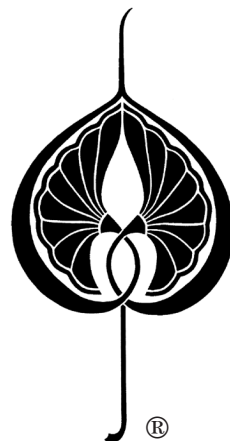


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The Pure Land on Earth: The *Chronicles of Amoghapaśa 'Phags pa Don yod zhags pa'i Lo rgyus*

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The *Chronicles of Amoghapaśa* describes the travels of a Buddhist layman named *Śāntivarnam to the Potala, the famed capitol of Amitābha's Pure Land Sukhāvātī. This account was written by Sonam Tsemo (1142–1182), the oldest son of Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092–1158), the founder of the Sakya order of Buddhism in Tibet. It is significant in that it presents the Potala as a real place on earth, map and all. In this account Amoghapaśa, rather than Avalokiteśvara or Amitābha, is the lord of the Potala. There is much use of allegory, bringing home a message of our relationship with the lord of the Potala and of spiritual progress, while describing a real historical transmission of its tidings down to the author. The story is rich in many ways. Rather than writing a long essay I present only the translation, in hopes that many people with numerous methodologies will find it a fruitful ground for further study.¹

TRANSLATION

I bow to Amoghapaśa.

The story:

Not too long after the Buddha passed into nirvana there was an *upāsaka*² in Vārāṇasī, to the west, named Armor of Peace.³ After he had gone to the Potala three times he became famous by the name of Iron Gift.⁴ He was a man who harbored many wonderful Dharmas. He studied the Dharma under all the gurus. His compassion was as great as any other buddha or bodhisattva. He would listen to sentient beings with a heart of love.

He had heard that on the ocean shore to the south there was a place called Potala Mountain. He got the idea that he would go there for a visit. He made it to Vajrāsana. At sNga gdong⁵ he saw a map drawn out for going to Oud̥yana, a map for going to Mt. Śri, a map for going to the five-peaked mountain [Wu Tai Shan] in China, and a map for going to the Potala. He copied the map for the Potala and took it with him when he left.

On his way south he spent six months in a city without departing. Then he traveled for twenty days over an empty plain where there were no cities. There was a red river next to a huge ocean that he followed for seven days, until his knees wore out. The water was so hot that he couldn't drink it, so he took fruit from trees growing there and dunked them in the rivulets until they were saturated. He carried a lot of them, and when he was thirsty he sucked their juice as he went along.

He couldn't get over the river, so he looked at the map. There was something on it that said: "Get what you ask for from Tārā." So he prayed, and Tārā gave him a boat. Then she left. He reached a place called Tārā's Harbor, but no one came out to guide his boat in. He looked over the map. It said: "You will get what you ask for from Brikuṭi." He prayed. A high place appeared to him, so he went up to it. The place was called Brikuṭi Heights. A giant river named Bhaganati came from the southwest on toward the northeast. It went right out to the middle of the ocean without mixing its waters [with the ocean water]. He was stuck in the middle [of the river] and couldn't get out. He looked at the map. There was something that said: "You will get what you ask for from Hayagriva, the horse-necked one." So he prayed. A bridge appeared on which there was a giant serpent, as big as a chariot wheel. There was a growth on its head that was a horse's head. There was an opening [on the bridge], so he crossed to the other side and arrived at the foothills of the Potala. That [bridge] was called Horse-neck Bridge. He went up from there and there was Jomo Tārā teaching the Dharma to bodhisattvas, mostly gods. He offered her flowers. He bowed and gave her gifts.

She asked him: "Where do you come from and where are you going?"

The *upāsaka* said: "I come from Vārāṇasī. I am going to see the Noble One's face."

She said: "Come back here after you meet him."

So he went on.

On the midsection of the mountain there was Samantabhadra with a retinue that was mostly *asuras*. He was sitting there explaining the Dharma, just as the previous one. The *upāsaka* went on from there and Brikuṭi was sitting there explaining the Dharma to a multitude of bodhisattva retinues, and it was just as before. Then he got to the summit. The ground was made entirely of precious gold, with many jeweled eyes drawn in patterns upon it. It had an inlay of Vaiḍūrya jewels. Trees of jewels were spread out, and there was a variety of deer there. All of them were announcing the Mahayana Dharma. They were working to liberate the spirits⁶ of all sentient beings. There were all kinds of birds doing the same thing. There was a complete sangha of bodhisattvas, a part of which consisted of women and children. There were also a lot of *śrāvaka* sangha members there.

In the midst of all of them there was a crystal palace. The door in the east opened up with just a touch. He went inside and saw the noble Amoghapaśa by the light of five gods who were serving there as lamps for the way. He bowed. He presented offerings.

The Noble One said: “From whence have you come? Why have you come here? You are worn out.”

The *upāsaka* said: “I came from Vārāṇasī to see the Noble One’s face, and to request the Dharma.”

So the Noble One taught him the Dharma. “Now, will you be staying here or returning to your country?”

The *upāsaka* thought to himself: “I have seen the faces of many buddhas and served them. I have made it this far, so if I go back I’ll be famous among men.” So he said: “I will go to my country.”

[The Noble One] invited about five hundred guests and gave them a meal, then he said: “O Na, go on, you.”

Then the *upāsaka* bowed and made offerings to the Noble One and started his descent. He met Brikuṭi. “Did you meet the Noble One? Now where will you go?” she asked.

He said: “I met the Noble One. Now I’m going to my country.” He bowed and made offerings, then went on. It went the same way with Samantabhadra on the midsection of the mountain and with Tārā among the forest leaves. Then he prayed to the Horse-necked One, who made a bridge for him, and so on until eventually he made it to Vārāṇasī.

Now the king of Vārāṇasī, the *paṇḍitas* there, and everyone else was saying: “O *upāsaka*, where did you go?”

He told them, “I went to the Potala and met Tārā,” and went on to tell them the whole story.

“O Na, what *siddhis* did the Noble One give you?”

“He didn’t give me any at all,” the *upāsaka* said.

Everybody said: “If you meet a Noble One it’s expected that you receive *siddhis*. This didn’t happen, so you are telling us lies.”

Now in the forest grove there lived a large number of yogis who had attained *siddhis*. He bowed and made offerings to them, doing them great services. He asked them: “Is it the truth when I say that I went to the Potala and met the Noble One?”

The *siddhas* said: “That’s how it was.”

Then the king and the *paṇḍitas* said to the *upāsaka*: “O Na, There are too many chapters in *The Twenty-thousand [Line Perfection of Wisdom]* and they do not agree with the *Abhisamayālamkāra* written by Maitreya. So did you ask him how this could be?”

He said: “I didn’t ask.”

They said: “It is fitting that you ask.”

So the *upāsaka* went back and step by step he reached the outskirts of the Potala. There was a good man at home who had covered his head with a monk’s robe while plowing the fields, and the rows where he plowed were all brimming with the blood of dead animals. His wife was pulling weeds. A little boy was lying in a bed.

He saw these things, but he couldn’t believe it. He went up to them and put on [the robes] that characterize the Buddha and said: “Do it like this.” Then he took the robes off and put on white clothes. The good man said: “O Na, you have to carry these Dharma clothes,” and gave them to him.

The *upāsaka* carried them until he had brought them into a forest, then he set them down. Then he went on. He went to the place that Tārā used to stay. He scattered some old flowers there, but he didn’t see Tārā. Neither did he see Samantabhadra or Brikuṭi. He went to the summit of the mountain, but it was cloaked in fog and he didn’t see any of the things he had seen before.

He thought to himself: “What is it that is keeping me in the dark?” Then he confessed his evil deeds for one full day. He prayed to the Noble One, and things started to appear to him like they had looked before.

He met the Noble One, and asked: “Why is it that I didn’t see Tārā and the others?”

The Noble One said: “You are in the shadows because you made that good man part from his Dharma clothes. That’s why you don’t see. You have tossed away the things that support him that are so difficult to find. They will support him when he becomes a monk. You have forced him to part with the insignia that are so difficult to find, the insignia of saffron. You must go and return the Dharma clothes. If you do that he won’t go to hell. If you don’t, he will go to hell.”

So the *upāsaka* went down and looked for the Dharma clothes. They were in an opening in the woods on the path he had previously gone on. He picked them up and went to where the good man lived with his wife and child.

He was sitting there in a grass hut boiling some rice soup. The *upāsaka* gave [the Dharma clothes] to him. He said: “When I made you part from these things I took on a massive shadow. Now you must wear them until you die.”

He left and met up with Tārā. He told her the whole story.

She said: “I was right here. You were in a shadow so you didn’t see me.” It went the same way with Samantabhadra and Brikuṭi. Then he went to where the Noble One was. He said to the Noble One: “I beg you to come to Jambu Island⁷ to help its sentient beings.”

The Buddha said: “I’m always there, but they don’t see.”

The *upāsaka* asked him again, but he said: “Sentient beings have impure karma, so I’m of no use.”

Then he asked again. The Buddha said: “O Na, I will come.” He called out and invited five hundred guests. He said: “Go and give this to them for a meal. I will come while you are eating.”

Now the *upāsaka* thought to himself: “I had a question earlier on. When the Noble One comes out I’ll ask him.” Then he set out for home.

He made offerings to Brikuṭi and the rest of [the assembly] and then left. The stages he went through were that he stayed in the city for five months without leaving. The place was about one month’s journey from Vajrāsana. There was a place called the City of the Gods.⁸ He went there. He saw some travelers there, and stood up to teach the Dharma to them. When there was only one left he sat down. The rest of them had gone to buy things to eat. The *upāsaka* ate and went back to the forest highlands. He sat down at the trunk of a tree where it didn’t hurt. He slept the night at its roots. When he got up in the morning the earth was glistening and shining so brightly. A rain of flowers and perfumed waters came down. The sky before him was full of light. The

children of the gods were offering their gifts from out of the sky and then set themselves down there.

He thought to himself: “What’s this?”

He looked all over the ground and didn’t see anything. He did not give up. He went on and looked everywhere, but he didn’t see anything. He went up to a tree, and there the noble Amoghapaśa was sitting at its trunk with five gods. The *upāsaka* bowed and made offerings.

Then the Noble One said: “You don’t have what it takes. Enlist the son of the king of Bochara to build a *chopari* here. So the *upāsaka* went to that country, but the Noble One was already there. All the people were making offerings to him. The king offered into his hands a mountain of ten million pieces of gold. He cut the top off of a tree and put a *gañjira* on it. He put a *chopari* on it. He called it the Temple of Kharsapāṇi. The king supported eighty monks there.

Then the *upāsaka* asked the Noble One: “There are too many chapters in *The Twenty-thousand [Line Perfection of Wisdom]* and they do not agree with the *Abhisamayālamkara*. How could that be?”

“I am just a manifestation of great compassion. I don’t know. The source of great compassion is the embodiment of perfect enjoyment and lives at the Potala. Hurry over there.”

So once again the *upāsaka* went over the same old road just as he had before. He met Tārā in the Potala’s foothills. He bowed and made offerings.

She said: “You’ve come back. Why have you come?”

He told her the whole story of what had happened.

“How could it be that he didn’t know?” she said. “He got you to come to the Potala a third time so that you could clear away the darkness. Now wake up from all that darkness! Clear it out!”

It went the same way when he met Samanthabhadra, Brikūṭi, and the Noble One.

Then the Noble One said: “*The Twenty-thousand [Line Perfection of Wisdom]* has eight chapters and agrees with the *Abhisamayalamkara*,” and he gave him the books.⁹

So once again he took that old road and came to Kharsapāṇi. He met the Noble One there, who said exactly the same thing he had before.

They say that the *upāsaka* returned to the Potala and lived there.

After that a *paṇḍita* from western India named Abhyakara showed up and performed services for the Noble One while he lived there. He had a dream one evening in which he heard the spell of the eternal

door¹⁰ recited three times from out of the sky in the Sanskrit language. When he woke up he sat there with his mind stuck on this. He thought: “This is the blessing of the Noble One,” so he took him as his only *yidam*. They say he attained *siddhis* and that he moved to the Potala.

After him there was a *paṇḍita* named Sa ston. He served the Noble One while living there. First he taught him the Dharma in his dreams. Later on he taught him for real.

His student was Paṇḍita Amoghavajra. His student was Bari Lotsawa.¹¹

NOTES

1 The *'Phags pa Don you zhags pa'i lo rgyus* is found in the *Sa skya bKa' 'bum*, a fifteen-volume compilation of the collected writings of the founders of the Sa skya tradition, vol. 5, pp. 361–369. Five hundred photo-offset copies of the original manuscript were published in 2006 by Sachen International, Guru Lama, Kathmandu, Nepal (ISBN 99933-8208-3).

2 A Buddhist layperson who has taken the five vows of not killing, stealing, lying, having perverse desires and consuming alcohol.

3 Zhi ba'i go cha, *Śāntivarnam.

4 Lcags kyi byin pa, *Ayasdatta

5 Literally, “Early Face.” It is possible that this is a corrupt spelling of lnga gdong, “Five-faced One,” which is an epitaph of Mahādeva.

6 *rgyud*.

7 Jambudvīpa is the name of the continent where the Buddha taught, according to Buddhist cosmology.

8 Devikoṭa.

9 Po ti.

10 Sgo mtha' yas pa'i gzungs.

11 Bari Lotsawa was a teacher of Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, Sonam Tsemo's father.

