

Sutra of the Medicine Buddha

Translated & Annotated under the Guidance of
Dharma Master Hsuan Jung

by Minh Thành & P.D. Leigh



E-mail: bdea@buddhanet.net
Web site: www.buddhanet.net

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D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (p. 161):

Yakushi (the Medicine Buddha) is the Bodhisattva doctor. He holds a medicine jar in his hand and is attended by twelve gods each of whom represents one of his twelve vows. The main object of his appearance among us is to cure us of ignorance, which is the most fundamental of all the ills the flesh is heir to.

Dedication of Merit

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn the Buddha's Pure Land,
repaying the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts
generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.
Homage to Amita Buddha!

SUTRA OF THE MEDICINE BUDDHA

Kinh Dược Sư

藥
師
經

Taisho XIV, 450

Translated and annotated under the guidance of
Dharma Master Hsuan Jung
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International Buddhist Monastic Institute
2001



Medicine Buddha
Sutra 藥師經



The *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* is among the most popular texts in East Asia, along with the *Amitabha*, the *Ksitigarbha* and the *Lotus* sutras. This new translation, freely available to all seekers, includes the oral comments of several contemporary senior monks.

2001
Second edition

International Buddhist Monastic Institute
9250 Columbus Avenue
North Hills, CA 91343 (USA)
tel. (818) 893-5317

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mthanhlee@aol.com

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Cover illustration

Stamped Buddha images, above the ceiling of an ancient temple.

Amitabha Buddha (first row)
Medicine Buddha (second & third rows)
Japan, ca. 13th c.

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Email: overseas@budaedu.org.tw
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Bhaishajyaguru (Yakushi Nyorai)

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
NOTE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
SUTRA OF THE MEDICINE BUDDHA	17
NOTES	47
GLOSSARY	57

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Note to the English Edition

The present work is part of a multilingual series of Pure Land and Pure Land-related texts prepared since 1991 by the Van Hien Study Group, in co-operation with the Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada and the International Buddhist Monastic Institute (USA).

This new translation is of a Pure Land-related text, the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*. It has benefitted from six previous renderings in both Sino-Vietnamese and English and incorporates oral explanations and comments provided by several contemporary senior Masters. Explanatory notes and a glossary are included for the benefit of readers.



In the Mahayana tradition of East Asia, particularly China, Japan, Vietnam and Tibet, Bhaishajya-guru, the Medicine Buddha, (*Yao-shih Fo*, *Yakushi*, *Dược Sư Phật*, *Sangye Menla*), occupies a special place in the hearts of the devout. Specializing in curing disease, both physical and mental – of which delusion is the root cause – the Medicine Buddha is also the Buddha of wisdom. His heal-

ing acts are but the prelude to Supreme Enlightenment for those seekers who have the good fortune to learn of his vows or merely to hear his name!

Toward this ultimate goal, the sutra contains a passage describing the steps taken by the Medicine Buddha to help “monks, nuns, upasakas, upasikas, laymen and laywomen” who seek rebirth in Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha in the West.

A key element of the sutra is its emphasis on the assistance of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and its corollary of single-minded, enlightened faith. This is the crux of the sutra, the source of the efficacy of the Buddhas’ and Bodhisattvas’ vows. *If you are utterly sincere, if you do not harbor a single doubt*, you are fully concentrated – you are in samadhi. Your mind is then in tune with the mind of the Buddhas; a process of *spiritual osmosis* occurs whereby their merits and virtues become your own. How can your wishes and hopes then not become reality?¹

May all sentient beings live in peace, ultimately attaining Supreme Enlightenment under the benevolent light of the Medicine Buddha – *in this world* – and the compassionate light of Amitabha Buddha – *in the worlds beyond!*²

Van Hien Study Group
Bhaishajya-guru Festival
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Introduction

In the vast Mahayana pantheon, three Buddhas stand supreme: *Sakyamuni* the Buddha of the present age; *Amitabha*, the Lord of Sukhavati, the Western Pure Land; and the *Medicine Buddha*, the “Healing Buddha”, the “Doctor of Body and Soul”. As embodiments of the archetypical “healer” watching over the living and “consoler” watching over those long gone, the Medicine Buddha and Amitabha Buddha represent teachings common to all traditions of Buddhism.³

I. *Bhaishajya guru – the Medicine Buddha*

In East Asian temples, the Medicine Buddha is usually represented seated as part of a massive trinity with Sakyamuni (in the center) and Amitabha (on Sakyamuni’s right). His right hand is raised, forming the Varada mudra, the hand-and-fingers gesture symbolizing offering, giving, compassion. The left hand usually rests on his lap, holding a jar of medicine (or sometimes a healing fruit or stupa). The medicine jar, painted dark blue (the color of the gemstone lapis lazuli), is the distinguishing feature of this Buddha, although it may be missing from some statues.⁴

The Medicine Buddha should be distinguished from Aksobya Buddha (whose Pure Land is also in the East)⁵

and from the Medicine King *Bodhisattva* (referred to in the *Lotus Sutra*).

2. *The Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*

There are currently five extant Chinese translations from the Sanskrit, done between AD 317 and AD 707, as well as two Tibetan translations. The text that forms the basis of this translation is that of the Patriarch Hsuan-tsang, founder of the Chinese Yogacara (Mind-Only) school and translator of some 75 Buddhist sutras. Completed in AD 650, it is considered the most complete and authoritative version of the sutra.

The sutra is composed essentially of three parts, the first describing the Twelve Great Vows of the Medicine Buddha and the second, his extensive merits as well as the various ways he comes to the aid of those beset by sufferings and calamities. The third part sets forth the vows of the twelve Yaksa Generals to benefit sentient beings.

The sutra is influential throughout East Asia, as it combines the Pure Land teachings on rebirth and the esoteric practices of reciting dharani and lighting lamps with the promise of *practical benefits* in everyday life. This promise (of protection against disease and other personal misfortunes) is the single most attractive feature of the sutra.

3. *Teachings of the sutra*

The sutra emphasizes faith in the assistance of the Medicine Buddha, while not neglecting *self-power*, the cultivation of the devout.

The Buddha then said to Ananda: “if sentient beings [beset by heavy karma] should hear the name of the Medicine Buddha Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata, single-mindedly recite and hold fast to it without harboring a single doubt, then it will be impossible for them to sink into the Evil Realms.

“O, Ananda! These sublime practices of the Buddhas are difficult to believe in, difficult to understand. Yet you are now able to uphold them. You should realize that this is due to the awesome power of the Tathagatas.”

However, the question remains as to how reciting the name and making offerings to the Medicine Buddha can ward off disease and calamity, bringing peace and joy to the sick and suffering. In this context, the teachings on the transference of merit and on Mind-Only come into focus.

a) *Mind-Only*

All karma, good or bad, is created from the mind. If through visualizing the Medicine Buddha or reciting his name, a person’s mind changes from greed, anger and delusion to selflessness, compassion and wisdom, a change in his negative pattern of thinking is realized and his nega-

xiii

tive karma changes for the good. “The drifting life is cast aside for one of spiritual dedication” (John Blofeld). With the removal of greed, anger and delusion, most other illnesses, however physical their symptoms, are also eventually cured.

b) *Transference of merit*

Some of us may ask whether the effect of evil karma can be... changed by repeating the name of Kuan-Yin (Avalokitesvara). This question is tied up with that of rebirth in Sukhavati (the Pure Land) and it may be answered by saying that the invocation of Kuan-Yin’s name forms another cause which will right away offset the previous karma. We know, for example, that if there is a dark, heavy cloud above, the chances are that it will rain. But we also know that if a strong wind should blow, the cloud will be carried away somewhere else and we will not feel the rain. Similarly, the addition of one big factor can alter the whole course of karma.... It is only by accepting the idea of life as one whole that both Theravadins and Mahayanists can advocate the practice of transference of merit to others. With the case of Kuan-Yin then, by calling on Her name we identify ourselves with Her and as a result of this identification, Her merits flow over to us. These merits which are now ours then counterbalance our bad karma and save us from calamity. The Law of Cause and Effect still stands good. All that has happened is that a powerful and immensely good karma has overshadowed the weaker one. (Lecture on Kuan-Yin by Tech Eng Soon – Penang Buddhist Association, c. 1960. Pamphlet.)

xiv

c) *Efficacy of the Vows*

The key to the sutra’s efficacy lies in the complete absence of doubt on the part of the practitioner. If he is utterly sincere, he is in a *de facto* state of samadhi – the very state of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. His mind is then the mind of the Buddhas – their merits and virtues become his own. How then can disease or calamity defeat him?



In the end, the teaching of the *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha* is one of life and hope, infinite trust and boundless compassion – in other words, a teaching of the heart.

What is told is just what the wonder images in the temples tell. Somebody arrived, infinite years ago, who promised release from misery, salvation. Trust in this promise, hold fast to the name of this Buddha.... If a man once heard His name, a new hope has come into his life – this hope is his treasure, he must not squander it. (W. Liebenthal)

And squander it he must not, because this hope leads to nothing less than eventual Enlightenment and Buddhahood.⁶

mt/pd

xv

Faith is the basis of the path, the mother of virtues,
Nourishing and growing all good ways...
Faith can increase knowledge and virtue;
Faith can assure arrival at Enlightenment.
(*Avatamsaka Sutra*)

Sutra of the Medicine Buddha



Sutra of the Medicine Buddha Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata: His Past Vows, Merits & Virtues

(Translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the

Tang dynasty Tripitaka Master Hsuan-tsang)

[Translated into English by Minh Thanh & P.D. Leigh (2001)]

Thus have I heard: Once Buddha Sakyamuni, the World-Honored One, was traveling throughout the various lands to teach and convert the people. When he arrived in Vaisali, he rested under the Tree of Music, accompanied by 8,000 great Bhiksus. An immeasurably great Assembly, including 36,000 great Bodhisattvas as well as kings, great ministers, Brahmins, laymen and women, the Eight Types of Divinities and other human and non-human beings, gathered respectfully around the Buddha as He preached the Dharma.

At that time, the Bodhisattva Manjusri, Prince of the Dharma, receiving the awesome spiritual power of the Buddha, rose from his seat, adjusted his robe to bare his shoulder and knelt on his right knee. He bowed deeply, and with palms joined, respectfully addressed the Buddha: “World-Honored One, may I please request you to explain

17

the various names and titles, the great, past vows and the superlative virtues of the Buddhas, so that those who are listening to you will be freed of karmic obstructions, while in the future, sentient beings in the Dharma Semblance Age will also derive great benefit and joy.”

The Buddha praised the Bodhisattva Manjusri, saying:

“Excellent! Excellent, Manjusri! Out of great compassion, you have urged me to explain the names and titles,⁷ merits and virtues and past vows of the Buddhas, in order to liberate those who are bound by karmic obstructions and bring benefits, peace and joy to all sentient beings in the Dharma Semblance Age. Now, listen attentively and reflect very carefully upon what I am about to say.”

The Bodhisattva Manjusri replied: “So be it, World-Honored One. We will joyfully listen to whatever you wish to teach.”



The Buddha then said to the Bodhisattva Manjusri:

“East of this world, past countless Buddha-lands – more numerous than the grains of sand in ten Ganges Rivers – there exists a world called Pure Lapis Lazuli. The Buddha of that world is called the Medicine Buddha Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata, Arhat, the Perfectly Enlightened, Perfect in Mind and Deed, Well Gone, Knower of the World, Unsurpassed Being, Tamer of

18

Passions, Teacher of Gods and Men, Buddha-World-Honored One.

“Manjusri, when the World-Honored Medicine Buddha was treading the Bodhisattva path, he solemnly made Twelve Great Vows to grant sentient beings whatever they desired.”

First Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment, brilliant rays will shine forth from my body, illuminating infinite, countless boundless realms. This body will be adorned with the Thirty-Two Marks of Greatness and Eighty Auspicious Characteristics. Furthermore, I will enable all sentient beings to become just like me.

Second Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, my body, inside and out, will radiate far and wide the clarity and flawless purity of lapis lazuli. This body will be adorned with superlative virtues and dwell peacefully in the midst of a web of light more magnificent than the sun or moon. The light will awaken the minds of all beings dwelling in darkness, enabling them to engage in their pursuits according to their wishes.

19

Third Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, I will, with infinite wisdom and skillful means, provide all sentient beings with an inexhaustible quantity of goods to meet their material needs. They will never want for anything.

Fourth Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, I will set all who follow heretical ways upon the path to Enlightenment. Likewise, I will set those who follow the Sravaka and Pratyeka-Buddha ways onto the Mahayana path.

Fifth Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, I will help all the countless sentient beings who cultivate the path of morality in accordance with my Dharma to observe the rules of conduct (Precepts) to perfection, in conformity with the Three Root Precepts. Even those guilty of disparaging or violating the Precepts will regain their purity upon hearing my name, and avoid descending upon the Evil Paths.

20

Sixth Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, sentient beings with imperfect bodies – whose senses are deficient, who are ugly, stupid, blind, deaf, mute, crippled, hunchbacked, leprous, insane or suffering from various other illnesses – will, upon hearing my name, acquire well-formed bodies, endowed with intelligence, with all senses intact. They will be free of illness and suffering.

Seventh Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, sentient beings afflicted with various illnesses, with no one to help them, nowhere to turn, no physicians, no medicine, no family, no home – who are destitute and miserable – will, as soon as my name passes through their ears, be relieved of all their illnesses. With mind and body peaceful and contented, they will enjoy home, family and property in abundance and eventually realize Unsurpassed Supreme Enlightenment.

Eighth Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, those women who are extremely disgusted with the ‘hundred afflictions that befall women’ and wish

to abandon their female form, will, upon hearing my name, all be reborn as men. They will be endowed with noble features and eventually realize Unsurpassed Supreme Enlightenment.

Ninth Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, I will help all sentient beings escape from the demons’ net and free themselves from the bonds of heretical paths.

“Should they be caught in the thicket of wrong views, I will lead them to correct views, gradually inducing them to cultivate the practices of Bodhisattvas and swiftly realize Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment.

Tenth Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life,, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, those sentient beings who are shackled, beaten, imprisoned, condemned to death or otherwise subjected to countless miseries and humiliations by royal decree – and who are suffering in body and mind from this oppression – need only hear my name to be freed from all these afflictions, thanks to the awesome power of my merits and virtues.

Eleventh Great vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, if sentient beings who are tormented by hunger and thirst – to the point of creating evil karma in their attempts to survive – should succeed in hearing my name, recite it single-mindedly and hold fast to it, I will first satisfy them with the most exquisite food and drink. Ultimately, it is through the flavor of the Dharma that I will establish them in the realm of peace and happiness.

Twelfth Great Vow

“I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, if sentient beings who are utterly destitute, lacking clothes to protect them from mosquitos and flies, heat and cold – and are suffering day and night – should hear my name, recite it single-mindedly and hold fast to it, their wishes will be fulfilled. They will immediately receive all manner of exquisite clothing, precious adornments, flower garlands and incense powder, and will enjoy music and entertainment to their heart’s content.”

“Manjusri, these are the Twelve Sublime Vows made by the World-Honored Medicine Buddha Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata, Arhat, the Perfectly Enlightened, when he was cultivating the Bodhisattva path.



“Manjusri, as to these Great Vows made by the Medicine Buddha while he was following the Bodhisattva path – *as well as the merits, virtues and adornments of his Buddha-land* – I cannot possibly describe them all, not even if I were to speak for an aeon or more. However, this Buddha-land is utterly pure. You will find no temptations,⁸ no Evil Paths nor even cries of suffering there.

“In this land, the ground is made of lapis lazuli, the boundaries are demarcated with golden cords, the towns, towers, palaces, pavilions, as well as the balconies, windows and draperies are all made of the Seven Treasures. The merits, virtues and adornments of this realm are identical to those of Amitabha Buddha’s Pure Land in the west.

“In this land dwell two great Bodhisattvas, Universal Solar Radiance and Universal Lunar Radiance. Among the countless Bodhisattvas, they are the leaders. Each in turn will serve as successor to the Medicine Buddha and as the able guardian of His True Dharma treasury.

“For these reasons, Manjusri, all devout men and women should vow to be born in this land.⁹



Buddha Sakyamuni then told the Bodhisattva Manjusri:

“There are sentient beings who cannot tell right from wrong. They are greedy and mean, do not practice charity

and do not understand the rewards of generosity. They are ignorant and unintelligent. Lacking the foundations of faith, they amass riches, which they assiduously hoard. Whenever they come across anyone seeking charity, they become annoyed; if forced to give, they feel as much pain and regret as if they were parting with their own flesh.

“Moreover, there are also countless sentient beings who are miserly and avaricious. They spend time amassing wealth, while not daring to spend it even on themselves, let alone on parents, spouse, children, servants or beggars. Upon their death, these stingy persons will descend onto the paths of hungry ghosts or animality.

“However, even though they may suffer such a fate, if in a previous existence in the human realm they happened to hear the name of the Medicine Buddha, and now recall and recite his name, even briefly, they will immediately vanish from the Evil Paths to be born once more among humans. However, they will remember their stay on the Evil Paths and, dreading their past suffering, will cease to wallow in worldly pleasures. They will gladly practice charity themselves, praise others who do so and will no longer be stingy.

“Eventually, they will even be able to donate their head, eyes, limbs, blood, flesh or other parts of their bodies to those who need them, not to mention mere material possessions.¹⁰



“Moreover, Manjusri, there are sentient beings who have accepted the teachings of the Tathagata but have violated the Precepts (moral rules). Or, they have not violated the Precepts, but have broken the regulations. Or else, while they have violated neither the Precepts nor the regulations, they have disparaged Right Views; or they have not disparaged Right Views but have abandoned extensive study of the Dharma and thus cannot explain the profound meaning of the sutras preached by the Buddha. Or else, although they may be learned, they have grown conceited. Because conceit clouds the mind, they believe that they are in the right and others are in the wrong. Therefore, they deprecate the correct Dharma – and ally themselves with demons.

“Such deluded persons not only follow wrong views themselves, they also lead countless other sentient beings into the same great pitfall. These sentient beings are bound to wander endlessly on the paths of hell, animality and hungry ghosts.

“Yet, if they should succeed in hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha, they will abandon their evil conduct forthwith to cultivate wholesome ways, and thus avoid descending upon the Evil Paths.¹¹

“Even those who cannot abandon evil practices or cultivate wholesome teachings, and thus descend onto the

Evil Paths, can still benefit from the awesome power of the Medicine Buddha’s past vows. If through this power, they should hear his name even briefly, their lives on the Evil Paths will end and they will be born again in the human realm. They will hold correct views, diligently pursue their practice and tame their minds. They will then be able to abandon the home life to become monks or nuns. They will uphold and study the Dharma of the Tathagatas rather than disparaging and violating it. With correct views and extensive study, they will fathom the extremely profound meaning of the teachings, abandon all conceit and cease to disparage the correct Dharma. They will no longer have demons as companions, but will gradually cultivate the practices of Bodhisattvas and swiftly perfect them.

“Moreover, Manjusri, there are sentient beings who are avaricious, envious, jealous and accustomed to praising themselves and disparaging others. They are bound to sink onto the three Evil Paths, suffering intense misery for countless thousands of years. When this intense suffering comes to an end, they will be born in the human world as oxen, horses, donkeys or camels. Often beaten and mistreated, they will suffer hunger and thirst and constantly travel along the road carrying heavy loads. If they succeed in returning as human beings, they will be among the poor and lowly, always serving others, constantly receiving orders, never being free.

“However, if any of them, in a former incarnation as a human being, have heard the name of the World-Honored Medicine Buddha and, as a result of this good cause, now remember and single-mindedly take refuge in him, they will, thanks to this Buddha’s spiritual powers, escape all suffering. Their senses will be sharp and they will be wise and learned, constantly seeking the supreme teachings, and meeting with good spiritual friends. They will break forever through Mara’s net, smash the shell of delusion, dry up the river of afflictions and thus escape all the worry and suffering of birth, old age, disease and death.

“Moreover, Manjusri, there are sentient beings who love to quarrel, create schisms and engage in legal disputes. They constantly snake themselves and others suffer, creating and increasing all kinds of evil karma with body, speech and mind.

“They plot against one another without mercy, while invoking the spirits of mountains, forests, trees and tombs.

“They kill sentient beings and use their flesh and blood to propitiate the Yaksa and Raksasa demons.

“They may also write down the names and make images of those against whom they harbor grudges, curse them with evil mantras or try to harm or kill them with potions, witchcraft or demons-raised-from-the-dead.¹²

“However, if the victims succeed in hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha, none of these evil practices can harm them. Moreover, everyone concerned will develop

compassionate minds, endeavoring to benefit and bring peace and joy to others.

“They will abandon their harmful thoughts and their angry, spiteful minds and all parties will be happy and satisfied with what they have.

“They will cease to encroach upon others but will instead seek to benefit one another.



“Moreover, Manjusri, within the Fourfold Assembly of Bhiksus, Bhiksunis, Upasakas and Upasikas, as well as among other men and women of pure faith, there are those who are able to adhere to the Eight Precepts for a full year or for three months a year, dedicating these good roots toward rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Life, so as to listen to the correct Dharma.

“If their rebirth in the Pure Land is still uncertain, but they hear the name of the World-Honored Medicine Buddha, then, at the time of death, eight great Bodhisattvas, namely,

*Manjusri, Avalokitesvara,
Mahaṣṭhamaprapta, Aksayamati,
Ratnacandana, Bhaishajya-rajā,
Bhaishajya-samudgata, and Maitreya,*

will traverse space and descend to show them the way. They will thereupon be reborn spontaneously in jeweled flowers of many hues.

“Moreover, there are those who are born in the celestial realms, thanks to [hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha]. Despite their birth in the celestial realms, their good roots are still not exhausted, and thus they will not be born again on the Evil Paths. When their life-span in the celestial realms comes to an end, they may return to the human world as Wheel-turning Kings, ruling over the Four Continents [around Mount Sumeru]. With awesome virtues and ease, they will set countless hundreds of thousands of sentient beings onto the path of the Ten Virtues.

“Or else, such persons may be born as Ksatriyas (the military ruling class), or Brahmins or laymen of great families, with abundant wealth and overflowing granaries and storehouses. They will be endowed with noble features, numerous family members and retainers, as well as intelligence, wisdom, bravery, vigor and the imposing demeanor of a great hero. Likewise, if there is any woman who hears and single-mindedly holds fast to the name of the Medicine Buddha, she will never again be born in female form.¹³



“Manjusri, after the Medicine Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment, he realized, by virtue of his past vows, that sentient beings endured various ailments, such as emaciation, crippling disabilities, fever, dysentery, jaundice, etc. Some were the targets of black magic or various poisons, while others suffered short lives or untimely death. At that time, seeking to put an end to these miseries and fulfil the desires of sentient beings, he entered a samadhi called ‘Eliminating All the Suffering and Afflictions of Sentient Beings’.

“Once he entered that samadhi, a brilliant light shone forth from his urna as he uttered a great Dharani:

*Namo bhagavate
Bhaishajyaguru-vaidurya
Prabha-rajaya
Tathagataya
Arhate
Samyak-sambuddhaya
Tadyatha*

*Om Bhaishajye Bhaishajye
Bhaishajya-samudgate Svaha.¹⁴*

“As soon as the Medicine Buddha, in his radiance, had uttered this Dharani, the entire cosmos rumbled and shook. Brilliant lights shone forth, allowing all sentient beings to escape disease and suffering and enjoy peace and happiness.¹⁵

“Manjusri, if you come across any man (or woman) suffering illness, you should constantly cleanse him, bathe him and rinse his mouth. You should single-mindedly recite this Dharani 108 times on his behalf, over his food, medicine or water from which insects have been removed. Once he has consumed the food or drink, his illness and suffering will disappear.

“If the patient has a particular wish and single-mindedly recites this Dharani, his wish will be fulfilled. He will be free of disease, enjoy a longer life and, at death, be born in the realm of the Medicine Buddha. He will then be beyond retrogression and eventually realize Supreme Enlightenment.

“Therefore, Manjusri, any man or woman who single-mindedly reveres and respectfully makes offerings to the Medicine Buddha should constantly recite this Dharani, never letting it out of his mind.



“Moreover, Manjusri, upon hearing the various names of the Medicine Buddha Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata, Arhat, the Perfectly Enlightened, men and women of pure faith should recite and hold fast to this name.

“Each morning, at dawn, having bathed themselves and cleaned their teeth, they should make offerings of fragrant flowers, incense, perfume and various kinds of

music before an image of this Buddha. Furthermore, they should copy this sutra or have others do so, as well as single-mindedly recite it and listen to explanations of its meaning.

“They should offer all the necessities of life to the Dharma masters who teach this sutra, making sure they lack nothing.

“In this way, devout men and women will be under the protection of the Buddhas. All their wishes will be fulfilled and they will eventually realize Supreme Enlightenment.”



The Bodhisattva Manjusri then respectfully addressed the Buddha: “O, World-Honored One, I vow that in the Dharma Semblance Age, I will use every skillful means to help men and women of pure faith hear the name of the World-Honored Medicine Buddha. Even in their sleep, I will awaken their consciousness with the name of this Buddha.

“O, World-Honored One, if any devout persons should read, recite and uphold this sutra, or lecture upon it, explaining its meaning to others, or copy it or have others copy it, or if they should pay it the utmost reverence, adorning it with fragrant flowers, perfumes, incense powder and sticks, garlands, necklaces, banners, canopies,

dance and music and protecting it with precious, multi-colored cloth – and if they should prepare a clean site, erect a high altar and place the sutra upon it – the Four Great Celestial Kings, their retinues as well as countless hundreds of thousands of other divinities, will thereupon proceed to this place to make offerings and guard this sutra.



“World-Honored One, wherever this treasure of a sutra has spread and there are people capable of upholding it, you should know that, thanks to the Medicine Buddha’s past vows, his virtues and the power of his name, the place will be free of untimely death. In that place, there will no longer be evil demons or spirits to sap the vital energy of the people.

“Even if there were, these devout men and women would recover, enjoying good health and peace of mind.”



The Buddha then spoke to Manjusri:

“So be it, so be it, Manjusri. It is just as you say. If men and women of pure faith wish to make offerings to the World-Honored Medicine Buddha, they should first make an image of this Buddha, and then place it upon a pure, clean altar.

“They should scatter all kinds of flowers, burn all varieties of incense and adorn the place with banners and pennants. For seven days and nights they should adhere to the Eight Precepts, consume only pure food, bathe and perfume themselves, put on clean, fresh clothing and keep their mind undefiled, free of anger or malice. They should develop feelings of kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity toward all sentient beings, while bringing them benefits, peace and happiness. They should play music and sing the praises of the Medicine Buddha, while circumambulating his image in a rightward [clockwise] direction. Moreover, they should bear in mind his merits, virtues and past vows, while reading and reciting this sutra, reflecting on its meaning and explaining it to others.

“Whatever they wish will then be fulfilled – whether it be longevity, wealth, or anything else, such as official position or the birth of sons and daughters.

“Moreover, if any sentient beings suddenly suffer nightmares and witness all kinds of evil omens – such as flocks of strange birds, or hundreds of ominous signs throughout their homes – they need only venerate the World-Honored Medicine Buddha with all kinds of wonderful offerings, and the nightmares, evil omens and inauspicious signs will all disappear, no longer able to cause them harm.

“If any sentient beings are in fear of water, fire, knives, poison, falling off a precipice, or of vicious beasts – such as wild elephants, lions, tigers, wolves, bears, venomous

snakes, scorpions, centipedes, millipedes, [infectious] mosquitos or gnats – they need only single-mindedly recall and recite the name of the Medicine Buddha, while respectfully making offerings to him, and they will escape all these terrors. If a country should be subject to foreign invasion, banditry or rebellion, the inhabitants need only recall and recite the name of the Medicine Buddha, while paying homage to him, and all these calamities will likewise disappear.

“Moreover, Manjusri, there are men and women of pure faith who throughout their lives have not worshipped any deities, but have single-mindedly taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha and upheld the Precepts – the five or ten lay Precepts, the 400 Bodhisattva Precepts or the 250 Bhiksu or 500 Bhiksuni Precepts.¹⁶ However, if any of them have violated the Precepts they have taken and fear falling onto an evil path, they should concentrate on reciting the name of the Medicine Buddha and respectfully make offerings to him. They will then certainly avoid rebirth on the Three Evil Paths.

“If women who experience extreme pain during childbirth can, with utmost sincerity, recite the name of the Medicine Buddha, praise, venerate and make offerings to him, they will be relieved of their suffering.

“The children born to them will be without defects, attractive in appearance, causing those who see them to rejoice. They will be endowed with keen senses and intelli-

gence, along with a quiet disposition. They will seldom become ill, nor will evil spirits sap their vital energy.”



The World-Honored One then asked Ananda:

“I have just extolled the merits and virtues of the World-Honored Medicine Buddha. These merits and virtues are the extremely profound practices of all Buddhas, but are difficult to explain. Do you have faith in them or not?”

Ananda respectfully replied: “O, Great Virtuous World-Honored One, I do not have any doubts about the sutras preached by the Tathagatas. Why? It is because the Tathagatas’ karma of body, speech and mind are all pure. O, World-Honored One, the sun and the moon may fall, Mount Sumeru, the majestic king of mountains, may tremble, but the words of the Buddhas can never change. O, World-Honored One, some sentient beings, whose roots of faith are deficient, may hear of the sublime practices of the Buddhas and think, ‘how can we obtain these merits, virtues and great advantages just by reciting the name of the Medicine Buddha alone?’ Because of this lack of faith, they even develop disparaging thoughts, thus forfeiting great benefits and remaining in the long, dark night [of ignorance]. They descend onto the Evil Paths, revolving along them without end.”

The Buddha then said to Ananda:

“If these sentient beings should hear the name of the World-Honored Medicine Buddha, single-mindedly recite and hold fast to it without harboring doubts, then it will be impossible for them to sink onto the Evil Paths.

“O, Ananda! These extremely profound practices of the Buddhas are difficult to believe in, difficult to understand. Yet you are now able to accept them. You should realize that this is all due to the awesome power of the Tathagatas.

“O, Ananda! Even the Sravakas, Pratyeka Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who have not reached the Ten Grounds (Stages) cannot understand and believe in this truth. Only the Bodhisattvas who are one lifetime away from Buddhahood can.

“O, Ananda! A human rebirth is difficult to achieve; however, to believe in, respect and honor the Triple Jewel is even more difficult. To hear the name of the World-Honored Medicine Buddha is more difficult still.

“O, Ananda, the Medicine Buddha has cultivated countless Bodhisattva practices, employed countless skillful means and made countless far reaching vows. If I were to take an aeon or more to recount them, the aeon would come to an end before I could exhaustively describe all these wonderful practices, vows and skillful means.”



At that time, a Great Bodhisattva in the Assembly, named Salvation, arose from his seat, adjusted his robe to bare his right shoulder, knelt on his right knee, bowed and, with palms joined, respectfully addressed the Buddha:

“O, Great Virtuous World-Honored One, in the Dharma Semblance Age, there will be sentient beings who suffer numerous calamities, and are always sick and emaciated, unable to eat or drink, their throats dry and lips parched, their eyes seeing darkness everywhere. As the signs of death appear, they are surrounded by parents, family, friends and acquaintances weeping and lamenting.

“As such a patient lies in bed, he sees the messengers of Yama arrive to lead his consciousness before this King of Justice. Now, all sentient beings have inborn spirits who record everything they do, both their transgressions and their merits.¹⁷ These spirits then present the patient’s entire record to King Yama.

“At that time, the King questions the dying person and tabulates his good and bad karma before deciding upon his fate.

“If, at that point, the relatives and acquaintances of the patient are able to take refuge in the World-Honored Medicine Buddha on his behalf, invite monks and nuns to recite this sutra, light seven-tiered lamps and hang multi-colored longevity banners, his consciousness may return

then and there, and he will see himself clearly, as though in a dream.

“Or else, after 7, 21, 35 or 49 days, when his consciousness returns, as if awakening from a dream, he will recall his good and bad karma and the consequences thereof.¹⁸

“Having personally witnessed the consequences of karma, he will never again create evil karma, even if his life is in danger. Therefore, men and women of pure faith should uphold the name of the Medicine Buddha, venerate and make offerings to him according to their means.”



Ananda then asked the Bodhisattva Salvation: “Good Man, how should we venerate and make offerings to the World-Honored Medicine Buddha and how should we make the longevity pennants and lamps?”

The Bodhisattva Salvation replied: “Virtuous One, in order to help the patient recover, you should adhere to the Eight Precepts for seven days and seven nights, make offerings of food, drink and other necessities to a [group of] monks and nuns in accordance with your means, pay homage and respectfully make offerings to the World-Honored Medicine Buddha six times a day and recite this sutra forty-nine times.

“You should light forty-nine lamps, make seven images of the Medicine Buddha and place seven lamps,

each as large as a cartwheel, before each image, letting them burn continuously for forty-nine days and nights.

“You should also make multi-colored banners, forty-nine hand-lengths long.

“Furthermore, you should release forty-nine species of animals [thus sparing their lives].

The patient may then escape danger and will not be under the sway of evil demons, nor subject to untimely death.¹⁹

“Moreover, Ananda, when the anointed Ksatriya kings find themselves beset by calamities, such as epidemics, foreign invasion, internal insurrection, an adverse alignment of the stars, an eclipse of the sun or the moon, unseasonable storms or a failure of the monsoons, they should develop compassionate feelings toward all sentient beings.

“They should also pardon prisoners and make offerings to the World-Honored Medicine Buddha in accordance with the rites described earlier.

“Thanks to these good roots and the power of the Medicine Buddha’s past vows,²⁰ peace and stability will immediately return to the affected countries; the rains and winds will be favorable; crops will mature on time and everyone will be healthy and happy. The country will be free of evil Yaksas out to harm the populace. All the evil omens will immediately disappear, and these anointed Ksatriya kings will enjoy greater longevity and vitality,

finer appearance as well as greater health and freedom than ever before.

“O, Ananda, the queens, consorts, princesses, royal heirs, great ministers, court ladies, officials or commoners who suffer disease and other misfortunes should also make offerings to the Medicine Buddha. They should make multi-colored longevity banners, light lamps, ensuring that they burn continuously, liberate all kinds of animals, scatter flowers of various colors and burn various kinds of incense renowned for their fragrance. They will then recover from disease and escape misfortune.”

Ananda then asked the Bodhisattva Salvation: “Good Man, how can an expiring life-span be lengthened?”

The Bodhisattva Salvation replied: “Virtuous One, did you not hear the Tathagata explain the nine forms of untimely death? I would urge everyone to make longevity banners and lamps and cultivate merits and virtues. Thanks to such cultivation, they will escape suffering and misfortune throughout their lives.”

Ananda further asked: “What are the nine forms of untimely death?”

The Bodhisattva Salvation replied:

“Some sentient beings contract a minor illness which goes untreated for lack of a physician or medicine; or else, even though there is a physician, he prescribes the wrong medicine, causing premature death. Or, the patients, believing the false pronouncements of earthly demons,

heretics or practitioners of black magic, may panic – unable to calm their minds. They may then engage in divination or perform animal sacrifices in order to propitiate the spirits, praying, for blessings and longevity – all in vain. Through, ignorance, confusion and reliance on wrong, inverted views, they meet with untimely death and sink into the hells, with no end in sight. This is the first form of untimely death.

“The *second* form is execution, by royal decree.

“The *third* is losing ones vitality to the demons through hunting, gambling, debauchery, drunkenness or extreme dissipation.

“The *fourth* is death by fire; the *fifth* is death by drowning. The *sixth* is being devoured by wild animals.

“The *seventh* is falling off a mountain or a cliff. The *eighth* is death by poison, incantations, evil mantras or demons-raised-from-the-dead. The *ninth* is from hunger or thirst, for lack of food and water.

“These are the nine forms of untimely death ; mentioned by the Tathagatas. There are also countless other forms, which are too numerous to describe.

“Moreover, Ananda, King Yama is responsible for keeping the karmic register of everyone in the world. If sentient beings have been unfilial,²¹ committed the Five Cardinal Sins, disparaged the Triple jewel, broken the laws of the land or violated the major Precepts, King Yama will mete out punishment according to the infrac-

tion. Therefore, I urge sentient beings to light lamps, make banners, liberate animals and cultivate merits in order to avoid suffering and misfortune.²²



At that time, there were twelve powerful Yaksa generals in the Great Assembly named:

<i>Kumbhira,</i>	<i>Vajra,</i>
<i>Mihira,</i>	<i>Andira,</i>
<i>Anila,</i>	<i>Sandila,</i>
<i>Indra,</i>	<i>Pajra,</i>
<i>Makura,</i>	<i>Sindura,</i>
<i>Catura, and</i>	<i>Vikarala.</i>

Each was accompanied by a retinue of 7,000 Yaksas.

They all raised their voices in unison and said respectfully to the Buddha:

“O, World-Honored One, today, thanks to the Buddha’s awesome power, we have succeeded in hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha and no longer fear descending onto the Evil Paths.

“Together, with one mind, we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha for the rest of our lives and pledge to support all sentient beings – bringing them genuine benefits and joy.

“Wherever this sutra circulates or wherever there are sentient beings who hold fast to the name of the Medicine Buddha and respectfully make offerings to him, whether in villages, towns, kingdoms or in the wilderness, we will all protect them.

“We will release them from all suffering and calamities and see to it that all their wishes are fulfilled.”²³

“Sentient beings afflicted by disease or calamity and wishing to escape should also read or recite this sutra. They should ‘knot’ our names with multi-colored strands – untying them when their wishes are fulfilled.”²⁴

Thereupon, Buddha Sakyamuni praised the great Yaksa generals with these words: “Good indeed, good indeed, great Yaksa generals! Those of you who wish to repay the benevolence and the virtues of the World-Honored Medicine Buddha should always benefit and bring joy to all sentient beings in this way.



Ananda then asked the Buddha: “World-Honored One, what should we call this teaching, and how should we adhere to it and put it into practice?”

Buddha Sakyamuni replied to Ananda: “This teaching is called the ‘Past Vows, Merits and Virtues of the Medicine Buddha’ or the ‘Dharani of the Vows of the Twelve Yaksa Generals to Benefit Sentient Beings’ or

‘Eradicating of All Karmic Obstacles’. You should uphold it as such.”

When Buddha Sakyamuni finished speaking, the great Bodhisattvas, as well as the great Sravakas, kings, ministers, brahmins, lay-persons, devas, nagas, yaksas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kinnaras, mahoragas and other human and non-human beings all rejoiced at the Buddha’s words. They faithfully accepted them and put them into practice.

*Sutra of the Medicine Buddha
Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata:
His Past Vows, Merits and Virtues*

*Homage to the Medicine Buddha’s
Great Assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*



The Buddhas of the Ten Directions
Always keep them in mind and protect them...;
Wherever they are reborn,
The Bodhisattvas are their friends.

(Brahma Net Sutra)

Notes

1. This is the single most important point of the sutra. If you have utmost faith in the words of the sutra, then all the promises of the Medicine Buddha are true. If, however, you harbor even a trace of doubt, no amount of recitation or lamp-lighting will bring the benefits desired. This crucial point is common to all sutras. This intense state of faith is usually accompanied by “tears streaming down one’s face”, as exemplified in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* by Sudhana in the presence of his primary spiritual benefactor, the Bodhisattva Manjushri:

Then Sudhana, pleased, enraptured, transported with joy, delighted, happy, and cheerful, laid his head at the feet of Manjushri in respect, circled Manjushri hundreds and thousands of times, and looked at him hundreds and thousands of times... with tears streaming *down his face as he wept*, and left Manjushri (Thomas Cleary, tr., Vol. III, p. 55–56). [BACK](#)

2. *Representation of the Medicine Buddha:*

In later Chinese Buddhism (apparently beginning in the Sung period), Bhaisajyaguru (the Medicine Buddha) was depicted in a different sort of assembly. Here the Buddha of Healing is joined by Amitabha and Sakyamuni to form a basic trinity important in Chinese Buddhism to the present day. This group, often depicted in massive sculpture, commonly is found on the principal altar of the main assembly hall of Chinese Buddhist temples. Here the central image of Sakyamuni represents the basic Buddha-principle... Bhaisajyaguru to the east (the direction of his paradise) watches overall living beings, protecting them, strengthen-

ing their health, and preventing them from suffering untimely death; Amitabha to the west is the compassionate lord who cares for those in the spirit world after death, who watches over them in his Western Realm of Bliss (Birnbau, p. 252–253).

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Medicine Buddha watches over sentient beings in their current lifetimes, granting them peace, happiness and freedom from disease and other calamities. Amitabha Buddha watches over sentient beings after their death, ensuring them a favorable rebirth in his land. The combination of current and future peace and happiness leads eventually to *ultimate peace, happiness and liberation*, that is, Buddhahood (Master Thich Thien Hue). [BACK](#)

3. The full name of the Medicine Buddha (Bhaisajyaguru) is rendered in this text as *Medicine Buddha Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata*. Please note other variants occurring in the literature:

Healing Buddha	Azure Radiance Tathagata
Master of Healing	Vaidurya Light Tathagata
Master of Medicine	Beryl Radiance Tathagata.

Moreover, many popular books use the Japanese name *Yakushi*.

According to V. de Visser (*Ancient Buddhism*, vol. II), most of the Bodhisattvas in the Medicine Buddha’s Assembly are also depicted surrounding Amitabha Buddha, in paintings of Amitabha’s descent to welcome the faithful (Raigo). This is another example of the close relationship between the Medicine Buddha and Amitabha Buddha in the Mahayana tradition. [BACK](#)

4. The mudra is not fixed. In the Tibetan tradition, for example, instead of the Varuda (compassion) mudra, the Medicine Buddha is sometimes depicted forming the “taking the earth as witness” mudra. Moreover, rather than forming a mudra, the right hand may hold the healing fruit (myrobolan) as well as its stem and leaves. Furthermore, the entire body of the Medicine Buddha is painted blue. (Details graciously provided by Upasaka Harry Leong.) [BACK](#)

5. Please note, however, that in the Vajradhatu Mandala of the Esoteric School, the Medicine Buddha is apparently associated with Aksobhya Buddha (Louis Frederic). [BACK](#)

6. The Medicine Buddha provides support to Pure Land cultivators who may need freedom from mundane concerns (disease, material need, calamity, untimely death, etc.) in order to concentrate single-mindedly on their goal of rebirth in Sukhavati. This may explain the representation, on the major altar of many Mahayana temples, of a massive trinity of Sakyamuni Buddha, the Medicine Buddha and Amitabha Buddha. One notable example of this trinity is in the Mahayana Temple complex in South Cairo, NY (USA).

Exponents of Tibetan tantric practice and of the Chinese/Japanese forms of Pure Land practice will recognize close affinities between what they have learned and what is advocated in these Healing Buddha sutras. Those familiar with works about Kuan Yin (Avalokitesvara, Chenresigs) will find that the powers attributed to the Healing Buddhas, and the reasons for those powers, are very similar in character to those attributed to that Bodhisattva.... It can be confidently asserted that similar methods and values pertaining to the Healing Buddhas are accepted by the vast majority of Mahayana Buddhists, no matter to which school they belong (John Blofeld).

In Mahayana Buddhism, there are many popular Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The reason why some persons seek the

help, for example, of the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin while others call upon the Medicine Buddha, is related to their past affinities (causes and conditions) with a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva. The important point to remember is that the Medicine Buddha specializes in curing diseases – particularly “incurable” ones!

The Medicine Buddha and Amitabha Buddha each has his own Pure Land, the Lapis Lazuli Pure Land and Sukhavati, respectively. Both are ideal, transcendental realms where practitioners can further their cultivation and ultimately attain Buddhahood. The main difference between the two Pure Lands (indeed between Sukhavati and any other Pure Land) lies in its accessibility. It is the difference between a country which receives immigrants and one which actively goes out to recruit them. The Medicine Buddha’s special mission is to prevent calamities and cure illnesses, while the principal vow of Amitabha Buddha is to make his Pure Land a place of refuge for all sentient beings. See also Note 2. [BACK](#)

7. *Names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas:*

The name of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva is presumed to embody his virtues and powers. Hence, invocation of the name of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva activates those virtues and powers (Luis O. Gomez, *The Land of Bliss*, p. 311).

This emphasis on names is frequently stressed in the Mahayana teachings about Bodhisattvas and Buddhas; in these teachings, the

names of great beings are held to be precious. By hearing the name of the great being, one can gain contact with his spiritual force and protection (Birnbaum, p. 40). [BACK](#)

8. The original wording in the sutra is “no women”. We have translated it, following Prof. Raoul Birnbaum, as “no temptations”. In the Buddha’s time, some 2,500 years ago, the clergy was overwhelmingly male, and therefore the source of temptation to abandon celibacy was viewed as largely female. The context of the sutra also suggests “temptations” as the better rendering. [BACK](#)

9. Please note that the word used here is “birth”, not “rebirth” as in the *Amitabha Sutra*. See also note 6, last paragraph. [BACK](#)

10. To succeed in cultivation, it is essential to develop the Bodhi Mind (i.e., to seek Buddhahood for the benefit of sentient beings). To do so, the advanced practitioner must set aside the ego, sever attachment to the self, and thus be willing to sacrifice himself for sentient beings (donate his eyes, ears, etc.). This important point, illustrated time and time again in the *Jatakas* (accounts of the previous lives of the Buddha), is explained in detail in the *Brahma Net Sutra*, Secondary Precept no. 16. This sutra is available free of charge from the International Buddhist Monastic Institute (tel. 818-893-5317), the Sutra Translation Committee of the US and Canada (tel. 718-584-0621), the

Buddha Educational Foundation in Taiwan (tel. 886-2-23951198, email: overseas@budaedu.org.tw).

One of the foremost exponents of Ch’an in modern China, Hsu Yun, burned off his finger in sacrifice for the sake of his deceased mother in his fifty-eighth year. This is discussed in his autobiography translated by Charles Luk, Empty Cloud: *The Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master Hsu Yun* (Rochester, New York 1974), pp.27–28 (Birnbaum, p. 49). [BACK](#)

11. According to the sutra, the efficacy of the Medicine Buddha’s name is absolute. All karma, even Fixed Karma, or the heavy karma created by the Five Cardinal Sins, is erased through concentration on the Medicine Buddha. [BACK](#)

12. The notion that a ghost or demon can be invoked through an evil mantra is by no means limited to Asia:

In the soil beneath a mango tree, Eliezer, one of Zohar’s sons and the author’s father, draws the outline of a human figure and tries to conjure a golem out of the ground. In Jewish mysticism, a golem is a supernatural creature created from dirt and with magical words.... Like the Frankenstein monster, golems are supposed to be benign and protective, but as they are made by man, not God, they are imperfect and frequently run amok (*NYT Book Review*, 10/22/2000). [BACK](#)

13. *Rebirth as a male:*

The sudden transformation of a woman into a male means nothing but the transcendence of the differences between male and female. Sakyamuni

Buddha asserted that animals, birds, worms, plants and trees, as well as human beings, possess the Buddha-nature. How could he then discriminate between men and women? It is impossible. Observed with the Buddha's eyes, all living beings are equal. We must never misunderstand this (Niwano, *Buddhism for Today*). [BACK](#)

14. Please note that while the quotation begins with "Namo bhagawate" ("homage to the Medicine Buddha"), the Dharani (Mantra) itself is the phrase beginning with the word "Om" and ending with "svaha". [BACK](#)

15. An explanation for this cosmic change is offered below:

When the Buddha taught, our world became a celestial abode. The power of his articulated wisdom made it possible for those present to see beyond mundane reality, into the inherent purity and cosmic presence that eternally surround us. The mandala that appeared around him is a vision of humanity's potential: enlightened mind in harmony with nature, working for the benefit of all. It is the archtypal pristine world inhabited by beings living in a golden age of spiritual achievement: heaven on earth. It is our world, after the gloom of ignorance and confusion of mental defilements have been removed by the lights of purifying awareness, and the glorious prosperity of nature renewed by treating the earth as a sacred garden of medicine (D. Crow, *In Search of the Medicine Buddha*). [BACK](#)

16. There are minor differences in the way the precepts are formulated in the various Mahayana schools, which accounts for some discrepancies in their number. The principles underlying the precepts are, however, the same.

53

Nowadays, the Bodhisattva precepts are usually reckoned as ten major and 48 minor precepts, while the Bhiksuni precepts are listed as 348. [BACK](#)

17. In Asian popular belief, each person is born with two innate spirits, who record all his deeds – good and bad. In Buddhism, these spirits stand for the Alaya consciousness (see Glossary), which follows a person from lifetime to lifetime. [BACK](#)

18. On the significance of the number seven in Buddhism:

According to the Esoteric School, the number seven is the ultimate number in the cycle of Birth and Death. Therefore, in the bardo stage, [between reincarnations] the "soul" must undergo changes every seven days, and to be efficacious, mantras should be recited at least seven times.... Starting with the number seven and multiplying it by three or seven, we have twenty-one or forty-nine. Therefore, the Esoteric School teaches that mantras should be recited [at least] seven times to be effective, twenty-one or forty-nine times if the mind is weak and agitated (Thich Thien Tam, *Buddhism of Wisdom and Faith*, p. 174). [BACK](#)

19. How is it possible for a dying person *to recover immediately, upon reciting the Medicine Buddha's name?* It should be remembered that in Buddhism, everything is Mind-made, Mind Only, including birth and death. Thus,

54

in Zen literature, for example, truly accomplished Zen masters are always described as above birth and death, "returning to quiescence" at a time and place of their own choosing. Here, as everywhere else in this sutra, the key element is faith: the stronger one's faith, the deeper one's level of samadhi. One's power over the environment likewise increases, even to the point of turning death into life, not to mention curing disease!

The practice of lighting lamps and hanging banners is a skillful means designed to heighten the faith of the devout. [BACK](#)

20. Please note the crucial combination of *self-help* (good roots and practice on the part of the cultivator) and *other-power* (the assistance of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas). [BACK](#)

21. In Mahayana sutras, the word "parents" refers to all sentient beings, as throughout the aeons of time in Samsara, all beings have been our fathers or mothers at one time or another. Thus, to be unfilial is to transgress against any sentient being (*Brahma Net Sutra*, Secondary Precept 20). [BACK](#)

22. This passage shows that all karma, even the heaviest, can be dissipated through concentrating on the Medicine

55

Buddha and cultivating merits and virtues. Thus, there is no disease or calamity that cannot be alleviated. [BACK](#)

23. The vows of the Yaksa Generals to come to the assistance of all sentient beings derive from the virtues and power of the Medicine Buddha. They constitute another important means of curing disease and preventing calamities.

Please note that the number of Yaksa generals (12) multiplied by the size of their retinues (7,000 members each) equals 84,000 the total number of Dharma methods employed by the Buddha to teach and convert sentient beings. [BACK](#)

24. Lit., "strand of five colors". The ritual of "Knotting" the names of the Yaksa Generals consists of single-mindedly reciting the Medicine Buddha Dharani (Mantra) one or three times, followed by the name of a Yaksa general, while simultaneously tying one knot. This continues until all twelve names are recited and twelve knots are tied. Please note that this practice is a skillful expedient designed to deepen the faith of the devout.

See Master Hsuan Hua (*Medicine Master Sutra*, p. 173):

A five-colored thread symbolizes the Five Directions (i.e., all directions), each of which has a demon associated with it. When the five-colored thread is tied into knots, it brings stability to insecure places. [BACK](#)

56

Glossary

Alaya Consciousness. “All karma created in the present and previous lifetimes is stored in the Alaya Consciousness. This is regarded as that which undergoes the cycle of birth and death” (Sokk: 9).

“The concept of Alaya Vijnana (consciousness) constitutes the basis of the ‘mind-only’ doctrine of the Yogachara [school] and stands at the center of this school’s theory of individualization, according to which past karmic seeds... enter into the Alaya-Vijnana, whence they arise again to occasion thought activity. This individuated thinking is ridden with ignorance and egotism, which instigate the notion that it constitutes a real person in the real world” (Sham: 4).

Amitabha Buddha. Amitabha is the most commonly used name for the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life. A transhistorical Buddha venerated by all Mahayana schools (T’ien-T’ai, Esoteric, Zen...) and, particularly, Pure Land. Presides over the Western Pure Land (Land of Ultimate Bliss) or Sukhavati, where anyone can be reborn through utterly sincere (i.e., single-minded) recitation of meditation on his name.

“In the Pure Land schools of China and Japan, Amitabha is the intermediary between Supreme Reality

and mankind, and faith in him ensures rebirth in his Paradise (Sukhavati). Symbolically, Amitabha is Higher Self (or Self-Nature)” (Humphrey: 30).

Amitabha Buddha at the higher or noumenon level represents the True Mind, the Self-Nature common to the Buddhas and sentient beings – infinitely bright and everlasting. This deeper understanding provides the rationale for the harmonization of Zen and Pure Land, two of the most popular schools of Mahayana Buddhism.

Ananda. “A cousin of the Buddha, the brother of Devadatta. One of the ten great disciples of the Buddha. Ananda accompanied the Buddha for more than twenty years and was the Master’s favorite disciple. He attained Enlightenment after the demise of the Buddha under the guidance of Mahakasyapa. He was famed for his excellent memory and recited the Sutra-Pitaka (the sermons contained in the Tripitaka) at the First Buddhist Council” (Daito: 8).

Dharma. The word Dharma has several meanings: a) The teachings of the Buddhas (generally capitalized in English); b) law, doctrine; c) things, events, phenomena.

Dharma Semblance Age. The time following Buddha Sakyamuni’s demise has been divided into three periods: i) the *Perfect Age of the Dharma*, lasting 500 years,

when the Buddha’s teaching was correctly practiced and Enlightenment often attained; ii) the *Dharma Semblance Age*, lasting about 1,000 years, when a form of the teaching was practiced but Enlightenment seldom attained; iii) the *Dharma-Ending Age*, lasting some ‘ten thousand’ years, when a diluted form of the teaching exists and Enlightenment is rarely attained.

Eight Precepts. “The eight precepts which a lay Buddhist should observe on *certain retreats* (1) not killing living beings, (2) not stealing, (3) not having sexual intercourse, (4) not telling lies, (5) not drinking intoxicants, (6) not wearing bodily decoration, not using perfumes, not singing and dancing, and not going to see dances or plays, (7) not sleeping in a raised bed, and (8) not eating after noon” (Inagaki: 396–397).

Eight Types of Divinities. “These are various classes of non-human beings that are regarded as protectors of the Buddhist Dharma and often appear as part of the audience attending the Buddha’s sermons. Strictly speaking, not all are celestials, but most of them inhabit the celestial or heavenly spheres of a world system. The eight classes, are: (1) gods (deva); (2) asuras; (3) the gandharvas and (4) the kinnaras; local spirits known as (5) yakshas (yaksa), sometimes associated with the Tushita Heaven, but usually located on the human plane; two kinds of mythical serpents,

(6) the mahoragas and (7) the nagas; and (8) the celestial eagles known as the garudas.” (Gomez: 289–290).

Eighty Auspicious Characteristics. “Bodily attributes of a Buddha, more subtle than the thirty-two auspicious signs. Examples: youthful complexion; a soft body; lips colored like a red, bright gourd; face like a full, clear moon; emitting fragrance from the pores and mouth; deportment as awesome as that of a lion; graceful and steady gait.” (Chan: 495–496). See also “Thirty-two Marks of Greatness”.

Evil Paths. see Three Evil Realms

Great Vehicle. see Mahayana

Karma. Action leading to future retribution *or reward*, in current or future lifetimes.

(i) *Collective karma:* the difference between personal and collective karma can be seen in the following example: Suppose a country goes to war to gain certain economic advantages and in the process, numerous soldiers and civilians are killed or maimed. If a particular citizen volunteers for military service and actually participates in the carnage, he commits a personal karma of killing. Other citizens, however, even if opposed to the war, may benefit directly or indirectly (e.g., through economic gain). They are thus said to share in the collective karma of killing by their country.

(ii) *Fixed karma*: in principle, all karma is subject to change. Fixed karma, however, is karma which can be changed only in extraordinary circumstances, because it derives from an evil act committed simultaneously with mind, speech, and body. An example of fixed karma would be a premeditated crime (versus a crime of passion).

Lapis Lazuli. “Lapis lazuli is a deep blue gem-stone marked by sparkling golden crystals of iron pyrite, like the night sky awash with bright stars” (Birnbaum: 251).

Mahayana. “The *Great Vehicle*, one of the two major schools of Buddhism, the other being Theravada. Mahayana aims at bringing all sentient beings to Buddhahood. [Advanced] followers of Mahayana are called ‘Bodhisattvas.’ At the outset of their career, they make vows to save all beings, and in order to realize them, cultivate wisdom and accumulate merits. When their vows are fulfilled, they become Buddhas. Although historical evidence shows that Mahayana arose a few centuries after the Buddha’s death... the essential part of the Mahayana teaching was revealed by the Buddha [during his lifetime to advanced practitioners]” (Inagaki: 407).

“Mahayana radically changed the conception of the adept: he no longer aspires to Nirvana but to the condition of a Buddha... two things are necessary for the Bodhisattva and his practice of wisdom: ‘Never to aban-

there are a number of regulations established either by the Buddha or, later on, by heads of Buddhist orders or major monasteries. The regulations are designed to clarify the rules or Precepts or their mode of application.

Sakyamuni Buddha. “Historical founder of Buddhism, Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha Sakyamuni, who [lived] circa 581–501 B.C. as the first son of King Suddhodana, whose capital city of Kapilavastu was located in what is now Nepal. At the age of twenty-nine, he left his father’s palace and his wife and child in search of the meaning of existence. One morning at the age of thirty-five, he realized Enlightenment while practicing meditation seated beneath the Bodhi tree. Thereafter, He spent the next forty-five years, until his death at the age of eighty, expounding his teachings... in order that all sentient beings might realize the same Enlightenment that he had. Nowadays, the term ‘a Buddha’ denotes anyone who has realized Enlightenment, while ‘the Buddha’ refers to the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni. ‘Buddhas,’ naturally refers to all enlightened beings” (Yoko: 181).

Seven Treasures. Traditionally listed as: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, red pearl and carnelian. They represent the seven powers of faith, perseverance, sense of shame, avoidance of wrongdoing, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.

don all beings, and to see into the truth that all things are empty” (Eliade: 219).

Manjusri. “Manjusri, a famous Bodhisattva, is worshipped as the [personification of transcendental] Wisdom, and popularly depicted riding on a lion, the symbol of bravery. He generally holds a sword in his right hand, while in his left he has a lotus, on which a book [or sutra] is laid. His image is often seen in the second hall of the Buddhist monastery by the side of that of Sakyamuni Buddha” (Will: enc/264).

Medicine Buddha. “Buddha who heals the ills of body and spirit including that of ignorance; popular figure in early Mahayana Buddhism; reigns over the Pure Lapis Lazuli Paradise in the East” (Okazaki: 187).

Pratyeka-Buddha. “These Buddhas become fully enlightened... by meditating on the principle of causality. Unlike the Perfect Buddhas, however, they do not exert themselves to teach others” (A. Buzo and T. Prince).

“In Buddhism, Pratyeka-buddhas generally mean those who live in a time when there is no Buddha but who awaken to the Truth through their own efforts” (Sokk: 344).

Precepts. “Rules of conduct and discipline established by the Buddha” (Yoko: 210). In addition to the Precepts,

Sravaka. Literally, “hearer”. Also translated as disciple. “Those who follow [the early teachings of the Buddha] and eventually become Arhats as a result of listening to the Buddhas and following their teachings” (T. Prince: 81).

“In Mahayana Buddhism [the term Sravaka] refers to a person in the Theravada school who exerts himself to attain the stage of Arhat by observing 250 precepts in the case of monks and 348 in the case of nuns. This is a lower stage than that of Bodhisattva” (Yoko: 289).

“Originally a term for any practicing disciple of the Buddha (especially those who had adopted monastic vows), the word eventually came to refer in Mahayana literature to those who were ‘mere disciples,’ that is, those who did not seek to emulate the Buddha by taking the Bodhisattva’s vows. In this sense, the word is often used in contrast to Bodhisattva...” (Gomez).

Sumeru. Also called Polar Mountain. “A mountain thought to stand at the center of the world, according to ancient Indian tradition... The god Indra resides on the summit, while the Four Heavenly Kings live halfway down the four sides” (Sokk: 412).

In Buddhist cosmology, the universe is composed of worlds upon worlds, *ad infinitum*. (Our earth is only an infinitesimal part of one of these countless worlds.) The Polar Mountain (Mount Sumeru) is the central mountain of each world.

Ten Grounds (Stages, Bhumi). “Ten Stages (or Ten Bhumi) through which the practitioner advances in Buddhist practice. In the system of the fifty-two (or fifty-three) levels of Bodhisattva practice, they are viewed as the forty-first through fiftieth levels” (Sokk: 439). In other words, the Ten Stages are among the highest levels achieved by Bodhisattvas before attaining Buddhahood.

Thirty-two Marks of Greatness (32 Auspicious Signs). “The major signs adorning the visible body of a Buddha or that of a universal monarch. Some examples are: a protuberance on the crown; a curling, white hair between the eyebrows; a golden complexion; a long, broad tongue; a halo ten feet in radius; an excellent voice” (Chan: 495). See also “Eighty Auspicious Characteristics”.

Three Evil Realms (Paths). “The three lower states of Samsara: hell-dweller, hungry ghost, and animal. To be born in a miserable state is the result of evil karma committed in a past life. When the retribution for that karma is completed, one will again be born in a higher state” (Chan: 479).

These paths can be taken as states of mind; i.e., when someone has a vicious thought of maiming or killing another, he is effectively reborn, *for that moment*, in the hells.

“Animals and hungry ghosts, heavens and hells (or paradises and purgatories) are metaphors for spiritual conditions and spiritual progress. They embody the *states of mind* whose pain and confusion motivate us to seek salvation, and the happiness and ease that foreshadow salvation” (Gomez/Land of Bliss: 30).

“According to Buddhist teachings, karmic results follow ineluctably upon the perpetration of acts, irrespective of conscious attitude or moral conscience (although the quality and force of the act may be significantly affected thereby). Thus beings in the lower states, animals for example, do indeed accumulate karma and must sooner or later experience the consequences of their actions, even though these may be performed under the irresistible influence of instinct. And the Karmic situation is compounded, rather than mitigated, by an unconsciousness of the Dharma. The strength of instinctual habit and the ignorance of what behavior is to be adopted and what behavior is to be abandoned constitutes one of the principal miseries of existence in states other than that of the precious human condition” (Shantideva: 108).

Three Root Precepts (Three Bodies of Pure Precepts). Three groups of precepts which form the basis of all Bodhisattva practice: (1) Do not what is evil, (2) Do what is good and (3) Be of benefit to all sentient beings.

The Mahayana Three Root Precepts are similar to a formulation in the Pali Canon, except for the last clause which reads in the latter, “Keep the mind pure.” The difference highlights the altruistic emphasis of Mahayana Buddhism.

All sets of precepts, including the Bodhisattva precepts, are derived from the Three Bodies of Pure Precepts, the root precepts in Buddhism. These precepts may in principle be administered to Buddhists in lieu of the full set of Bodhisattva precepts described in the *Brahma Net Sutra*.

Triple jewel. “In Buddhism, there are three fundamental aspects – known as the Three jewels (triratna) because of their preciousness – which form a basis for belief and practice. The first Jewel is the Buddha, who, after years of searching found the path to Enlightenment and subsequently taught it to others. The second is the Dharma, the teaching or the truth about the way things are. The last one is the Sangha, the community of monks, nuns, and lay-people who practice and help others to practice the teaching...” (Clarke: 151).

Wheel-turning King. “In the Indian mythological history of the world, a universal monarch occasionally appears who is supposed to be a most powerful and meritorious king capable of ruling the entire world” (Chan: 485).

*“Wherever the Buddha’s teachings have flourished,
either in cities or countryside,
people would gain inconceivable benefits.
The land and people would be enveloped in peace.
The sun and moon will shine clear and bright.
Wind and rain would appear accordingly,
and there will be no disasters.
Nations would be prosperous
and there would be no use for soldiers or weapons.
People would abide by morality and accord with laws.
They would be courteous and humble,
and everyone would be content without injustices.
There would be no thefts or violence.
The strong would not dominate the weak
and everyone would get their fair share.”*

*The Buddha Speaks of
The Infinite Life Sutra of
Adornment, Purity, Equality
and Enlightenment of
The Mahayana School*

With bad advisors forever left behind,
From paths of evil he departs for eternity,
Soon to see the Buddha of Limitless Light
And perfect Samantabhadra's Supreme Vows.

The supreme and endless blessings
of Samantabhadra's deeds,
I now universally transfer.
May every living being, drowning and adrift,
Soon return to the Pure Land of
Limitless Light!

The Vows of Samantabhadra

I vow that when my life approaches its end,
All obstructions will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in His Western Pure Land of
Ultimate Bliss and Peace.

When reborn in the Western Pure Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill
Without exception these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.

The Vows of Samantabhadra Avatamsaka Sutra

Namo Amitabha

南無阿彌陀佛

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11F., 55 HANG CHOW SOUTH ROAD SEC 1, TAIPEI, TAIWAN, R.O.C.

TEL: 886-2-23951198, FAX: 886-2-23913415

EMAIL: OVERSEAS@BUDAEDU.ORG.TW

WEBSITE: HTTP://WWW.BUDAEDU.ORG.TW

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