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Evidence for Mahāyāna Buddhism and Sukhāvātī 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 inscriptional 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).¹ 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 Sukhāvātī 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.

¹ 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.² 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 Amītibha Buddha is the Govindnagar inscription from the time of Huviṣka, dated 26 of the Kaniṣka era (equivalent to 104 or 153 CE), inscribed on the pedestal of an image of Buddha Amītibha.³ This

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 Sukhāvātī cult in Newar society but, his starting point being SCHOPEN’S conclusions, the historical aspect of Sukhāvātī 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 $p[i]t[-x](n)[-x]$ and its interpretation as an instrumental singular of *pitṛ*. As SCHOPEN has stated, the upper parts of the *akṣaras* are broken, leaving only the consonants certain, but the vowel sign on top of the first *akṣara* is still partially visible. So, SCHOPEN has conjectured the first *akṣara* as *pi* and suggested to read the word as *pitṛṇā*. He himself, however, has noted a negative point against his suggestion: “*pitṛṇā* 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, *pitena*, 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 Kuṣāṇa 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 Sax-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 *akṣara* at issue must be *po*. I present here both of these *akṣaras*:



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 *papotreṇa*. I see two possibilities: either we have a case of haplography, 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 Sāñcī ... dated to the end of the seventh century” (p. 247). This is not true. About a century before the Sāñcī inscription, a Nepalese inscription refers not only to Amitābha in Sukhāvātī 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 inscriptional 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.⁷ On palaeographical grounds, VAJRACHARYA

ity in that temple is used, not an adjective. So, there is a high chance that the image of the Buddha referred to in our inscription was worshipped as Mahāmuni. It is noteworthy that the second *Bahubuddhasūtra* from the *Mahāvastu* records Mahāmuni as one of the Buddhas (SENART 1897: 230). Also in the versified core of the *Daśabhūmika* section of the *Mahāvastu*, the name Śākyamuni is used in a similar way, where Śākyamuni is used only once but Mahāmuni 15 times. See also fn. 31.

⁷ VAJRACHARYA relates this inscription to the lime-washed white *caitya* in front of which it is currently placed. However, the inscription itself does not speak of any *caitya/stūpa* but of an image of Mahāmuni and a community of the nobles (*āryasaṅgha*).

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 rebuilt 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 Vṛṣadeva, who is described as 'siding with Buddhism' (*sugataśāsanapakṣapāṭī*) 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*.⁸ 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 *māghavarṣe 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.⁹ References to Jovian years appear in Gupta inscriptions only between 475–528 CE¹⁰ where we find them in a standardised expression – a month name prefixed with *mahā-* and compounded with *saṃvatsara*. Two more references appear also in Kadamba inscriptions of about the middle of the fifth century, but there the expression is not standardised.¹¹ 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 *pauṣe saṃvatsare* occurs in one of the Halsi grants of Mrgeśvaravarman dated in his third regnal year (line 8), and *vaiśākhre saṃvatsare* in the other dated in his eighth regnal year (line 10). FLEET (1888: 334, fn. 9) relates the use of the prefix *mahā-* 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.¹² 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).¹³ So, the image of Mahāmuni with this inscription must have been installed in one of these years.¹⁴

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

(1) *durddharair indriyaiḥ kṛtsnā vāhyate yair iyam prajā
dāsavat tāni sandhāryya kṛpayā paripīḍya tā[m]*¹⁵ [1]

(1) *dānaśīla<kṣamāvīryadhyānaprajñāniṣevanāt>*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

+²⁰ + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + +
 + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + [6]

- (4) *catvāriṃśat sapañceha yatra dhānyasya mānikāḥ
 varṣe varṣe 'tha jāyante kṣetran tat tādrśan dadau* [7]

+
 + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + [8]

- (5) *bhūyaḥ saṅghasya bhaktārtthaṃ pūjārtthañ ca mahāmuneḥ
 kṣetran dattan tayā hy atra aṣṭāviṃśatimānikāḥ* [9]

+ + + + + + + + + + +²¹ + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + +
 + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + [10]

- (6) *vicitraṃ deyadharmmam me kārayitveha yac chubham
 strībhāvaṃ hi virāgyāhaṃ puruṣatvam avāpya ca*²² [11]

*śokakāmamayāt pa<ṅkāt>*²³ + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + +
 + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + [12]

<samvat> + + + (7) *māghavarse kāle āṣāḍhaśudiva 10* ²⁴ *asyān
 divasapūrvvāyām bhaṭṭārakamahārājaśrī*+ + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + +
 + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + + ²⁵

²⁰ VAJRACHARYA reads *śrī* here which I cannot see on the stone or photo.

²¹ The context asks for an expression meaning 'of paddy are produced every year' in the lost part, something close to *dhānyasya varṣe varṣe 'tha jāyante* as in stanza 7.

²² The usage of *virāgya* here is noteworthy. This peculiar form is attested in the *Daśabhūmika*, and other forms of the denominative verbal stem *virāgay* are found also in other Mahāyāna *sūtras*. See EDGERTON, S.V. *virāgayati*.

²³ The ligature of *tpa* is rather clearly visible but VAJRACHARYA does not read *pa*. I have completed the word by supplying <*ṅkāt*>. In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, all those Bodhisattvas who reach the land of Abhirati are said to 'have gone across the mire' (*uttṛṇapankāḥ*). For this passage, see below, pp. 62–63.

²⁴ VAJRACHARYA misses the symbol of 2 and takes the day as the 10th.

²⁵ If we wanted to guess at the lost part of this line, adapting to the formula found in the inscription of Śaka 425 mentioned before and using the possible names of the King Vṛṣadeva and the donor Cārumatī, it would be something closer to this: *ovṛṣadevasya sāgraṃ varṣaśataṃ samājñā-*

Like a slave,²⁶ 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 Ma<hāmuni>...²⁷ [ll.1–2=vv.1–4]

Taking a lot of trouble²⁸ for quite a long time, [she built] the abode of the destroyer of the worldly existence, [i.e. Mahāmuni,] which

payataḥ cārumatyā sthāpito bhagavān mahāmuniḥ.

²⁶ 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-bhūmi*. 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 bodhisattvaḥ pravarāyām agryāyām api saṃpadi vartamāno dāsavat preṣyavad vaśyaputravac canaladārakavan nīcacitto nihatamadamānāhaṃkāraḥ* (WOGIHARA 1936: 225 reads *nihita*^o = ‘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 *paripīḍ* 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.’

²⁷ The statement might have concluded with something like ‘that Mahāmuni excels all’ or ‘that Mahāmuni may show us/you the way.’

²⁸ 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 Āṣāḍha, 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 *Mūlasarvāstivādinaya*, 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

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ 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.

³¹ 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 Śākya-muni 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 *Kinnarijātaka* of the *Mahāvastu*. The name Mahāmuni appears 27 times in the *Mahāvastu*, more than in any other text (the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* comes second with 11 occurrences).

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) *deyadharmo yaṃ śrīdhārmārājikāmātya-su[pa]* // (2) *sāṃghikabhikṣusamghasa* // (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 sarvāṃgapratyaṃgopetāḥ avikalendriyā[ḥ]*. (The edition omits *visarga*, probably because of *yaś ca* in the following.)

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 gaṅgadevā bhaginī strībhāvaṃ vivartya puruṣabhāvaṃ pratilabhya itaś cyutvā akṣobhyasya tathāgata-syārhatāḥ samyaksambuddhasya buddhakṣetre abhiratyāṃ lokadhātāv upapatsyate.*

³⁵ The wording of the inscription, *strībhāvaṃ hi virāgyāhaṃ puruṣatvam avāpya ca*, is very close to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* wording: *strībhāvaṃ vivartya (vivarjya in the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā) puruṣabhāvaṃ pratilabhya.*

Here are two more statements close to the expression in the inscription: *Samādhirāja* 32.157cd–158ab: *vivartayitvā strībhāvaṃ sa bhaved dharmabhāṇakaḥ, na sā puno 'pi strībhāvaṃ itaḥ paścād grahīsyati. Ratnaketuparivarta* (II.27: KURUMIYA p. 50): *strībhāvaṃ antardhāya puruṣabhāvaḥ saṃvr̥tto. 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 contemporary 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 *yad atra puṇyam...* being blended in a Śaiva inscription from Budhanilakantha (Kathmandu) inscribed on the base of a *śivaliṅga* and dated in [Śaka] *saṃvat* 398 (476/477 CE).³⁷ The related portion of the inscription runs this way:

*<śrīmānadeva>nṛpatiḥ praṇato jagāda
tvatsthāpanājanitam asti yad atra puṇyam
tat sarvvalokasahitasya vivṛddhamūlam
duḥkhakṣayāya bhagavan mama sarvathāstu.*

The king <Illustrious Mānadeva>, bowed to [the god], said: ‘What here is the merit produced from this action of founding you, [i.e. the *śivaliṅga*,] 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.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 Avalokiteśvara³⁹ which is dated in [Śaka] *saṃvat* 479 (558 CE):

(1) *saṃvat 479 dviṭīyāṣāḍha... .yajīva.....(2)bhagavadāryyā-*

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.

³⁸ For an elaboration on this, see ACHARYA 2007.

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.

<valokiteśvara>... ..mānenārddha... .. (3) sarvvajñājnānāvāptaye bhavatu⁴⁰

The [Śaka] year 479, the second Āṣāḍha <Pri>yajīva [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, *sarvvajñājnānāvāptaye*, 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 Gnoli, I am of the opinion that it should be Gaṅgādeva (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) om̐ sva<sti saṃvat> ++++++ bhattārakama<hārājaśrī-gaṅ>[gā]devasya sāgraṃ varṣaśataṃ samājñā<payataḥ> (2) sarvvasattvahitasukhārtthāya bhagavata āryyāvalokiteśvaranātha⁴¹ pratiṣṭhāpitaḥ [SPACE] deyadharmmo 'yaṃ paramopāsakamaṇiguptasya (3) bhāryyayā mahendramatyā saha yad attra puṇyaṃ tad bha[va]tu mātāpitr̥pūrvvaṅgamaṃ kṛtvā sarvvasattvānāṃ sarvvākāra-ropeta(4)++++sarvvajñājnānāvāptaye⁴²

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ This sentence is grammatically incorrect. It needs to be either *bhagavān āryyāvalokiteśvaranāthaḥ* or *bhagavān āryyāvalokiteśvaranāthasya vigrahaḥ*.

⁴² VAJRACHARYA 1973: 177, no. 40.

Om, good <luck! In the year...> when the lord great <king Illustrious Gaṅ>gādeva is ruling for hundred years and further, [an image of] the lord Āryāvalokiteśvara, the Blessed One, has been set up. This is a charity of Paramopāsaka Maṅigupta together with his wife Mahendramatī. 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 *sarvajñānāna*, which is attested in many Mahāyāna *sūtras* including the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, larger *Sukhāvativyūha* and also in Asaṅga's *Bodhisattvabhūmi*. Compared to *sarvajñānāna*, *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 *sarvajñānāna* was the last member of a tripartite compound which contained *sarvākāraropeta* as the first and another word of five *akṣaras* as the second member. *Sarvākāraropeta* appears once qualifying *śūnyatā* in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (WOGIHARA 1935: 750), and once in the *Lalitavistara* qualifying *supariśodhitajñāna* (VAIDYA 1958: 309). In the *Daśabhūmika* (KONDO 1936: 61), *sarvākāraropetasarvajñānāna* is found as a compound without any intervening element, and in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (KIMURA 2006: 166), we find *sarvākāraropeta* compounded with *sarvākārajñatā*. In a seventh century Nepalese inscription, *anuttara* is combined with *sarvajñānāna* in a similar donative formula,⁴³ and this combination is also attested in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. However, in our inscription just *anuttara* is not possible, because we have space for five *akṣaras*, and *-ta-* at the end of the first word is intact, which would not have been so if the following *akṣara* 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 STAËL-HOLSTEIN (1926: 8), VOROBYOVA-DESYATOVSKAYA

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 Sukhāvātī 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.⁴⁵ It is not dated but on palaeographical grounds it is placed about the time of Aṃśuvarman, 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 Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala team in the fifth issue of their Nepali journal

et al (2002: 5–6) introduce a wrong word division and read “*yās ca satv[ān] paripācayati tān sarvān uttarasyā(ṃ) samyaksambodh[au].*” Since *anuttarasyāṃ samyaksambodhau* is attested dozens of times in Mahāyāna *sūtras*, I suggest to read *sarvānuttarasyāṃ* as a compound.

One more expression found in our inscription, *sarvasattvahitasukha-*, appears in several Mahāyāna *sūtras* including the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* and the larger *Sukhāvātīvyūha*.

⁴⁵ 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.

Pūrṇimā, and it has been included in VAJRACHARYA'S book.⁴⁶ 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 Śikhariṇī, 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) [*siddham*]⁴⁷ *akṣobhyam akṣobhyaśītāgramūrtin
tathāgataṃ staumya abhito bhiratyām*

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.

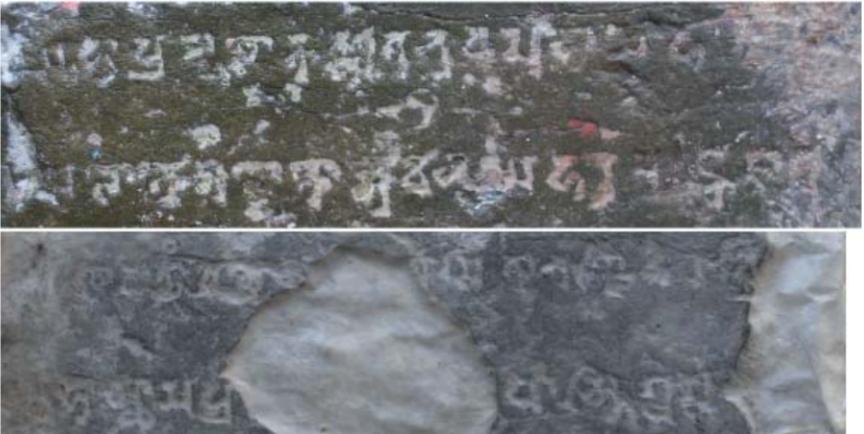
⁴⁷ VAJRACHARYA (1973: 387) reads *om*.

- 2) *samantabhadram bhuvī bhadracāriṇan
tathaiva sannirmalakīrtimālinam*
bhiratyām | bhiramyam V; bhadracāriṇan | bhadrakāriṇan V



South side:

- 1) *mahāprajñālokakṣatabhavamahāmohatimiram
sukhāvatyāṃ vande satatam amitābhañ jinaravim*
- 2) *salokeśam lokodbhavabhayaharam pañkajadharam
mahāsthāmapr[ā]<ptam aniyatakr>pāsnigdhama[na][sam]*



[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].⁴⁹ [I praise] Samantabhra [Bodhisattva], who performs good [deeds] on earth, and in the same way, Sannirmalakīrtimālin [Bodhisattva].

[South Side:] I always venerate Amitābha, the Sun-like Jina, in the world of Sukhāvātī, 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,⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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

In this *caitya*, 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

⁴⁹ The original meaning of *śīta* is 'sharpened,' and this meaning fits well here, but VAJRACHARYA (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 *śīta* appear together into *akṣobhy* and *aśīta*, and thus, get closer to 'black' (*asīta*). Something like this could be lying behind the attributed complexion of Akṣobhya.

⁵⁰ The inscription reads *salokeśaṃ*, 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 *salokeśaṃ* as 'and Lokeśa' following the demand of the context.

⁵¹ As an alternative, one can probably take *nityaṃ* 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.⁵² This clearly suggests that, in this *caitya*, the Tathāgatas are placed in the lower level and the Bodhisattvas in the higher.⁵³ 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

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).⁵⁴ 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 *caitya*

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 *caitya* is indicated by an auspicious symbol, and here is housed Akṣobhya Tathāgata together with Samantabhadra and Sannirmalakīrtimālin 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 *Akṣobhyavyūha*, one of the early Mahāyāna texts translated into Chinese, which is also made part of the *Mahā-*

⁵⁴ AS ALSOP has argued, the Licchavi stone *caityas* were originally built with empty niches. It is highly probable that this was the case with our *caitya*, and whatever we see now under the niches, defaced stones or recognisable images, are unoriginal.

ratnakūṭa collection,⁵⁵ and the portions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* regarded as additions (but made before the second century CE)⁵⁶ that the cult of Akṣobhya predated the cult of Amitābha,⁵⁷ 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*.⁵⁸ The *Akṣobhyavyūha* 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 Sākyamuni in mediaeval Mahāyāna sources. However, he is said to be coming from the east, the direction of Akṣobhya, in the *Samantabhadrotsāhana* chapter of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*.⁵⁹ 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 *Gaṇḍavyūha*,⁶⁰ 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,

⁵⁵ The Bajaur manuscripts in Kharosthi script and Gandhari language also include a large portion of an early Mahāyāna *sūtra* related with the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, see STRAUCH 2007: 47–60.

⁵⁶ For identification of these portions, see CONZE 1967: 172–173.

⁵⁷ NATTIER 2000: 101–102.

⁵⁸ SENART 1882: 139.

⁵⁹ *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* 26: *atha khalu samantabhadro bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ pūrvasyāṃ diśi gaṇanāsamatikrāntair bodhisattvair mahāsattvaiḥ sārddham parivṛtaḥ ...*

⁶⁰ For example, SUZUKI & IDZUMI 1934: 425: *yathā ceha sahāyāṃ lokadhātau bhagavato vairocanasya pādāmūlagataḥ samantabhadro bodhisattvo dakṣiṇaṃ pāṇiṃ prasārya sudhanasya mūrdhni pratiṣṭhāpāyāmāsa, 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 *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* 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 Akṣobhya'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-

⁶¹ I do not think that Vimalakīrti's identity as a layman poses problem to his inclusion in the triad of Akṣobhya as an object of devotion. It is not necessary that both of the Bodhisattvas included in a triad are of equal status. In fact in all four triads from our inscription, the first Bodhisattva is superior to the second in the same set (see p. 70).

Because in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Vimalakīrti is made to narrate Dharma even to Mañjuśrī, a celestial Bodhisattva with the role of a saviour, one can imagine how much importance is attached to him in certain traditions: he is regarded virtually superior in knowledge and its transmission even though he is a layman. However, it is true that he is dropped off in later traditions (with a few exceptions).

⁶² LAMOTTE 1998: §§ 78–79.

⁶³ Here I remind the reader that when Khotanese fragments of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* were discovered, EMMERICK was able to correct three Bodhisattva names reconstructed by LAMOTTE: Meruśikharadhara to Meruśikharakūṭarāja, Vimalacandragarbha to Śaśivimalagarbha, Sarvaratnaracitā to Sarvaratnapratyupta. See, LAMOTTE 1998: xv.

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 *Vimalaprabhākīrtirāja⁶⁴ is the closest match for Sannirmalakīrtimālin of our inscription.

Vimalakīrti appears also in the first two chapters of the Tantric *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* (Sāstrī 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.⁶⁵ What is more, upon a request of the assembly, he brings the Abhirati world into the Sahā world, i.e. our world.⁶⁶

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 *Akṣobhyavyūha* 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.

⁶⁶ *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* 11.2–4.

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,⁶⁷ 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 *Akṣobhyavyūha* and the ‘additions’ to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*,⁶⁸ and before the longer *Sukhāvātīvyūha* where Samantabhadra appears. It appears that there existed a tradition that connected Samantabhadra to Akṣobhya slightly posterior to the ‘additions’ to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*.

As for the triad of Akṣobhya, it must have been formed already along with other triads by the time of composition of the longer *Sukhāvātīvyūha* 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 *Sukhāvātīvyūha* and the Contemplation Sutra.⁶⁹ The first *sūtra* says that, in the west in

⁶⁷ The three types of elephants are *bhadra*, *mandra* and *mṛga*. Three subtypes, *bhadramandra*, *bhadramṛga* and *mṛgamandra* are also mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (I.6.22).

⁶⁸ Apart from these two texts, Gandhahasti appears also in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the shorter *Sukhāvātīvyūha* as a member of the assembly of Śākyamuni, when the *Samādhirāja* makes him visit Śākyamuni from the world of Akṣobhya. Samantabhadra does not appear in these texts. Both of these names are used only in the relatively late *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* and *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.

⁶⁹ The other *sūtra*, the shorter version of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha*, spells the name of the Tathāgata Amitāyus instead of Amitābha, and does not men-

Sukhāvātī Lokadhātu is Amitābha Tathāgata, the *Arhat*; he has two Bodhisattvas: the first of them is Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta is the other.⁷⁰ 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 evidence⁷¹ for the existence of the Sukhāvātī cult proper.

The cult of Samantakusuma

Moving to the west, we find Samantakusuma Tathāgata with Mañjuśrī and Susthitamati. 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-

tion Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta even among the assembled Bodhisattvas. For the two alternative names Amitābha and Amitāyus, see NATTIER 2007.

⁷⁰ *paścimāyāṃ diśi ... sukhāvatyāṃ lokadhātāv amitābho nāma tathāgato rhan ...* (ASIKAGA 1965: 26); *ekas tayor ānanda avalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ dviṭīyo mahāsthāmaprāpto nāma* (ASIKAGA 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 Sukhāvātī 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 Padmāvātī, the Buddha-field of the Tathāgata Samantakusuma, where Mañjuśrī the Crown Prince resides, and the Bodhisattva Susthitamati, and other very powerful Bodhisattvas.”⁷²

Though a Buddha of this name does not appear in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, an almost synonymous term, Avakīrṇakusuma, ‘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 Suvarṇapuṣpa who is named after a similar concept and described in a similar way. The name Samantakusuma means ‘Flowers All Around’ and Suvarṇapuṣpa means ‘Golden Flowers.’ While the Buddha Samantakusuma is described in our inscription as having his limbs covered with bunches of flowers of True Dharma,⁷³ Suvarṇapuṣpa is also described as a future Buddha in a similar fashion in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*: Sākyamuni shines a ‘golden’ smile when Sister Gaṅgadevā appears in his assembly. When Ānanda asks why he is smiling, he tells that Sister Gaṅgadevā will become the Buddha Suvarṇapuṣpa in the future, and relates the name of the future Buddha with the lady’s *brahmacarya* vow under the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, and her act of covering the latter with golden flowers.⁷⁴

⁷² CONZE 1975: 44; Sanskrit text (DUTT 1934: 17): *tadyathāpi nāma padmāvātī lokadhātuḥ samantakusumasya tathāgatasya buddhakṣetram yatra mañjuśrīḥ kumārabhūtaḥ pratīvasati susthitamatiś ca bodhisattvaḥ anye ca mahaujaskā bodhisattvāḥ*.

The world of Samantakusuma is named Abjavatī in our inscription for the sake of metre. The world of Padmāvātī is rarely attested. Beyond the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* and *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa* (see fn. 80 below), it appears once in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (SUZUKI & IDZUMI 1949: 82) but is spelt Padmavātī and the Buddha there is also different.

⁷³ Ratnakusumasampūṣpitagātra, a name almost identical in meaning to this attribute of Samantakusuma, appears as the name of one of the Tathāgatas in the Smaller *Sukhāvātīvyūha*. In both places the key word *ratnakusuma* is common. Besides, in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (VAIDYA p. 66), we find a Bodhisattva situated in the southwest whose long name incorporates the phrase *samantakusuma*.

⁷⁴ See *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 19 (WOGIHARA 1935: 747).

The *Akṣobhyavyūha*, 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 Akṣobhya “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*).⁷⁵ Let us read the following two representative⁷⁶ passages from the *Mahāvastu*, a small portion of a long description of the veneration of the Buddha by the deities:

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, Akṣobhya 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 *koṭis* 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 aloe-wood, of the celestial *keśara*, of celestial *tamāla*. They showered down flowers of the celestial coral tree, of the celestial great coral tree, of the *karkārava*, of the great *karkārava*, of the *rocamāna*, of the *bhīṣma*, of the *samantagandha*, of the great *samantagandha*, of the *mañjūṣaka*, of the great *mañjūṣaka*, 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 *koṭis* of *kalpas* (JONES 1952: 269–270).⁷⁷

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

⁷⁷ SENART 1890: 286–287: *saptāhaṃ ekāsane devakoṭisahasrāṇi pūjayensuḥ. tasmim āsane divyaṃ candanacūrṇaṃ okirensuḥ puṣpehi ca māndāravehi okirensuḥ divyāni tūryāni upari aghaṭṭitāni pravādyensuḥ tadā devā ca divyāni candanacūrṇāni uparito prakirensuḥ divyāni ca agurucūrṇāni divyāni ca keśalacūrṇāni divyāni tamālapatracūrāni divyāni māndāravāṇi puṣpāṇi pravarsensuḥ mahāmāndāravāṇi puṣpāṇi karkāravāṇi mahākarkāravāṇi rocamānāni mahārocamānāni bhīṣmāni mahābhīṣmāni samantagandhāni mahāsamantagandhāni mañjūṣakāni mahāmañjūṣakāni pārijātakapuṣpāṇi divyāni suvaṇapuṣpāṇi rupyapuṣpāṇi sarvaratanāmayāni puṣpāṇi pravarsensuḥ divyāni triṃśac-chatasahasrāṇi divyāni ratnamayāni antarikṣasmim prādurbhūtāni cchādayensuḥ jinakāyaṃ śailaṃ ratnāmayaṃ stūpaṃ vā svarṇamayam naikakalpakotiḥśalamūlasamanvāgataṃ.*

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 worshipping 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 *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (subsequent *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* included), where the name is assigned to the Buddha. In this way, we can see

⁷⁸ SENART 1890: 348–349: *punar aparaṃ bhikṣū tathāgato anuttarāṃ samyaksambodhiṃ abhisambodhitvā saptāhapūraṃ ekaparyāṅkena atināmesi. atha khalu bhūmyavacarā devā antarikṣecarā devā caturmahārājikā ca devā ... yāva akaniṣṭhā ca devā saptāhapūraṃ tathāgataṃ bodhimaṇḍavaragataṃ satkaronti gurukaronti mānāyanti pūjayanti sarvāvatī ca trisāhasramahāsāhasrā lokadhātuḥ saptāhapūraṃ ekālaṅkāra abhūṣi. atha khalu bhagavaṃ tāye velāye imāṃ gāthāṃ abhāṣi –*

saptāhapūraṃ sambuddho bodhiṃ buddhitva uttamāṃ |
āsanāto na utthesi sarvalokasya cetiyo ||

devakoṭisahasrāṇi gagaṇasmim samāgatā |
puṣpavarṣaṃ pravarṣensu saptarātraṃ anūnakaṃ ||

utpalāṃ padumāṃ campāṃ puṇḍarīkāṃ manoramāṃ |
sahasrapatrāṃ rucirāṃ tatra devā pravarṣiṣu ||

how this name was coined, and realise its antecedents.⁷⁹ Anyway, it seems that different names were tried for this Buddha presiding the Padmāvātī world covered with flowers/jewel-flowers/jewels. In the *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa*, Padmāvātī is retained as the name of one of the cities of the Tathāgatas but the Tathāgata there is named Ratnaśikhin.⁸⁰

Mañjuśrī is the best-known Bodhisattva. He begins to appear already in earliest Mahāyāna *sūtras* and his images are widely produced.⁸¹ However, his association with the Buddha Samantakusuma is not known from any other source than the passage from the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* cited earlier. Fortunately, his association with Susthitamati, the other Bodhisattva of our triad, is known from one more source. In the *Susthitamatidevaputra-paripṛcchā*,⁸² which makes part of the *Mahāratnakūṭa* collection, Mañjuśrī teaches Susthitamati the perfection of wisdom. Susthitamati as a *devaputra* is also present in the Buddha's assembly in the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā*. It is also noteworthy that Susthitamati appears as a *devaputra/-kanyā* in Khotanese materials.⁸³ Susthitamati later disappears from the scene but Mañjuśrī rises to prominence.

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

⁸⁰ DUTT 1984: 111–112.

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*.⁸⁴ It is well-known from early textual sources that Vajradhara/Vajrapāṇi 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 Vajravaradhara, the holder of a choice Vajra, with Śākyamuni, depicting him as the latter's protector.⁸⁵ However, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* states that Vajrapāṇi, the great Yakṣa, is the constant companion of the irreversible Bodhisattva.⁸⁶ 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 ābaddhamanīcūḍo | indro sahasranayano gacchati purato naravarasya ||*

⁸⁶ *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 17 (WOGIHARA 1935: 683): *punar aparaṃ subhūte avinivartanīyaśya bodhisattvasya mahāsattvasya vajrapāṇir mahāyakṣo nityānubaddho bhavati | sa durdharṣo bhavati, anantikramaṇīyaś ca bhavati manuṣyair vā amanuṣyair vā, durāsadaḥ sarvasattvānāṃ. ... ebhir api subhūte ākārair ebhir liṅgaṃ ebhir nimittaiḥ samanvāgato bodhisattvo mahāsattvo 'vinivartanīyo 'nuttarāyāḥ samyaksambodher dhāraṇītyaḥ. 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. Vajrapāṇi is rather the default identification of the first Bodhisattva, but Maitreya always remains unidentified, if he is not misidentified either as Brahmā or some other Bodhisattva.⁸⁷ As Śākyamuni disappears or is renamed in the scheme of *pañcajinamaṇḍala*, this triad of Śākyamuni, Maitreya and Vajradhara has further special value.

The directions of the Buddhas

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

The *Akṣobhyavyūha* centres on Akṣobhya who presides over the world of Abhirati in the east. The *sūtra*, however, mentions three other Buddhas: Śākyamuni as the narrator of the *sūtra*, *Suvarṇaṇapūṣpa/-padma as the successor of Buddha Akṣobhya, and Buddha *Viśālanetra⁸⁸ under whose guidance the would-be Akṣobhya adopted the path of Bodhisattva in the past; but the *sūtra* does not speak of their directions.

The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* 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 *sūtra* implies a set of four Tathāgatas in a successive row: Akṣobhya in the world of Abhirati, Dīpaṃkara in the city of Dīpavātī in the distant past (but it is unclear if it was in the Sahā world itself or somewhere else), and Suvarṇaṇapūṣpa and Śākyamuni in their

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 Śākyamuni with Maitreya and Vajradhara. See the figure numbered 13 in MYER 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 Sarvaśokāpagata, and the Bodhisattva there is named Viga-taśoka. 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: Akṣobhya in Abhirati, Śākyamuni in Sahā, Dīpaṃkara in Dīpavatī (though only a city, not a Buddha world),⁸⁹ and Samantakusuma in Padmāvātī with his two Bodhisattva attendants. Amitābha does not appear in this *sūtra* though Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta show up in the assembly.⁹⁰

All these *sūtras* look to the east as the direction of Akṣobhya 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 *Śūraṃgamasamādhi*, 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 *Sukhāvātīvyūha* 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 Akṣobhya 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 *samantabhadra-caryā*,” suggesting “some kind of linkage between the *Bhadracarī-praṇidhāna* 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 Sukhāvātī cult follow suit. The *Bhaiṣajyagurusūtra*, 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 *Samādhirāja* groups innumerable Buddhas in four directions,⁹¹ but does not name them. More than once the *sūtra* mentions Akṣobhya, Amitābha, Śākyasiṃha/-muni, and Dīpaṃkara, but locates only Akṣobhya in the east.⁹² If we compare these with the four Buddhas known to the redactor of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, we can see that the Buddha Samantakuṣuma of the world of Padmāvātī has been dropped here in order to accommodate the Buddha Amitābha of the world of Sukhāvātī. Similarly, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* 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 *Sukhāvātīvyūha*, 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 Mahābhijñāñānābhībhū in pairs in eight directions, where Akṣobhya and Amitābha appear in their usual directions. In the Mukta chapter of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (SUZUKI & IDZUMI 1949:

⁹¹ *Samādhirāja* 28.82f: *pūrvasyāṃ diśi aprameyān asaṃkhyeyān buddhān bhagavataḥ paśyati. evaṃ dakṣiṇasyāṃ paścimāyāṃ uttarasyāṃ diśi aprameyān asaṃkhyeyān buddhān bhagavataḥ paśyati. so 'virahito bhavati buddhadarśanena.*

⁹² *Samādhirāja* 14.68–69: *gandhahasti purimādiśā gato 'kṣobhyakṣetra diśi lokaviśrutaḥ | bodhisattvanayutaiḥ puraskṛtaḥ śākyasiṃhu dvipadendru pṛcchanā || sukhāvātīya varalokadhātuto mahāsthāmaprāpta avalokiteśvaraḥ | bodhisattvanayutaiḥ puraskṛtaḥ śākyasiṃhu dvipadendru pṛcchanā ||*

81–82), Merchant Mukataka 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 Sukhāvātī, Vajrābha in Candanavātī, Ratnābha in Gandhavātī, Ratnapadmābha in Padmavātī, Śāntābha in Kanakavātī, Akṣobhya in Abhiratī, Siṃha in Supraṭiṣṭhā, Candrabuddhi in Ādarśamaṇḍalanirbhāsā, and Vairocana in Ratnaśrīhaṃsacitrā. 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 Sukhāvātī 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 *Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā*, 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 Sukhāvātī 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 Sukhāvātī 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 *Sukhāvātī* 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 *Gaṇḍavyūha* 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 *Suvarṇaprabhāsa*, which is regarded as comparatively late, gives what appears to be a scheme of a *caturvyūhacaitya* 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 pūrvasmin dakṣiṇe ratnaketunā | paścimāyām amitābha uttare dundubhisvaraḥ ||*

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 Sukhāvātī as the ultimate religious goal. Once this process is properly explained, it will help us to understand the formation of our *caturvyūhacāitya* 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 Sukhāvātī as ‘a generalised religious goal,’ “the fact that rebirth in Sukhāvātī is promised as a reward in conjunction with the cult of the book, or the cult of a specific book ... clearly indicates that Sukhāvātī here[, in the *Samādhirāja* 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 Sukhāvātī’s attestation in the *Bhaiṣajyaguru*, *Samādhirāja* 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 Sukhāvātī 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 Sukhāvātī was not. The *Akṣobhyavyūha*, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Aṣṭāviṃśatisāhasrikā*, *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, and *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* 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 strībhāvaṃ vivartya puruṣabhāvaṃ pratilabhya itaś cyutvā 'kṣobhyasya tathāgatasyârhatāḥ samyak-saṃbuddhasya buddhakṣetre 'bhiratyāṃ lokadhātāv upapatsyate. tatra cōpapannā akṣobhyasya tathāgatasyârhatāḥ samyak-saṃbuddhasyântike brahmacaryaṃ carisyati. tataś cyutā satī buddha-kṣetrād buddha-kṣetraṃ saṃkramisyati avirahitā tathāgata-darśanena. (WOGIHARA 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.

uttīrṇa-pāṅkās te bodhisattvā mahāsattvāḥ, ye akṣobhyasya tathāgatasyârhatāḥ samyak-saṃbuddhasya buddha-kṣetre brahma-caryaṃ caranti. bodhi-pariniṣpatty-upagatās te ānanda bodhisattvā mahāsattvā veditavyāḥ. (WOGIHARA 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 *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* and *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, though they do not refer to access to the world of Abhirati as a religious reward, are engaged with Akṣobhya. They narrate stories of a Bodhisattva who comes to the Sahā world from the Buddha Akṣobhya'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 *Akṣobhyavyūha* 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 *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* 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 Akṣobhya. 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, “Akṣobhya appears first after Śākyamuni in the list of Buddhas given in Chih Ch'ien's translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, while by the time of Kumārajīva's translation Amitābha has now been moved to the first place” from the sixth. This “suggests that the cult of Akṣobhya was gradually being eclipsed by that of Amitābha.”

argument. Even though the longer version of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha* does not mention Akṣobhya, a reference to Samantabhadra's vows in the *sūtra* is enough to hold that the redactor of this *sūtra* was aware of some earlier cult, in which Samantabhadra had an important role. Unless and until the existence of an independent and archaic cult of Samantabhadra is confirmed, we cannot ignore the evidence of our inscription which makes Samantabhadra 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 *Samādhirāja* and *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa* contain some traces of it. In the *Samādhirāja*, 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 Sukhāvātī.⁹⁹ Let us look again at the following very exceptional Buddhist Sanskrit verse from the *Samādhirāja*:

*tatha punar amitāyus teṣa tatro bhāṣate buddha-aneka-ānuśaṃ
sām sarva imi [sukhāvātīm praviṣṭo abhirati gatva] akṣobhya paśyī
buddhaṃ.*

So also the Buddha Amitāyus, to those there declares various kinds of blessings: all these have entered Sukhāvātī, 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 Samantabhadra 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 Samantabhadra being in the centre of an independent and earlier cult.

⁹⁹ *Samādhirāja* 34.48: *susaṃgrhītvān ima buddhabodhiṃ dhāretva nityaṃ ca hi gauraveṇa | te arthu kṛtvā vipulaṃ prajānāṃ draṅsyanti akṣobhya narāṇam 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 Sukhāvātī 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 Sukhāvātī which states that they can fly to other Buddha-fields to make merit by worshipping the other Buddhas in them.

In the *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa* too, the pure lands of Akṣobhya and Amitābha, Abhirati and Sukhāvātī, 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 *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa*, 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 Sukhāvātī 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 than the number of beings established in Sukhāvātī, and Abhirati comes second to Sukhāvātī 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 Sukhāvātī 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 *Samādhirāja* and *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa*, 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

blessings: ‘You will all go to my Sukhāvātī.’ Having gone to Abhirati, they see the Buddha Akṣobhya.”

¹⁰¹ SCHOPEN (2005: 158) quotes this passage but arrives at the conclusion that “Abhirati and Sukhāvātī 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.

Akṣobhyavyūha: 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 *Sukhāvātīvyūha*: This *sūtra* mentions the making of the Buddha Amitābha styled after the *Akṣobhyavyūha*, and adopts Samantabhadra's vows.

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

Śūraṅgamasamādhi: 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 *Pratyutpannabuddhasammukhāvasthitasamādhi* though not to Amitābha.

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

Shorter *Sukhāvātīvyūha*: The Buddha of Sukhāvātī becomes Amitāyus; the Buddhas of six directions are specified.

Samādhirāja and *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa*: 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 *caturvyūhacaitya*.

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.¹⁰² 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 *Sukhāvātīvyūha* 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 *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* 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.¹⁰³ 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 *caturvyūhacaitya* 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 *caturvyūhacāitya*. The triad of Samantakusuma, too, is archaic, but the evidence of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* 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 *cāitya* 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 Sāñcī *stūpa* I were added in the fifth century.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 *cāitya*-inscription remains unknown.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, what we can sim-

Dhyānī Buddhas, the Buddha Samantakusuma is transformed into Ratnasambhava and Śākyamuni, too, is replaced by Amoghasiddhi.

¹⁰⁴ DALLAPICCOLA 2004: 805.

¹⁰⁵ I think we cannot expect to find the exact scheme of this *cāitya* 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 *cāityas* 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 *caturvyūhacāityas*. Things are less clear particularly when standing Buddha/Bodhisattva images are involved (These *cāityas* 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

ply observe here is that it combines the three major streams of Mahāyāna known to us, the cult of Akṣobhya,¹⁰⁶ 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

could be some other similar looking Buddha venerated in specific cults.

¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

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 *bodhimāṇḍa* 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 *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.

¹⁰⁷ On the issue of the fusion of the two cults of the *stūpa* and the book, see BENTOR 1995. AS BENTOR has stated, early textual evidence for the practice of depositing texts or text portions in *stūpas* is found in the *Pratyutpannasūtra*.

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