattvas. Similarly, the Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna shows its affiliation with the cult of Amitābha by mentioning him alone and depicting an access to his Sukhāvatī as the final reward.94

Now we have a more or less clear picture: the Prajñāpāramitā and affiliated sūtras invariably assign Akṣobhya in the east; the sūtras of the Sukhāvatī cult and those sūtras which are under the influence of this cult assign Amitābha in the west (and Akṣobhya

93 It is noteworthy that the list of Tathāgatas in this passage of the Gandavyūha begins with Amitābha and it is even possible that he is placed in the east in that scheme. In the same way, Śākyamuni’s world, Sahā, is positioned in the west in the Larger Prajñāpāramitāsūtra.

94 The Suvarnaprabhāsā, which is regarded as comparatively late, gives what appears to be a scheme of a catuvṛyāhacaitya and names Akṣobhya as the Tathāgata of the east, Amitābha of the west, Ratnaketu of the south, and Dundubhisvara of the north. See the sūtra 1.4: akṣobhyarājāḥ pārvasmin daksine ratnaketunā | paścimāyāṃ amitābha uttare dundubhisvarah ||
in the east if they mention him). However, most of the sūtras which combine both of these traditions are reluctant in fixing the directions of Amitābha and other Buddhas, though they generally pinpoint the direction of Akṣobhya.

**Implications and outcomes**

In the light of the above observations, another important issue can be better explained: the process of inclusion of the cult of Amitābha in a unified cult and identification of access to Sukhāvatī as the ultimate religious goal. Once this process is properly explained, it will help us to understand the formation of our caturvyūhacaitya in a better way, and it can also shed new light on the chronology of a few early Mahāyāna sūtras.

According to Schopen, who identified Sukhāvatī as ‘a generalised religious goal,’ “the fact that rebirth in Sukhāvatī is promised as a reward in conjunction with the cult of the book, or the cult of a specific book … clearly indicates that Sukhāvatī here, in the Samādhīraja and subsequent sūtras,] must have been conceived of as a generalised religious goal in no way attached specifically to the cult of Amitābha” (p. 166). However, Schopen was unable to determine “the degree to which this process of generalisation and disassociation effected a decline and weakening of the specific cult of Amitābha as a separate entity” (p. 183), and expressed the hope that future studies would shed light on this issue.

He was looking at the issue, I would say, from only one side. His starting point was Sukhāvatī’s attestation in the Bhaisajyaguru, Samādhīraja and subsequent mediaeval Mahāyāna sūtras as a generalised religious goal. He did not inquire into the prevailing situation at the time the cult of Amitābha came into existence. Consequently, he was unable to realise the important point that Amitābha’s Sukhāvatī arose only after Akṣobhya’s Abhirati as such a goal.\(^{95}\) There was a stage when Akṣobhya’s world of Abhirati

\(^{95}\) He was, however, aware of the need for defining the relation of Akṣobhya with early sūtras. This need has by now been served, to certain extent, by Jan Nattier’s articles on the cult of Akṣobhya.
was known but Amitābha’s world of Sukhāvatī was not. The Akṣobhyavyūha, Aṣṭasāhasrikā, Aṣṭāvimsatisāhasrikā, Pañcavimsatisāhasrikā, and Śūramgamasonamādhī represent this stage. Let me first quote some lines from the Akṣobhyavyūha:

Śāriputra, if good men or good women [who follow the Bodhisattva path] after their death in this Buddha-land or another Buddha-land, have been born, are being born, or will be born in the Buddha-land of Tathāgata Akṣobhya … (CHANG 1983: 327). Śāriputra, those Bodhisattvas who have received my prophecy and attained nonregression will be born in Akṣobhya Buddha’s land (ibid. 329).

Now here are two passages from the nineteenth Chapter of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā with my translation. Both of these fall in the portions identified as additions by CONZE:

sēyam ānanda gaṅgadevā bhaginī strībhāvam vivartya puruṣabhāvam pratilabhya itāḥ cyutāḥ ‘kṣobhyasya tathāgatasyārhatāḥ samyaksambuddhasya buddhakṣetre ‘bhiratāṁ lokadhātv upapatsyate. tatra cōpapannā akṣobhyasya tathāgatāsya rhatāḥ samyaksambuddhaśyantika brahmacaryam caraśyati. tataḥ cyutā satiḥ buddha-ksetrad buddha-ksetram samkramisyati avirahitā tathāgata-darśanena. (WOGHARA 1935: 745)

This goddess of the Ganges, Ānanda, when she vanishes from this world, she will sever her existence as a woman, assume manhood, and be born in the Abhirati world, the Buddha-field of the Tathāgata Akṣobhya, the Arhat, the fully enlightened. Having reached there she will observe the brahmacarya vow in the presence of Tathāgata Akṣobhya, the Arhat, the fully enlightened. When vanished from this world, she will pass from one Buddha-field to another, never deprived of the sight of the Tathāgatas.

uttāna-paṅkāś te bodhisattvā mahāsattvāḥ, ye akṣobhyasya tathāgatasyārhatāḥ samyaksambuddhasya buddha-ksetre brahma-caryam caraṇā. bodhi-parिनिश्चत्त-упागताः te ānanda bodhisattvā mahāsattvā veditavyāḥ. (WOGHARA 1935: 746)

Those great Bodhisattvas, who conduct the brahmacarya vow in the Buddha-field of Tathāgata Akṣobhya,96 the Arhat, the fully enlight-

96 This role of the teacher or guide of the Bodhisattvas born in his world is found attributed also to Amitābha in the Samādhirāja. See
ened, should be known as the ones who have got rid of the mire, who have reached near the accomplishment of enlightenment.

The Śūramgamasamādhi and Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, though they do not refer to access to the world of Abhirati as a religious reward, are engaged with Aksobhya. They narrate stories of a Bodhisattva who comes to the Sahā world from the Buddha Aksobhya’s world of Abhirati for the sake of perfection of all beings. In this respect, these two texts are different from the rest. However, I think this peculiarity is intended. These two texts are intended for more advanced and intellectually oriented people; their motive is different from that of the Aksobhyavyūha and Prajñāpāramitā texts, and so the process has been reversed to suggest that they can have the same purity in this world.

In the sūtras cited or discussed above, except the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, Amitābha or his two Bodhisattvas are not attested. The Vimalakīrtinirdeśa includes Amitābha and his two Bodhisattvas, though only in two separate lists of assembled Tathāgatas and Bodhisattvas.97 Amitābha appears in the same way in the Śatasāhasrikā, and his Bodhisattvas are included in the assembly in the Pañca-viṃśatisāhasrikā also. My guess is that these sūtras stand at the seam point of the first and second stages.

At some time in this stage the Amitābha cult, which must have existed as a minority cult in certain secluded regions, rose to prominence to compete with and finally eclipse the cult of Aksobhya. The proven existence of Amitābha in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent earlier than anywhere else in India might support this

SCHOPEN 2005: 171.

97 As NATTIER (2000: 80, fn. 19) has pointed out, two translations of the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa made in the third and fifth centuries present “a particularly intriguing tidbit of evidence” for the rise of the Amitābha cult by a change in the sequence of names in a list of Buddhas. As she notes, “Aksobhya appears first after Śākyamuni in the list of Buddhas given in Chih Ch’ien’s translation of the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa, while by the time of Kumārajiva’s translation Amitābha has now been moved to the first place” from the sixth. This “suggests that the cult of Aksobhya was gradually being eclipsed by that of Amitābha.”
argument. Even though the longer version of the Sukhāvatīvyūha does not mention Akṣobhya, a reference to Samantabhadrā’s vows in the śūtra is enough to hold that the redactor of this śūtra was aware of some earlier cult, in which Samantabhadrā had an important role. Unless and until the existence of an independent and archaic cult of Samantabhadrā is confirmed, we cannot ignore the evidence of our inscription which makes Samantabhadrā subordinate to Akṣobhya.98

There was another stage when both of the two Buddhas were known, and their lands were regarded simultaneously as the ultimate religious goal or reward, as two alternatives. The Samādhīrāja and Ajitasenavākarana contain some traces of it. In the Samādhīrāja, access to the Buddha Akṣobhya and his world Abhirati is described as the final religious goal, side by side with access to the Buddha Amitābha and his world of Sukhāvatī.99 Let us look again at the following very exceptional Budhist Sanskrit verse from the Samādhīrāja:

tatha punar amītāyu teṣa tatro bhāsate buddha-aneka-ānuśām sām sarva imi [sukhāvatīṃ praviṣṭo abhirati garva] akṣobhya puṣyā buddham.

So also the Buddha Amitāyus, to those there declares various kinds of blessings: all these have entered Sukhāvatī, and having gone to Abhirati, will see the Buddha Akṣobhya.100

98 The lexicon Amarakośa, which perhaps belongs to the sixth century (see Vogel 1979: 309–310), lists Samantabhadrā as a name of the Buddha, while it does not list any name of celestial Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. This alone cannot be conclusive but can keep open the possibility of Samantabhadrā being in the centre of an independent and earlier cult.

99 Samādhīrāja 34.48: susamgrhitvān ima buddhabodhim dhāretva nityam ca hi gauravena | te arthu kṛtvā vipulaṃ prajānāṃ drakṣyanti akṣobhya naraṇām uttamam ||

100 Schopen 2005: 163–164; Sanskrit verse as cited by Schopen; he has chosen the reading of the oldest manuscript from Gilgit, sarva imi against the reading of the edition, sarvi imi. However, his translation is problematic. It runs as follows:

“So also the Buddha Amitāyus, to those there declares various kinds of
Here Amitābha declares that his devotees go and see Akṣobhya, the Buddha spanning all three times, after entering his Sukhāvatī world. This might point to a stage where the cult of Amitābha was trying to engulf the cult of Akṣobhya. This goes well with one of the boons promised to all inhabitants of Sukhāvatī which states that they can fly to other Buddha-fields to make merit by worshiping the other Buddhas in them.

In the Ajitasenavyākarana too, the pure lands of Akṣobhya and Amitābha, Abhirati and Sukhāvatī, are shown as available goals, but it is less likely that they are “conceived of as being of the same order” as Schopen (p. 158) argued. In the whole of the Ajitasena-vyākarana, Akṣobhya’s Abhirati is mentioned only once. As the passage states, when the Buddha entered the city of Śrāvastī ninety-nine koṭis of niyutas of hundreds of thousands of beings were established in the Buddha world of Sukhāvatī and eighty-four koṭis of niyutas of hundreds of thousands of beings were established in the Buddha world of Abhirati.101 Here the number of people established in Abhirati is smaller that the number of beings established in Sukhāvatī, and Abhirati comes second to Sukhāvatī in order. This suggests that the cult of Amitābha has not yet entirely engulfed the cult of Akṣobhya but was in the process of subduing it.

It seems that even this subordinative reconciliation was short-lived. We soon find Sukhāvatī being unanimously described as the final religious reward in the last phase of this process of identification of such a reward. All the passages Schopen selected and analysed, except those from the Samādhīrāja and Ajitasenavyākarana, represent this stage.

In sum, the following observations can be made: a) the presence and influence of the Buddha Akṣobhya is seen in earlier sūtras, b) soon Amitābha arrives on stage, and for some time the new cult

101 Schopen (2005: 158) quotes this passage but arrives at the conclusion that “Abhirati and Sukhāvatī are here clearly conceived of as being of the same order, and there is no distinction of, or preference for, one over the other.”
struggles to engulf the older cult, c) gradually Amitābha becomes so prominent that all other Buddhas including Akṣobhya are subordinated, and d) newer Mahāyāna sūtras do not even mention many of the subordinated Buddhas.

* * *

At this juncture, I am tempted to produce a relative chronology of early Mahāyāna sūtras, using their affinity or affiliation with the cults of Akṣobhya and Amitābha as a criterion.

Original parts of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā: Originally Akṣobhya is foreign to the sūtra; cf. Conze 1967.

Aṣṭasāhasrikā: This sūtra mentions the genesis of the Buddha Akṣobhya, his parinirvāṇa is imagined, and his career is modeled after that of Śākyamuni.

Akṣobhya additions to the Aṣṭasāhasrikā: Akṣobhya is already a Buddha, his genesis is not discussed.

Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikā and Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā: These do not mention Amitābha or his Bodhisattvas.

Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha: This sūtra mentions the making of the Buddha Amitābha styled after the Aṣṭasāhasrikā, and adopts Samantabhadra’s vows.

Pratyutpannabuddhasammukhāvasthitasamādhi: The Śūraṃgamasamādhi refers to this sūtra, which mentions Amitābha.

Śūraṃgamasamādhi: This sūtra mentions Akṣobhya but is more interested in the conduct of the heroes than the devotional path that provides rebirth in a Buddha world; it refers to the Pratyutpānabuddhasamākāvasthitasamādhi though not to Amitābha.

Śatasāhasrikā and Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: These sūtras mention Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara only in passing.

Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha: The Buddha of Sukhāvati becomes Amitāyus; the Buddhas of six directions are specified.

Samādhirāja and Ajitasenavyākarana: The cults of Akṣobhya and Amitābha overlap, but there are indications that the cult of Amitābha is rising into prominence. Most of the time, he is referred to with his new name.

* * *
Now let us return to our caitya-inscription. The fact that Amitābha is placed in the south in our caitya-inscription, suggests that the presentation of a unified cult was the first priority in the choice of scheme followed in this caitya, rather than assigning Amitābha to his original place. In spite of this, his triad has remained intact in the unified cult of our caturvyūha caitya.

Most probably the cults united in the caitya did not lose their individual identities. Though not separate and independent, they existed embedded in the united cult, as long as the Mahāyāna perspective prevailed. The reality was that the independent identities of all individual cults involved in the caitya were not highlighted in the ‘books’ promoting particular cults. It is not even necessary that what is going on in the realm of lay practices is always reflected in high ‘books’ of philosophical or mythological nature.

Since the triad of the Buddha Amitābha is known from the Sukhāvatīvyūha which was translated already in the second century; since the triad of the Buddha Śākyamuni is depicted in the Ramnagar stele dated year 32 (equivalent to 110 or 159 CE); and since the other triad of the Buddha Samantakusuma is attested in the Pañcavimśatisahasrikā which could be placed around the same period (the Chinese translation requires a mid-third century date at the latest), no doubt remains about the fact that triads of the Buddhas were well known by the early second century CE. Let us try to find out when a fusion of these four triads into a caitya would have occurred. This must have happened before the time assigned to our inscription, the late sixth century. We can use the contents of the inscription to find an answer to this question.

102 However, these books sometimes exceptionally allude to some components of these cults. For example, the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka and Vimalakīrtinirdeśa allude to the fact that Samantabhadra and Vimalakīrti are associated with Abhirati.

103 The late sixth century is rather the time of late Mahāyānic development gradually heading towards Tantrism. The caturvyūha caitya was the working ground for Tantric traditions in the next phase of Buddhism. There we find a set of five Buddhas, four in four directions and one in the centre or pinnacle. In those traditions the set of five Buddhas is completed adding Vairocana at the top of the dome. In this set of five...
As I argued earlier, the triad of Akṣobhya found in our inscription represents a rare and archaic cult of Akṣobhya, which could have existed even before the available sūtras at the level of devotional practice. The triad of Śākyamuni, too, is quite archaic, and cannot help us determine the date of the scheme of our caturvṛtyāhacaitya. The triad of Samantakusuma, too, is archaic, but the evidence of the Pañcavimsatisāhasrikā suggests that it was known to the redactor of this sūtra but probably not to the redactor of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā. Above all, it should be noted that in our caitya Śākyamuni and Samantakusuma, like Akṣobhya and Amitābha, are placed in their own Buddha worlds. This phenomenon is not highlighted in later periods. We know that the Buddhas flanked by two attendants on four sides of the Sāncī stūpa I were added in the fifth century.\textsuperscript{104} It is possible that the idea of combining four Buddhas or four triads was in place, at least in a formative state, already in the fourth century.

The source of the exact scheme followed in this caitya-inscription remains unknown.\textsuperscript{105} Nevertheless, what we can sim-

\textsuperscript{104} DALLAPICCOLA 2004: 805.

\textsuperscript{105} I think we cannot expect to find the exact scheme of this caitya in one Mahāyāna sūtra, as it actually draws individual cults related with different books or traditions together, and we do not have access to ritual manuals of the period which might have recorded such schemes.

There are only six Licchavi caityas with their Buddha images intact, and two of them do not place the Buddhas in customary directions (GUTSCHOW 1998: 32, and a review: DECLER 2000). This suggests that more than one scheme was implemented to form caturvṛtyāhacaityas. Things are less clear particularly when standing Buddha/Bodhisattva images are involved (These caityas with standing figures probably predate those with triads). Art historians have offered competing theories to identify these images but dispute remains. They have also found ‘erroneous cases’ like Amitābha appearing twice (see GUTSCHOW 1998: 32). If we keep in mind that there were different schemes at work, it becomes easier to interpret such irregularities, and we do not need to assume any ‘errors.’ I think the second figure identified by GUTSCHOW or other art historians as Amitābha

Dhyāni Buddhas, the Buddha Samantakusuma is transformed into Ratnasambhava and Śākyamuni, too, is replaced by Amoghasiddhi.
ply observe here is that it combines the three major streams of Mahāyāna known to us, the cult of Akṣobhya, the Prajñāpāramitā cult, and the cult of Amitābha, and perhaps the stream of older Nikāya Buddhism with many cult-branches in which Śākyamuni was worshipped under this or that name.

For early Mahāyāna sūtras, as Schopen argues, “the image cult—like the stūpa cult—is an already established part of Buddhist cult practice,” and they promote “a whole series of already established religious actions undertaken with a specifically defined intention” (p. 118). However, as he states, “early Mahāyāna was neither involved with nor even interested in the early cult of images” (p. 116). “It was trying, most simply, to send its monks back to their books” (pp. 138–139) by promoting the cult of the book or specific books. On this ground, Schopen concludes, “we are left, it seems, with the apparent fact that, at least in regard to major Buddhist cult forms—the stūpa and the image cult—the appearance of early Mahāyāna sūtra literature had no effect” (p. 138).

Though they sound important, these conclusions are a bit exaggerated. We cannot say that the appearance of early Mahāyāna sūtra literature had no effect on the cult forms. There was some effect—rather mutual effect—and because of that the cult of the stūpa, specific cults of images, and the cults of specific books eventually coalesced into a caitya. Buddha images were not an essential part of the stūpa/caitya earlier, but by the time of mediaeval Mahāyāna they became so.

No doubt, “since each text placed itself at the centre of its own cult, early Mahāyāna, rather than being an identifiable single group, was in the beginning a loose federation of a number of distinct though related cults, all of the same pattern, but each associated with its specific text” (p. 52). As it is a general tendency, at least of the laity, to reconcile and identify heterogeneous entities, there

\[ \text{could be some other similar looking Buddha venerated in specific cults.} \]

\[ \text{As I speculate, the cult of Akṣobhya, the Imperturbable, probably was originally associated with the heroic path later attached to Samantabhadra, and his name was a constant reminder to a would-be Bodhisattva not to stumble on the path.} \]
was a clear need of reconciliation and fusion of these specifically heterogeneous but interrelated cults into one unified cult. For this purpose, specific Buddha/Bodhisattva images linked with specific books were made part of the stūpa. This fusion took place at a time when another fusion between the cult of the book and the cult of the stūpa was already at work.\footnote{On the issue of the fusion of the two cults of the stūpa and the book, see \textit{Bentor} 1995. As \textit{Bentor} has stated, early textual evidence for the practice of depositing texts or text portions in stūpas is found in the \textit{Pratyutpannasūtra}.}

If I may take liberty of speculating a bit, I find some scheme in the arrangement of the Tathāgatas in our caitya. In a sense, these four Tathāgatas also represent different aspects of the Buddha, or a Bodhisattva. He is Akṣobhya, the Imperturbable, when he cultivates the six perfections and is on the path of universal good. He is Amitābha, the Buddha of unmeasurable light, when he radiates rays of omniscience, compassion and so on. He is Samantakusuma when he is enthroned in the bodhimanda and enjoys the bliss of enlightenment, at the time when his achievement is celebrated by all divine and mortal beings. And, he is Śākyamuni, the Śākya sage, when he wanders and imparts the knowledge he has achieved.

I want to make one more observation about the arrangement of Bodhisattvas in these sets. In each set, one Bodhisattva is relatively more exalted compared to the other. Samantabhadra has the reputation of a celestial Bodhisattva but Vimalakīrti is a layman living in Vaiśālī, as the \textit{Vimalakīrtinirdeśa} describes. Maitreya is a celestial Bodhisattva, but Vajradhara is a king of lower beings, the Guhyakas. Again, Mañjuśrī is depicted as a godly Bodhisattva since early times but Susthitamati is a son of god with no important role. Similarly, the name of Avalokiteśvara itself suggests his innate divine nature and texts describe him as such, but the other attendant Mahāsthāmaprāpta was once in the mundane realm and has attained the Bodhisattva status with his efforts.
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Bodhisattvabhūmi of Asanga. See DUTT 1966 and WOGIHARA 1930.


Mahāyāna Buddhism and Sukhāvatī cult in India


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KIMURA, Takayasu. See Pañcavimśatisāhasrikā.


Mahāvastu. See Senart and Jones.


Pratyutpannabuddhasammukhāvastisātmyamūḍh. See Harrison 1990.


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— 1935. See *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.