

Pure Land Systematics in India: The *Buddhabhūmisūtra* and the *Trikāya* Doctrine

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INTRODUCTION

When tracing the lines of Indian Buddhist doctrinal development, Buddhologists most often portray Pure Land teaching as cultic in focus and devotional in impact. The principal Pure Land scriptures do indeed aim at an inculcation of faith and practice, and do not evidence any intent toward systematic explication of the meaning of the doctrine presented.

There are Indian Buddhist thinkers who deliteralize and deconstruct Pure Land. However, these thinkers are not, so it would appear, themselves Pure Land adherents, but rather philosophers from the Śāstra schools. Asaṅga argues that pure Buddha fields are ideas flowing from wisdom.¹ Vasubandhu interprets Pure Land as pure mind.² Śīlabhadra and Bandhuprabha see Pure Land as a symbol for wisdom focused on the pure Dharma realm.³ But nowhere, it would appear, is there any evidence of Indian Pure Land thinkers who themselves focus upon the doctrinal content of Pure Land and attempt to deliteralize its message.

The intent of this paper is to argue for the opposite thesis: That there is indeed a record of systematic and reflective thinking in India on the meaning of Pure Land and that this is the *Buddhabhūmisūtra*, *The Scripture on the Buddha Land*.

THE TEXT AND ITS PROBLEMATIC

The *Buddhabhūmisūtra* is a short text

(one *chuan* in Chinese) which systematically interprets the constituent factors of the Pure Land, which is understood to be the realm of awakening and of the four wisdoms. The original Sanskrit of this scripture is not extant, but two translations remain. A Tibetan version is entitled '*phags-pa sangs-rgyas kyi sa zhes-bya ba theg-pa chen-po'i mdo*.'⁴ The Chinese version is entitled simply *Fo-ti-ching*.⁵

The text opens with an introduction which describes the Buddha, the Pure Land in which he preaches this scripture, and the gathered assembly of bodhisattvas, *mahāśrāvakas*, and *mahāsattvas*. The body of the work treats the five factors which constitute the Buddha land: the pure Dharma realm, Mirror wisdom, Equality wisdom, Discernment wisdom, and Duty-Fulfillment wisdom. Each of these factors is described by a series of ten descriptions or similes. The Pure Dharma realm is compared to empty space, which pervades all places without itself being in any way delimited. Mirror wisdom is likened to a round mirror which reflects all images without discrimination. Equality wisdom is simply described in ten statements on the equality of all things. Discernment wisdom is described by drawing comparisons from the world and its contents. Duty-Fulfillment wisdom is understood through analogy with the actions of sentient beings in the world. In effect, the first two wisdoms correspond to the Yogācāra notion of Non-discriminative wisdom (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*) and the last two to subsequently attain-

ed wisdom (*prṣṭalabhā-jñāna*). Both focus on the pure Dharma realm as the space of emptiness and the sphere of compassion.

The concluding section of this scripture offers two similes to illustrate the nature of the wisdom described, now identified as a phenomenal wisdom all of one unified taste. The first simile depicts the luxurious grove of the gods wherein they lose any sense of their individual identities, drawing the analogy that entry into the Dharma realm of emptiness leads to the wisdom insight into the equality of all beings. The second simile notes the same point by describing the flow of all rivers and streams to the oneness of the great ocean.

Four verses then summarize the meaning of the entire text.

The *Buddhabhūmisūtra* does not, however, come to us on its own merits and present itself for our consideration as an independent text. Rather, it is embedded within a Yogācāra discourse on the nature of ultimate reality and wisdom. It is the source text for an extensive and important Yogācāra commentary, the *Buddhabhūmivivākhyāna* by Śīlabhadra or its much-expanded Chinese version, the *Buddhabhūmyupadeśa* of Bandhuprabha.⁴ Given this contextual web, the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* has come to be considered as itself a Yogācāra composition. Questions arise, however, when one attempts to identify its place in Yogācāra thinking, for while there is evidence that it is a very early text, it is never mentioned by Yogācāra writers before Asvabhāva (ca. 450-550). The evidence is as follows:

1) One of the concluding similes of the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* (that all rivers flow into the oneness of the great ocean) and its concluding verses in their entirety are found also in the Bodhi chapter of the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkāra*, thus showing a clear interdependence between these texts, in one direction or the other.⁷

2) Both Asvabhāva in his *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṃkāraṭīkā* and Sthiramati in his *Sūtrālaṃkāra-vṛttibhāṣya* identify the source of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* passage as the *Buddhabhūmisūtra*.

... the following part is based on the *Buddhabhūmisūtra*. This sutra declared: "The Buddha land is comprised of five factors, viz., the Pure Dharma realm, Mirror wisdom, Equality wisdom, Discernment wisdom, and Duty-fulfillment wisdom." Hence the topic of this section [of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*] should be considered according to the order of the five factors in this [*Buddhabhūmi*] sutra.⁸

This reference witnesses to the fact that these Yogācāra thinkers were of the opinion that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* preceded the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*.

3) The initial section of the introduction of the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* which describes the merits of the Buddha is also found in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* in almost identical terms.⁹ It also appears in Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha*, where Paramārtha identifies its source as "The Scripture in a Hundred Thousand [Verses] of the Bodhisattva Canon,"¹⁰ an unknown text. The absence of any reference to the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* on the part of Paramārtha here seems to suggest that he had no knowledge of it.

This evidence, scanty as it is, can lead to two opposite conclusions. Nishio Kyoo and Hakamaya Noriaki argue that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* is indeed the source for the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and at least older than that text.¹¹ Their principal evidence is the citations in the commentaries of Asvabhāva and Sthiramati.

More recently Takasaki Jikido has presented an opposing view, that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* is in fact a comparatively late

composition and draws on the *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra*.¹² Chief among his arguments is the absence of any reference to it by Yogācāra prior to Asvabhāva. By this reason, it would have been composed somewhere around 400 CE, before Asvabhāva but after Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. He would hold that Asvabhāva and Sthiramati, who follows his lead, simply mistake the direction of dependence.

In both opinions, scant attention is paid to the relationship between the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* and the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* (or the *Mahāyānasamgraha*), for the evidence there is not conclusive and the place of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* as a, if not the, foundational Yogācāra scripture is attested by a host of later references.

THE PRESENT THESIS

The present thesis attempts to do justice to the above evidence by maintaining that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* is indeed early and is the source for the parallel passages in both the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, as indicated by Asvabhāva and Sthiramati, and for the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, but that it was not originally a Yogācāra composition. This would account for the failure of the early Yogācāra masters to mention it. Rather it is an attempt by a person cognizant of the burgeoning Pure Land cults with their many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to systematize and interpret the meaning of those Pure Land cults and practices within an overall Mahayana understanding. The argument is as follows:

1) The *Buddhabhūmisūtra* does not mention the basic Yogācāra themes. There is no reference to the container consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*) or to the development of consciousness (*vijñānapariṇāma*). There is no account of the three patterns/natures of consciousness (*trilakṣaṇatrisvabhāva*). In its concluding verses, the wisdom of suchness (*ta-*

thatā-jñāna) is differentiated into essence, dharma-enjoyment, and transformation, but these differentiations are not identified as Buddha bodies and the Three Body theme (*trikāya*) remains undeveloped. These are the most central themes of Asaṅga in his *Mahāyānasamgraha*,¹³ and their absence strongly suggests that the text in question is not a Yogācāra work. The themes on the four wisdoms and the pure Dharma realm loom large in later Yogācāra commentaries, especially the *Ch'eng Wei-shih lun*.¹⁴ But this is probably the direct result of the adoption of this Pure Land text by Śīlabhadra and Bandhuprabha, a disciple of Dharmapāla, and its introduction into later Yogācāra discourse on wisdom and the Dharma Realm. It was probably so adopted by Yogācāra thinkers, because it admirably served the purpose of presenting a well-developed and systematic understanding of awakening—a theme to which no other Yogācāra text was specifically devoted. The absence of reference to it by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu results from the fact that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* was not within their doctrinal lineage, at least not yet. One can then conclude with Asvabhāva and Sthiramati that it is the source for the parallel passages in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*.

2) Furthermore, there is then no improbability of its being also the source for the introduction to the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, for, since it was not originally a Yogācāra text, it would not in any way supplant that text as the foundational Yogācāra scripture. It would then appear that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* predates the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*. It might be thought that Paramārtha's commentary argues against this contention:

In the Bodhisattva canon there is a particular Pure Land Scripture. This scripture has one hundred thousand verses. Thus it is called "The Scripture in One Hundred Thousand [Verses]."¹⁵

Étienne Lamotte presents evidence that this

"scripture in one hundred verses" is an alternate title for the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*,¹⁶ and thus Paramārtha's witness shows that he was aware both that the *Mahāyānasamgraha* passage was not original and that a parallel passage was present in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*.

If indeed there once was a version of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* in a hundred thousand verses, Paramārtha may have been referring to it. Yet he clearly identifies the source of the *Mayāyānasamgraha* passage as "a Pure Land scripture." He seems to have combined his awareness that the passage is both present in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* and that its source is a Pure Land text. It is, however, more probable that the introductory passage was borrowed from the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* by the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, because its rhetoric fits perfectly in the context of the *Buddhabhūmisūtra*. It describes the qualities of Pure Land, the merits of the Buddha dwelling there, and the good qualities of this assembled community. It is then a perfect lead-in to the main theme of the *Buddhabhūmisūtra*, i.e., the reality of Pure Land. But it does not harmonize so closely with the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, for the body of this latter text begins not with any disquisition on Pure Land, but with a discourse on the unconditioned in Prajñāpāramitā style.

The *Buddhabhūmisūtra* would then be earlier than the source for the parallel passages in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and probably earlier than the source for the parallel introduction in the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*. Read on its own merits and apart from the later commentaries, this scripture would appear to be an Indian attempt to understand the Buddha land by going beyond its imagery and systematically interpreting it as wisdom (in four aspects) focused on the pure Dharma realm.

3) The specific *sitz im leben* of the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* is then not Yogācāra

philosophy. Rather, its context is to be sought within Pure Land devotional practices. The *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka* witnesses to the presence of a host of Pure Land cults and practices directed to a number of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.¹⁷ Yamada Isshi dates this text between 200 and 400 CE, and specifies its intent as an apologetic for the Buddha Śākyamuni, who, it is argued, is superior in compassion to the host of Pure Land Buddhas, precisely because his vows (*praṇidhāna*) have led him to take birth in this Sāhā world of suffering, rather than in a pure land.

For the purpose at hand, this text demonstrates both the prevalence of Pure Land devotional cults and the felt need to interpret them within the overall Mahayana tradition. It is then not difficult to suppose that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* was also composed within this living context, not so much with the aim of bolstering flagging devotion to Śākyamuni, but rather of answering the more doctrinal question of how one was to understand Pure Land Buddhas, whoever they might be.

TRIKĀYA

Because of its co-option by later Yogācāra thinkers, the place of the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* within its own contextual web of ideas and its own problematic has been obscured. If, however, one can read it in its proper context as an attempt to interpret Pure Land practices within an overall Mahayana understanding of emptiness and Buddhahood, then a number of interesting conclusions follow in regard to the development of Yogācāra doctrine.

The *Buddhabhūmivivākhyāna* and the *Buddhabhūmyupadeśa* are prime sources for investigating the Yogācāra teaching on the Three Bodies of Buddha. Indeed Bandhuprabha's Chinese text adds a full chapter specifically to the theme.¹⁸ However, if it is true that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* predates

both the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*, then its doctrinal understanding of Buddha bodies stands at the beginning of this particular doctrinal tradition.

Buddhologists have long tried to uncover the lines of development for the *trikāya* theme within its apparent Yogācāra context. They have often seen the Enjoyment Body (*sambhoga-kāya*) as an intermediate body between the Dharma Body and the Transformation Body. If, however, the initial presentation of the *trikāya*, in fact, occurred in the *Buddhabhūmisūtra*, then the original form of this doctrine was not Yogācāra at all. Rather, it reflected the concern of a Pure Land *Mahāyāna* thinker to understand the Pure Land Buddhas, who are the direct referent for the Enjoyment Bodies, having created pure lands of untold bliss through their past actions and vows wherein both they and their devotees enjoy the one taste of the doctrine.¹⁹ This supposition is further bolstered by Asaṅga who in his *Mahāyānasamgraha* characterizes the Enjoyment body by its assemblies, its pure lands, and its enjoyment of doctrine.²⁰ The point to stress, however, is that these Pure Land Buddhas, such as Amitābha and Aśobhya, are not merely case examples of Enjoyment bodies, but the source for later Yogācāra thinking of Buddha bodies. They are the prototypes, whose existence in devotional practice led the author of the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* to present his threefold distinction, and the later Yogācāra masters to develop the theme more fully in their many treatises.

The Introduction to the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* has two phrases that relate to Buddha bodies: 1) "His body issues forth to all worlds,"²¹ and "all the bodies which he manifests cannot be differentiated."²² The first sentence is interpreted by Śīlabhadra to refer to the Transformation body and is explained as referring to the descent of the Buddha from the Tuṣita heaven.²³ The second passage is interpreted as referring to the

undefiled Buddha bodies of golden hue, which do not arise from "unreal imagining."²⁴ Thus these bodies indicate the Pure Land Buddhas encountered in concentration and recitation practices. Their appearance is due to the vows of the Pure Land Buddhas and is not imagined, although they take on a golden hue in those concentrated visualization practices.

But the most important passage by far is found in the concluding verses. As it is embedded within these verses, the entire section is given here:

The suchness of all things is characterized by purity from the obstacles (1a).
Mastery in reality wisdom and its object is characterized by inexhaustibility (1b).
Because of the cultivation of the wisdom of suchness in all respects, full perfection is realized (2a).
[That wisdom] establishes the two (i.e., benefit and happiness) for all sentient beings and brings about inexhaustible results in all respects (2b).
[That wisdom] has the activity of a very skillful method in the transformations of body, speech, and mind (3a).
[That wisdom] is fully endowed with the two limitless doors of concentration and mystic formulas (3b).
[That wisdom] displays the differentiations of essence, the enjoyment of doctrine, and transformation (4a).²⁵
This Pure Dharma Realm is enunciated by all Buddhas (4b).²⁶

The subject described in verse 1 is "the suchness of all things" (*chos rnam kun gyi de bzhin nyid*), which is further identified in the last verse as the Dharma realm (*chos cyi dbyings*). The point in these summary verses is apparently to understand all Buddha bodies within the overall theme of suchness and the Dharma realm, i.e., within an overall Mahāyāna understanding.

The subject of verses 2 through 4a, however, appears to be "the wisdom of suchness," i.e., wisdom not only enables one to become a Buddha by realizing the reality of suchness, but also serves to provide sentient beings with both benefit and happiness through its skillful transformations and its limitless practices of concentration and mystic formulas. It is precisely such practices of concentration and mystic formulas that most probably constituted the central focus of the Pure Land cults, wherein one entered into a state of concentrated visualization of Buddhas and recited formulas in their praise. Thus verse 4a presents the differentiations of this wisdom not only by referring to essence and transformation, but also by including the enjoyment of doctrine as the content of Pure Land devotional practice. This enjoyment receives no extended treatment, because it is not as yet a fully articulated factor in a consciously developed doctrine of the Three Bodies, but simply a reference to wisdom as practiced by Pure Land devotees.

CONCLUSION

The above thesis is that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* is an early Pure Land text and that source for both the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* and the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra*. If this conclusion is accepted, then its doctrine of the three differentiations, of the wisdom of suchness as including both the transformations of "historical" Buddhas and the enjoyment of doctrine that characterize Pure Land concentration and recitation practices, is the earliest form of the doctrine of Three Buddha bodies. There is, as a result, no need to interpret the origin of the Enjoyment Body as some kind of intermediary between the Dharma Body and the Transformation Body. One need only identify its living context within Pure Land practice.

From the extant references to Pure Land practice by *Asaṅga* and *Vasubandhu*, it may also be the case that they themselves, as sug-

gested by *Vasubandhu's* authorship of the *Sukhāvatīvyūhopadeśa*,²⁷ may have been Pure Land practitioners with the full awareness that they were engaged in symbolic liturgies.

FOOTNOTES:

1. *Trīṣatikāyāḥ Prajñāpāramitāyāḥ Kārikāsaptaiḥ*: "[Buddha] lands cannot be grasped because they are nothing but conscious constructs flowing from wisdom (*jñānanīṣyaṇḍavijñaptimātratvāt*).'" In Giuseppe Tucci, *Minor Buddhist Texts*, Part I, 1956: Roma: Serie Orientale Roma IX, Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (Kyoto: Rinsen, 1978 reprint), p. 63.

2. In his *Sukhāvatīvyūhopadeśa*. See Minoru Kiyota, "Buddhist Devotional Meditation," in *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation*, ed., M. Kiyota (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1978).

3. For *Śīlabhadra's* text see Nishio Kyoo, *The Buddhābhūmisūtra and the Buddhābhūmivyākhyāna* (Nagoya: Kakinkaku Shobo, 1939) and his Japanese study and translation, *Bucchikyōron no kenkyū* (Nagoya: 1940). Both recently reprinted by the Suzuki Research Foundation. For *Bandhuprabha's* text, see John Keenan, *A Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa: The Doctrinal Development of the Notion of Wisdom in Yogācāra Thought* (unpub. Ph.d. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1980).

4. For the Tibetan text, see Nishio, *The Buddhābhūmisūtra and the Buddhābhūmivyākhyāna*.

5. T. 16. pp. 720-724.

6. The Chinese text of *Bandhuprabha*, *Fo-ti ching-lun*, here restored as the *Buddhābhūmyupadeśa*, is based on the earlier version of *Śīlabhadra*, preserved in Tibetan and restored as the *Buddhābhūmivyākhyāna*. *Bandhuprabha's* version is twice as long as

Śīlabhadra's, because Bandhuprabha (or possibly its translator *Hsüan Tsang*) had incorporated much material from the *Dharmapāla/Fa-hsiang* tradition of Yogācāra. An English translation of the Chinese text, which marks the divergences, is given in Keenan, *A Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa*.

7. Sylvain Levi, *Mahāyāna sūtrālaṃkāra, Exposé de la Doctrine du Grand Véhicule* (2 vols.; Paris: Librairie Honore Champion, 1907), p. 149.

8. Asvabhāva's passage on these verses is found in *Theg pa chen pa'i mdo sde'i rgyan gyi rgya cher bshad pa*. P. ed., #5530, pp. 80b.5-83b.8. Sthiramati's passage is in *mdo sde rgyan gyi 'grel bshad*, P. ed., #5531, pp. 149b.1-160a.2. The above translation is drawn from Hakamaya Noriaki, "Asvabhāva's Commentary on the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* IX.56-76," in *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku*, (December 1971) 20.1: 472-471.

9. For Bodhirucci's translation, see T. 16, p. 665c. For Hsuan Tsang's translation, see T. 16, p. 688b. Also confer Étienne Lamotte, *Samdhinirmocanasūtra: L'Explication des Mystères*, (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, p. 167).

10. T. 31, p. 263a.

11. Hakamaya Noriaki, "Shōjō kokkai kō," *Nantō Bukkyō*, 37.1.n3 (November, 1976). Kyoo Nishio, *Bucchikyoron no kenkyū*, pp. 1-32.

12. In his *A Study of the Ratnagotravibhāga*, pp. 403-404, Takasaki agrees with Nishio's opinion, but he alters his view in "Hōsshin no ichigenron: Nyoraizō shisō no hō kannen," *Hirakawa Akira Hakase Kanreki Kinen ronshū: Bukkyō ni okeru hō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1975-76), p. 239, n. 38; and in his *Nyoraizō shisō no keiseki* (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1974), pp. 346-347, he presents the opinion that the *Buddhabhūmisūtra* depends upon the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*.

13. Asaṅga summarizes Yogācāra in

these terms in his *Mahāyānasamgraha*. See Lamotte, *La Somme*, pp. 132-133.

14. *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi: La Siddhi de Hiuan-Tsang*, de La Vallée Poussin (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1929), pp. 681-692.

15. T. 31, p. 263a.

16. Lamotte, *La Somme*, p. 62*.

17. Isshi Yamada, *Karuṇapūṇḍarīka: Edited with Introduction and Notes*, I (London: University of London, 1968), pp. 121-140.

18. Keenan, *A Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa*, pp. 850-891.

19. From the *Buddhabhūmisūtra*, Keenan, *A Study*, pp. 786-787.

20. Lamotte, *La Somme*, p. 267, and 266, n.2.

21. Keenan, *A Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa*, p. 470.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 470.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 478 and p. 489.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 479 and p. 490.

25. The text reads: *svabhāvadharmaśāmbhoganirmāṇairbhinnavṛttikaḥ*. In Tibetan: rang-bzhin chos rdzogs-long-spyod dang sprui-pas tha-dad 'hun-pa-can.

26. Nishio, *The Buddhābhūmisūtra and the Buddhābhūmivyākhyāna*, pp. 22-23 and p. 132, n.66.

27. In his "Ryūju Seishin ni okeru Jōdo shisō," in *Bukkyō no konpon shinri*, ed. and com. by Mimamoto Shoson (Tokyo: 1955), Yamaguchi Susumu presents the opinion that Vasubandhu, after being won over to Mahayana (in its Yogācāra reading) by his brother Asaṅga, in fact experienced yet another conversion to Pure Land. In the above understanding, no such conversion would be necessary for a Yogācāra scholar to engage in liturgical Pure Land practice, as long as the meditative images were understood to be, in Asaṅga's words, "conscious constructs flowing from wisdom," as long as the Buddha Land was understood to be comprised of the Pure Dharma Realm and the four wisdoms.