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Life and Light, the Infinite: A Historical and Philological Analysis of the Amida Cult

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LIFE AND LIGHT, THE INFINITE

A Historical and Philological Analysis of the Amida Cult

1. Two Names of Amida Buddha

When we study literature, history, philosophy, religion, or any other complicated subject, we tend to confine our research to a limited frame of reference as if the tradition were purely formed within a particular region. On the other hand, if we dare to step into the jungle of the enormous complex of elements behind one tradition, we must be armed with balancing kinds of weapons: aggression and patience, bravery and timidity, *avant-garde-ness* and conservatism. It seems this is what Iwamoto Yutaka (岩本裕) does in his book, *Bukkyō Setsuwa no Shinkō to Denshō* (仏教説話の信仰と伝承) which is about the history of Buddhism. After reading his book, despite my lack of knowledge and confidence, I could not resist the temptation to investigate further the original source of Pure Land Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhism did not become established as a distinct religious movement until the sixth century IE when it was founded by Tanluan (曇鸞), and expanded upon by Daochuo (道綽) and Shandao (善導) in China. Various schools of Buddhism, including Pure Land Buddhism, reached their full bloom during the Tang Dynasty, which exhibited a cosmopolitan ideal of various dimensions. Indigenous Taoism is also said to have stimulated the rise of Pure Land Buddhism in China. The western paradise world, or *Sukhāvatī* (極樂), which is an important Pure Land Buddhist notion, appears

to have been associated with the Taoist terrestrial paradise. This Taoist paradise was also believed to be located in the far west, somewhere in the *Kunlun* (崑崙) mountains where *Xi Wang Mu* (西王母), the divine Queen Mother of the West, ruled immortals.(1)

In the twelfth century, *Hōnen* (法然) founded the Pure Land school, or *Jōdo-shū* (浄土宗), and one of his disciples, *Shinran* (親鸞) founded the True Sect of the Pure Land, or *Jōdo-Shinshū* (浄土真宗) in Japan. By rejecting the principle of celibacy and by emphasizing no separation between religious and secular life, Amidism has become the most widespread form of Japanese Buddhism, and now has a following of about twenty million in Japan.

While the vast majority of Pure Land Buddhists have great faith in Amida Buddha, very few of them are aware of the varied historical background of this Buddha. We usually understand Pure Land Buddhism specifically as a product of the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist traditions. Hence, in order to expand our perspective of this Buddhist tradition, perhaps it would be meaningful to investigate the origins of the Amida cult before it came to China.

In the doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism, Amida Buddha is a superhuman savior who vows to give up the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (涅槃) until he can guide all who surrender to his saving power to a rebirth in the Pure Land (浄土) through the power of his Original Vow, or *pūrva-praṇidhāna* (本願). Amida Buddha has two names: *Amitāyus* (無量寿) and *Amitābha* (無量光). In Sanskrit, *amita*

means the "unmeasured, unmeasurable," -āyus of Amitāyus means the "life, long life," and -ābhā of Amitābha means the "light, splendor."

The word *Amituo Fo* (阿弥陀仏) appeared in *Lokakṣema*, or *Zhiloujiachen's* (支婁迦讖) translation of the *Pratyutpannasamādhi Sūtra*, or *Bo-zhou Sanmei Jing* (般舟三昧經) for the first time in the history of Chinese Buddhism in 179 IE.(2) According to *Mochizuki Bukkyō Daijiten* (望月仏教大辞典), the original name of Amida Buddha was neither *Amitāyus* nor *Amitābha*, but simply *Amita*. Two reasons are given. First, early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, including the *Pratyutpannasamādhi* and the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, or *Weimojie Suoshuo Jing* (維摩詰所說經), refer to neither *Amitāyus*, nor *Amitābha*, but simply use the word *Amituo Fo*. Second, because there is no other Buddha who has more than one name, Amida Buddha, cannot be an exception. He should also originally have had only one name, *Amita*. For these two reasons, according to Mochizuki, both *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha* were derived from *Amita*.(3)

However, Iwamoto points out that *Lokakṣema* frequently translated original Sanskrit terms in an abbreviated manner. It is possible that *Lokakṣema* might have translated the word *Amita* as an abbreviation of either *Amitāyus* or *Amitābha*, or even both. For example, we can observe his abbreviation of two personal names below:

Upālavanna > *Youpinina* (優波洹那) > *Youpini* (優波洹)
Vadālapara > *Batuoheluo* (跋陀和羅) > *Batuohe* (跋陀和) (4)

The same personal names appear as *Youpinina* (優波洹那) and *Batuoheluo* (跋陀和羅) in *Chang Ahan Jing* (長阿含經, trans. in 414 IE), *Fang Guang Jing* (放光經, trans. in 291 IE) and *Guangzan Boruo Jing* (光讚般若經, trans. in 286 IE), but they become *Youpini* (優波洹) and *Batuoheo* (跋陀和) in *Lokakṣema's* translation of the *Pratyutpannasamādhi*. Thus, we cannot tell anything about the original form of Amida Buddha's name from this scripture because of *Lokakṣema's* tendency to abbreviate Sanskrit terms.

It is interesting to note that *Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* (觀音菩薩) also has six names including *Sahasrābhūja Sahasranetra Avalokiteśvara* (千手千眼觀音), and *Manoratha Avalokiteśvara* (如意輪觀音), but all of these names designate different epithets of *Avalokiteśvara*. In contrast, Amida Buddha has two names, *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha*, which are not epithets. There must be some reason for this unique occurrence within the Buddhist tradition. Did these two names derive from one original root-term and later develop two forms? Or, did they derive from two totally different sources? At this point, I would like to begin a historical and philological investigation of Amida Buddha's name.

2. *Amida*, *Amita*, or *Amṛta*?

According to Ernst Waldschmidt's *Bruchstücke buddhistischer Sūtras aus dem centralasiatischen Sanskritkanon*, -*tuo* (陀) of *Amituo* (阿彌陀) in Chinese is most often transliterated from a Sanskrit sound, *da*.

tuo (陀) < *da*, *dā*, *dha*, *ta*, *tha*, *tyā*, *dhya*, *dhyā*, *dyā* (5)

If this is true we can assume that *Amituo* in Chinese was transliterated from *Amida* in the original language. But then, how can we explain the gap between *Amida* and *Amita* as the common portion of *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha*? As for this question, we can find an answer in R. Pischel's analysis of *Apabhraṃśas* in Grammar of the Prakrit Language:

In *Apabhraṃśas*, ... intervocalic *k*, *t*, *p* become *g*, *d*, *b* respectively instead of dropping off, and *kh*, *th*, *pha* become *gh*, *dh*, *bh* respectively instead of changing into *h*. (6)

In *Apabhraṃśas*, which is the later form of Prakrit in the group of Middle Indo-Āryan Languages, (7) "*k*, *t*, *p*" sounds between two vowels in Sanskrit change into soft sounds, "*g*, *d*, *b*." In the same way, if the original language of *Amituo* in Chinese is close to Prakrit, *Amida* can be a vernacular form of *Amita* in Sanskrit. However, at this point, we still do not know from where *Amita* came. It may be a shortened form of *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha*. Alternatively, it may have had an independent origin.

Ogiwara Unrai (荻原雲来) theorizes that *Amita* is a vernacular form of *Amṛta* in Sanskrit, or *Ganlu* (甘露) in Chinese, and concludes that *Amṛta* is the origin of *Amita*. As evidence he uses the example of the "*r>i*" change from Sanskrit to Prakrit as in *Amṛtodana* to *Amitodana*. According to Ogiwara, *Amṛta* as the nectar of immortality has a consistent linkage to *Soma* in the *R̥g-Veda* (Avestan, *Haoma*). *Soma* is the cultic beverage, which is ex-

tracted from the *Soma* tree in the highest heaven called *padam paramam* in the myth of *Viṣṇu*. It was believed to have a mysterious power to bring health and immortality to those who imbibed it. Moreover, *Soma* is considered as identical with the sun in the Vedic mythology. Hence, as Ogiwara expounds, the idea of *Amṛta* which originated from *Soma* could have developed into both the ideas of *Amitāyus*, or Infinite Life, and *Amitābha*, or Infinite Light, in later centuries.(8)

It is true that we can find the "*r>i*" change in Prakrit quite often. Pischel explains:

In all dialects *r* is most frequently represented by *i*, which corresponds today to *ri*, the most usual pronunciation of *r* in India.(9)

There are numerous examples of this "*r>i*" change such as *kṛśa>kisa*, *gr̥dhra>giddha*, *dr̥ṣṭi>diṭṭhi*, and so on. M.A. Mehendale also points out the same phenomenon in an Aśokan monument such as *kṛtā>kitā*, *saḍṛśa>sadisa*.(10)

It is also important to note that Amida Buddha is called *Ganlu Wang Rulai* (甘露王如来), or the King *Tathāgata* of *Amṛta*, in esoteric Buddhism (密教). *Amituo Zhou* (阿弥陀呪), one of the esoteric Buddhist scriptures, repeats the word *Amiliduo* (阿密哩多) ten times as a *mantra* called *Shiganlu Zhenyan* (十甘露真言).(11) However, since *Amita* happens to sound like *Amṛta* by coincidence, it is possible that esoteric Buddhists simply imitated *Amṛta* with the word *Amiliduo*, and eventually started calling Amida Buddha *Ganlu Wang Rulai* to suit their own religious purpose.

As was mentioned before, we find the word *Amituo Fo* in Chinese for the first time in the translation of the *Pratyutpannasamādhi*, but it is unclear what language this term was translated from. Iwamoto suggests *Gāndhārī* and gives two reasons to support his view.⁽¹²⁾ First of all, the term *Tathāgata* (如来) in Sanskrit is usually transliterated as *Duotuoqietuo* (多陀阿伽陀) in Chinese. In the Chinese translation of the *Pratyutpannasamādhi*, however, the same term is written as *Dasa-ahe* (怛薩阿訶), which seems to be closer to *Tasāgata* (*Gāndhārī*) rather than *Tathāgata* (Sanskrit). As we can see in John Brough's *Gāndhārī Dharmapada*, this "th>s" sound change often occurs as assimilation to a neighboring palatal in the transcription from Sanskrit to *Gāndhārī*: cf. *śithila* > *śisīla*, and *vaṇathaja* > *vaṇase'a*.⁽¹³⁾ The second reason Iwamoto gives for *Gāndhārī* as the original language of the *Pratyutpannasamādhi* was that *Gāndhārī* was used from the third century BIE to the third century IE in northwest India. Since *Gāndhārī* belongs to the group of North-western Prakrit, the above-discussed transition of *Amita/Amida* from Sanskrit to Prakrit is applicable to *Gāndhārī*, too. We should also note here that the Kushan (Skt., *Kuṣāṇas*) Empire (大月氏国), which was the homeland of the translator, *Lokakṣema*, was located solely in northwest India, where *Gāndhārī* was used.

If Iwamoto is right and the *Pratyutpannasamādhi* was translated from *Gāndhārī* into Chinese, then, Ogiwara's hypothesis is irrelevant. *Amṛta* in Sanskrit becomes *amuda* in *Gāndhārī*. If *Amita* originated from *Amṛta* in Sanskrit, the possible *Gāndhārī*

text of the *Pratyutpannasamādhi* must have called Amida Buddha *Amuda*. In that case, we cannot explain why *Amuda* in *Gāndhārī* became *Amituo* in Chinese, because the "mu" sound was transcribed by Chinese characters such as *mo, mu, mu, mou* (莫, 母, 目, 牟). (14) Because of these faults in Ogiwara's analysis, perhaps we can at least conclude that the etymology of *Amita* cannot be *amṛta*.

3. Amida Buddha and Indian Mythology

There are numerous scholars who insist upon the origination of the Amida cult within Indian mythology. For example, in *Die Religionen Indiens*, Jan Gonda writes that people were already paying their respect to the idea of luminosity in Vedic India:

Auch die Sonne tritt gegen die grossen vedischen Götter stark zurück. Gottheit und Naturphänomen sind identisch, und es ist oft unmöglich, eine eindeutige Übersetzung des Sanskritwortes zu geben. (15)

During the Vedic period, because God was not treated as something separate from natural phenomenon, according to Gonda, the sun was regarded as a *deva* or deity, *Sūrya*, in its own right.

In Vedic philosophy, which is a predecessor of Brahmanism, there is a distinction made in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* between the individual as shadow and the supreme self as light. As "the lump of salt" disappears in the water, the light of *Ātman* penetrates everywhere and adapts itself to every form in the whole universe. *Ātman*, the supreme self, has no inner or outer aspect, but is one in itself. Thus, it is possible to find a philosophical

relationship between *Ātman* as the supreme self and *Amitābha* as Infinite Light. (16)

In *Tōzai Bunka no Kōryū* (東西文化の交流), Nakamura Hajime (中村元) suspects that the origin of *Amitābha* was in Brahmanism. He uses an example from the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* where, in a description of the world of *Brahman* (梵天), *Brahman's* throne, or *Paryāṅka*, is called *Amitaujas*. *Amitaujas* has the meaning of "unbounded energy," or "almighty." (17) In Buddhist Sanskrit, the same word means "a former Buddha," and *-aujas* of *Amitaujas* implies luminosity, luster, the color of light, etc. (18) Also, in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, *Ātman* is sometimes described as *Bhārūpa*: the form of light which exists in the cosmic man as *Puruṣa*. However, when we learn that the idea of luminosity was not stressed and that the sun was never considered the most important *deva* in the Vedas, it is difficult to say at this point that *Amitābha* originated from *Ātman*.

We can also find evidence for the origin of *Amitāyus*, or Infinite Life, in the Brahmanic tradition. In classical *Upaniṣads*, it was believed that when people bathed in the river of *Vijarā* they would not grow old (*na jarayiṣyati*). When *Brahman* and *Ātman* were identified in the Self, according to S. Radhakrishnan, deliverance was believed to be manifested as "life eternal." Life in paradise is a prolongation of self-centered life, while "life eternal" is liberation from it. The former is time extended, but the latter is time transcended. (19) Indeed, *Amitāyus* also transcends time.

In accord with the hypothesis that the Amida cult originated from Indian mytholgy, we can find the following parallels between the Vedic and Pure Land Buddhist traditions:

First, concerning the notion of *Sukhāvatī*, we can find a few interesting similarities between these two traditions. For example, in The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka, H. Kern relates *Sukhāvatī*, or the western paradise world, to the notion of *Yama*. In the *Rg-veda*, *Yama* is described as the ideal world of the Imperishable Light (*jyótir ājasram*), where people go to after death. Thus, we may be able to consider *Yama* as a prototype of *Sukhāvatī*.⁽²⁰⁾ In Buddhist Mahayana Sutras, F. Max Müller suggests that *Sukhā*, the capital of *Varuṇa*'s world, may be related with the notion of *Sukhāvatī*. Müller also explains that *Amitābha* or *Amitāyus* coincides with *Varuṇa*, the ruler of the west in the Vedic mythology.⁽²¹⁾

Second, *Bhakti*, or devotion, is one of the major Hindu spiritual practices. In the *Rg-Veda*, *Bhakti* was originally understood as the divine-human relationship, and had the sense of mutual interaction between the devotees and God, but in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it meant the detachment from all worldly beings that must accompany passionate attachment to God.⁽²²⁾ This kind of devotional practice could have preceded Pure Land Buddhist faith in the Original Vow of Amida Buddha.

Third, the Hindu's recitation of "Om" as a symbol of *Brahman* has a commonality with the Pure Land Buddhists' recitation of Amida Buddha's name as *Nien Fo* (念仏: Jpn., *Nembutsu*). In *Nien Fo*, *nanwu* of *Nanwu Amituo Fo* (南無阿弥陀仏) is a corruption of a

Sanskrit term, *namaḥ*, which means "to pay homage." (23) Both Hindus and Pure Land Buddhists pay great respect to the name of the object of their worship, and recite it with emotional devotion.

Fourth, the Hindu *trimūrti* of *Viṣṇu*, *Śiva*, and *Brahman* may also be connected with the Pure Land Buddhist Triad of *Amitāyus*, *Avalokiteśvara*, and *Mahāsthāmaprāpta* (無量壽如來, 觀世音菩薩, 大勢至菩薩).

Unlike the hypothesis that the Vedic religion produced the Amida cult, there are a few scholars who try to find the birth of Amida Buddha within the Buddhist tradition. For example, in *Gokuraku Jōdo-ron* (極樂淨土論), Matsumoto Bunzaburō (松本文三郎) proposed that the *Mahāśudassana-suttanta* (大善見王經) is the birth-place of Amida Buddha. Since the castle called *Kusāvatī* in the scripture, according to Matsumoto, resembles *Sukhāvatī*, *Mahāśudassana*, who is symbolized by the sun and immortality, became Amida Buddha. T.W. Rhys Davids also takes the same stand as Matsumoto. (24)

Yabuki Keiki (矢吹慶輝) believes that the idea of Amida Buddha was produced as the result of the theoretical development of the concept of *Śākyamuni* himself. *Śākyamuni*'s virtues of self-realization and of enlightening others was idealized, after his passing away, as Amida Buddha by later Mahayanists. (25)

Thus, we can find not only the etymological sources of *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha*, but also the antecedents of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition in Indian mythology. Scholars other than those referred to above who insist upon the Indian origination of

the Amida Cult include K. Fujita, E.J. Thomas, D. Snellgrove, G. Tucci, E. Zurcher, A.K. Coomaraswamy, and so on. Yet, few of them explain what historical relationship exists between the two names, *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha*. At this point, another important question arises: which was first to appear in the Buddhist scriptures, *Amitāyus* or *Amitābha*? To examine this idea, perhaps we should undertake a historical investigation of the rise of Amida Buddha in the Buddhist textual tradition.

4. Which came first, *Amitāyus* or *Amitābha*?

The Lotus Sutra (法華經), or the *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka*, plays a pivotal role in clarifying which name of Amida Buddha occurred first, *Amitāyus* or *Amitābha*. According to Fuse Kōgaku's *Hokkekyō Seiritsu Shi* (布施浩岳: 法華經成立史), the scripture was compiled over four different periods as follows:

- 1st: 1st century BIE
- 2nd: 1st century IE
- 3rd: circa 100 IE
- 4th: circa 150 IE (26)

According to Iwamoto, the Lotus Sutra only refers to Amida Buddha three times in Chapter 7, 23 and 24. All these chapters belong to either the second or the fourth period. In Chapter 7, we find the words, *Akṣobhya* (阿閼), the Buddha in the Eastern Paradise, *Abhirati*, and *Amitāyus*, but not *Sukhāvatī* as Amida's Paradise. *Amitāyus* is referred to as one of the sixteen princes of *Mahā-bhijñājñānabhibhū* (大通智勝如来), and does not play an important

role there. In Chapter 15, we do not find any term which is directly related to Amida Buddha, except for the story about the *Tathāgata* preaching the *Dharma* even after he entered *Parinirvāṇa*. *Parinirvāṇa* is the ultimate release from the miseries of transmigration and entrance into the fullest joy at the time of one's final death. This idea implies immortality, and thus we can connect it with the meaning of *Amitāyus*, or Infinite Life.

In Chapter 23, we find both *Amitāyus* and *Sukhāvatī* in the same context in a story in which the Buddha vows to change all women to men for their attainment of the Buddhahood. The story of the gender transformation, *Biancheng Nanzi* (變成男子), is also one of the most important teachings in the *Sukhāvatīvyūha*. This indicates the formation of the Amida cult around the time when this text was produced.

Finally, in Chapter 24, we find both *Amitābha* and *Sukhāvatī*. The phrase in the text goes as follows:

In the west, where the pure world *Sukhāvatī* is situated, there the Chief *Amitābha*, the tamer of men, has his fixed abode. There no women are to be found; there sexual intercourse is absolutely unknown; there the sons of *Gīna*, on springing into existence by apparitional birth, are sitting in the undefiled cups of lotuses. And Chief *Amitābha* himself is seated on a throne in the pure and nice cup of a lotus, and shines as the *Sāla*-king.(27)

However, we cannot find this description from Chapter 24 in either of the Chinese translations, *Zheng Fahua Jing* (正法華經, trans. in 286 IE) or *Miaofa Lianhua Jing* (妙法蓮華經, trans. in 406 IE). Consequently, as Iwamoto says, we may be able to assume

that the paragraph with *Amitābha* in Chapter 24 was added to the original Sansrit text after the Chinese translations.

A diagram can be made about the terminology of *Amitāyus*, *Amitābha*, and *Sukhāvatī* in the Lotus Sutra as follows:

[Complilation]	[Chapter]	[Amida's Name]	[Amida's Land]
1st century IE:	7	<i>Amitāyus</i>	None
Mid. 2nd cent. IE:	23	<i>Amitāyus</i>	<i>Sukhāvatī</i>
Sometime after:	24	<i>Amitābha</i>	<i>Sukhāvatī</i>

Besides *Amitābha*, or Infinite Light, we find numerous terms which are related to the notion of luminosity or light in the Lotus Sutra. Some of these terms are listed as below:

Candrasūryapradīpa: One who makes the moon and sun his light.
Varaprabha: One who has the glorious light.
Dīpaṃkara: One who radiates light.
Padmaprabha: One who has luminosity like the red lotus.
Rāśmiprabha: One who has the moon light.
Mahāvairocana: Great Sun *Tathāgata* (28)

Thus, the numerous light-related Buddha-names in this scripture clearly indicate the upsurge of the notion of luminosity in the *Mahāyāna* tradition during the period from the first century BIE (the first period) to the middle of the second century IE (the fourth period). In particular, the idea of *Amitābha*, or Infinite Light, seems to have become strong by the time Chapter 24 was produced sometime after the middle of the second century.

5. The Idea of Luminosity in Mahayana Thought

Pure Land Buddhism uses three central scriptures for its doctrinal basis: a) the "Smaller" *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, or *Amituo*

Jing (阿弥陀经), b) the *Amitāyur-dhyāna Sūtra*, or *Guan Wuliangshou Jing* (觀無量寿经), and c) the "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, or *Wuliangshou Jing* (無量寿经). These three scriptures are called the *Jōdo Sanbu-kyō* (浄土三部经) in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism.

[Scripture]	[Possible compilation time]
a) "Smaller" <i>Sukhāvatīvyūha</i> (阿弥陀经):	before, or c. 100 IE
b) <i>Amitāyur-dhyāna</i> (觀無量寿经):	later 4th c. IE ?
c) "Larger" <i>Sukhāvatīvyūha</i> (無量寿经):	by the mid. of 2nd. c. IE

First, the "Smaller" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* was translated by *Kumārajīva* (鳩摩羅什) into Chinese in 402 IE. This scripture reinforces the tone of admiration for Amida Buddha and *Sukhāvatī*. The "Smaller" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* mostly uses the term *Amitāyus*, with the term *Amitābha* only used a few times:

Now what do you think, O *Śāriputra*, for what reason is that *Tathāgata* called *Amitābha*? The splendour (*ābhā*), O *Śāriputra*, of that *Tathāgata* is unimpeded over all Buddha countries. Therefore is that *Tathāgata* called *Amitābha*. (29)

The second scripture, the *Amitāyur-dhyāna*, was translated by *Kālayaśas*, or *Jiangliangyeshe* (江良耶舍) between 424 and 442 IE, but its original version no longer exists in either Sanskrit or Tibetan. Many scholars, such as Y. Iwamoto, H. Nakamura, K. Fujita, S. Kasugai, and K. Sakurabe assume that this scripture was compiled somewhere in Central Asia during the later part of the fourth century, because the style and terminology are different from many other scriptures which originated in India. (30) For example, in the anecdote of *Agātasatru*, when he imprisoned

his father, the King *Bimbisāra*, to starve him to death,
Agātasatru's mother, *Vaidehī*, secretly supplies food to her
husband:

She supported him in this wise: having purified herself by
bathing and washing, she anointed her body with honey and ghee
mixed with corn-flour, and she concealed the juice of grapes
in the various garlands she wore (in order to give him food
without being noticed by the warder). (31)

The corn-flour (麴) and grape juice (葡萄漿) were neither food
nor drink of India. According to Iwamoto, they are most likely
products of Central Asia or the northwestern part of China, but
not India proper. Also, around the fifth century when the
Amitāyur-dhyāna (觀無量壽經) was translated into Chinese, there
are several other scriptures, the titles of which have the
character, *guan*, at the head, such as *Guan Yaowang Shang'er Pusa*
Jing (觀藥王上二菩薩經), *Guan Xukong Pusa Jing* (觀虛空藏菩薩經),
Guan Puxian Pusa Xingfa Jing (觀普賢菩薩行法經), and *Guan Mile*
Pusa Shangsheng Douzutian Jing (觀弥勒菩薩上生兜率天經). We may
note that all the translators of these scriptures came from
Central Asia.

The third scripture, the "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, was trans-
lated by *Samghavarman*, or *Kangsengkai* (康僧鎧) in 252 IE. The
"Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* uses *Amitābha*, and frequently has a long
description of the term:

And his light is immeasurable, so that it is not easy to know
the limit of its measure, saying, he stands illuminating so
many hundreds of Buddha countries. ... But indeed, O *Ānanda*,
to put it briefly, a hundred thousand *niyutas* of *koṭīs* of
Buddha countries, equal to the sands of river *Gaṅgā*, are

always lighted up in the eastern quarter, by the light of that *Bhagavat Amitābha*.(32)

This description of *Amitābha* continues with nineteen more terms which are related to luminosity. According to Iwamoto, at the point when the "Smaller" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* was edited, it became necessary to include another name of Amida Buddha, *Amitābha*. When we compare the description of Amida Buddha in both the "Smaller" and "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtras*, and consider the time of the compilation of these scriptures, the idea of *Amitābha* could have become popular during the period from 100 to 150 IE. If so, it seems that the "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* may have been produced in order to stress the transition of Amida Buddha's name from *Amitāyus* to *Amitābha*.

The "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* stresses the thought of the Original Vow (本願思想), which is not referred to at all in the "Smaller" *Sukhāvatīvyūha*. As we mentioned before, it is possible to relate the idea of the Original Vow to that of *Bhakti*, which is one of the most important notions in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. This may be explained by the fact that Hinduism, in particular, the school of *Bhāgavata*, became popular sometime after the first century in northwest India.(33). However, some scholars like Akanuma Chizen (赤沼智禪) and S. Mochizuki assert that the "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* was produced earlier than the "Smaller" one.(34) If this is so, Iwamoto's hypothesis that the concept of luminosity became strong during the period from 100 to 150 IE might not be possible. Hence, further investigation into the

time of compilation of these scriptures is required.

There were originally twelve Chinese translations of the "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha*, but only five of them still exist (五存七缺). The five extant Chinese translations, as a series of *Wuliangshou Jing*, are: (35)

[Dynasty]	[Translator]	[The Name of Scripture]	[Trans. Time]
Han trans.:	Lokakṣema	<i>Wuliang Qingjing</i> <i>Pingdengjue Jing</i>	circa 186
(漢訳)	(支婁迦讖)	(無量清淨平等覺經) 4 vol.	
Wu trans.:	Zhiqian	<i>Foshuo Da Amituo Jing</i>	223-253
(吳訳)	(支謙)	(仏説大阿彌陀經) 2 vol.	
Wei trans.:	Samghavarman	<i>Foshuo Wuliangshou Jing</i>	252
(魏訳)	(康僧鎧)	(仏説無量寿經) 2 vol.	
Tang trans.:	Bodhiruci	<i>Wuliangshou Rulai Hui</i>	706-713
(唐訳)	(菩提流支)	(無量寿如来会)	
Song trans.:	Dharmabhadra	<i>Dacheng Wuliangshou</i> <i>Zhuangyan Jing</i>	1001
(宋訳)	(法賢)	(大乘無量寿莊嚴經)	

The first two scriptures belong to the group called the early-period *Sukhāvatīvyūha* (初期無量寿經). Both contain the 24 Original Vows of Amida Buddha. The third and fourth scriptures belong to the latter-period *Sukhāvatīvyūha* (後期無量寿經), which includes the 48 Original Vows. Even though the *Song* translation is the latest, it has the 36 Original Vows. Hence, most scholars assume that the original text of the *Song* translation was compiled between the early-period scriptures with the 24 Vows, and the latter-period scriptures with the 48 Vows. (36)

The early-period *Sukhāvatīvyūha* has rather disorganized explanations about the luminosity of Amida Buddha. In contrast, the latter-period *Sukhāvatīvyūha* contains more rhetorically refined descriptions of luminosity. Since it is known that An-

shigao (安世高) produced the first translation of the "Larger" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* in 148 IE, the original Sanskrit (or Prakrit) text must have been compiled around 140 IE, or even before. This is the same period when the word *Amitābha* started appearing in the Lotus Sutra. Since the "Smaller" *Sukhāvatīvyūha* was probably compiled sometime before 100 IE, we can narrow the period when the idea of luminosity became popular to about 100-140 IE.

6. The Encounter of Buddhism and Zoroastrianism

Iwamoto insists that early Indian Buddhism, at least before the first century IE, did not have a strong notion of luminosity because the schools of both *Sthaviravādin* (上座部) and *Sarvāstivādin* (說一切有部) did not talk about luminosity. For example, we find a description of the Buddha in the *Sumāgadhāvadāna*:

Our Master, the Buddha is exactly like a mass of genuine gold. He is as pure as refined gold is. (37)

Instead of terms for luminosity, they always used the image of "gold" to admire the Buddha's glory. It is well known that the Buddhism of Sri Lanka and Burma, which inherited the tradition of the *Sthaviravādins*, has produced many Buddha statues decorated with gold. Even in Chinese Buddhism, this tradition remains in the form of the golden mouth, or *Jinkou* (金口), and the golden words, *Jinyan* (金言), which are used to describe Buddha's sermons. Thus, the image of gold seems to have been more prevalent than that of luminosity in early Indian Buddhism.

Despite the overwhelming number of Buddhist images in India, no statues of Amida Buddha have yet been found. According to Hayashima Kyōsei (早島鏡正), there are a few descriptions of *Avalokiteśvara* in non-Buddhist documents of ancient India, but none about Amida Buddha.(38) In Hand-book for the Student of Chinese Buddhism, E.J. Eitel also mentions that while both *Faxian* (法顯) in the fifth century, and *Xuanzang* (玄奘) in the seventh century, who travelled to India, neither ever refers to Amida Buddha.(39) These facts strongly indicate that the rise of the Amida cult did not occur for a few centuries until Buddhism was exposed to a different cultural climate than that of India proper.

Unlike *Hīnayāna* texts, in the scriptures of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, as we observed in the Lotus Sutra, there is a sudden increase in the usage of terms related to luminosity when describing the Buddhas. Iwamoto is aware of some of the descriptions of luminosity in the *Upaniṣad* and Hindu scriptures, but he believes that the idea of light in ancient Indian religion was much too weak to give an impact toward a large-scale development of the idea of luminosity in Buddhist tradition. Instead, he assumes that there was some extraordinary influence from a totally foreign religion, such as Zoroastrianism, around the first century IE.(40)

Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Iranian empires, which flourished from the sixth century BIE to the seventh century IE. We can find numerous descriptions in Zoroastrian texts

such as the *Gāthās* (the Songs) that *Ahura Mazda* and other lesser divinities, the *yazatas*, are "shining," or "radiant" figures.(41) In terms of the idea of luminosity, Kenneth Ch'en also suggests a significant connection between Buddhism in India and the Zoroastrian religion in Persia:

In Zoroastrianism there is the heaven of boundless light presided over by *Ahuramazda*, described as full of light and brilliance. Such *Mahāyāna* Buddhas as *Vairocāna*, the Brilliant One, and *Dipankara*, Light Maker, also may be indicative of sun worship.(42)

Ch'en points out that there could have been important contact between Zoroastrianism and Buddhism somewhere in the middle of the Kushan (Skt. *Kuṣāṇas*) and the Parthia empires. Now we should proceed to the next stage of our discussion and investigate the idea of luminosity in the Buddhist tradition. The study of Buddhist art seems to provide an important key in examining this issue.

7. Luminosity and the Cult of Mithra

In northwest India there were two major streams of Buddhist art, namely Kushan art at Mathura, and Gandharan art at Taxila. Particularly, the latter is well known for its traces of Hellenistic influence. In History of Indian and Indonesian Art, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy observes that Buddhist statues that were produced during the period from the first century BIE to the first century IE in Kashmir and Gandhara do not have luminous disks, namely nimbi, or *śīras'-cakra* (光背).(43)

We first find the nimbus in a *Bodhisattva* statue from Mathura, the capital of the Indo-Scythian empire of the Kushans, around early second century IE.(44) After the Mathura type, it became very common for Buddha or *Bodhisattva* images to have nimbi. Some of *Kaniṣka*'s coins bear the standing figure of Buddha in loose diaphanous robes, with nimbus and body-halo, and the inscription "*Buddo*."(45) Coomaraswamy explains:

Elements of sun- and fire-worship are certainly indicated in early Buddhist art; we find the worship of a flaming pillar, and later, Buddhas, Sivas and kings with flames rising from their shoulders, while the nimbus is of solar origin and must have originated either in India or Persia.(46)

In addition to the figure of Buddha, kings such as *Kadphises* I in the middle of the first century IE, and *Kaniṣka* in the second century IE, have their own figures with nimbi around the heads on their coins.(47) We can trace the origin of the nimbus back to a luminous and radiant force, *Khvarenah*, which plays an important part in all phases of Zoroastrian religion. In Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism, R.C. Zaehner explains the Avestan term, *Khvarenah*, or *Hvarenō*:

That *khvarenah* should so long have been translated as "glory" is comprehensible, for the "royal fortune" is identical with a blazing fire, whereas all *khvarenah* is said to derive from the Endless Light. Material light is said to emanate from it and the moon stores it up and then distributes it to the sub-lunary world. (48)

The "Endless Light," which has a remarkable resemblance to the name of *Amitābha*, is one of the four heavens described in the

Avesta, such as the good thought Paradise, the good word Paradise, the good deed Paradise and the Endless Light.(49) *Khvarenah* is also said to have descended in the form of a blazing fire to the Prophet Zoroaster before he was born, and was visible for three days and nights. In the Zoroastrian tradition, *Khvarenah* is generally personified as the *yazata*, or a being worthy of worship. Many of the *Yashts* (hymns to various divinities) are dedicated to *Mithra* and *Khvarenah* as well as to other divinities. In The Mysteries of Mithra, Franz Cumont writes:

The invincible Sun, identified with *Mithra*, was during the Alexandrian period generally considered as the dispenser of the *Hvarenō* that gives victory. The monarch upon whom this divine grace descended was lifted above ordinary mortals and revered by his subjects as a peer of the gods.(50)

Thus, *Khvarenah* was believed to have the power to illuminate the mind and to open the eye of the soul to spiritual vision, enabling those who possessed it to penetrate the mysteries of the other world. Since *Khvarenah* was often associated with the aureole of royalty and of royal fortune, it became a characteristic attribute of *Mithra* as the most potent and most glorious of the *yazatas*. *Khvarenah* is also regarded as identical with Greek *tuche* and Aramaic *gad*, "fortune." Fundamental to the concept of *Khvarenah* are its connections with light and fire, because the term is derived from *khvar*, which means "to shine, to illuminate."(51)

The cult of *Mithra* may have been quite influential in the Parthian Empire. For example, from the second century BIE to the

second century IE, there were four Parthian kings with the name, *Mithradates*, which obviously reflects their worship of *Mithra*.

In Political History of Parthia, N.C. Debevoise explains:

Mithradates was the first Parthian ruler whose name did honor to the god *Mithra*; and the worship of this god, hitherto largely officially ignored, must have received official sanction.(52)

The worship of *Mithra* became popular in northwest India after *Misridates* I's invasion of India in the second century BIE.(53) Furthermore, according to Debevoise, the cultural influence of the Parthians became strong in India, including Gandhara and Taxila, through their close connection with the Sacae in east Iran.(54) In Heritage of Persia, R.N. Frye also writes "that many names have in them the God *Mithra*, such as *Mihrobozan*, *Mihrdatak*, *Mihrfan*, showing the popularity of the sun god in the Parthian homeland."(55)

It is difficult to determine to what extent Kushan power extended westwards at the expense of the Parthians and received the influence of the *Mithra* cult. Through a Chinese text, however, we know at least that before the Kushan dynasty reached a peak of prosperity under the able king *Kaniška*, Afganistan and the Punjab as the Parthian eastern frontier had fallen into the hands of the *Yueh-chih* dynasty of the Kushans.(56) Concerning the religion of the Kushans, Frye writes:

When one speaks, however, of Iranian elements in the pantheon of the Kushans, presumably we interpret this as meaning descendants of old Aryan gods or peculiarly Iranian practices such as the exposure of the dead or reverence for fire.(57)

Frye believes that the Kushans contributed to the Iranisation of northwest India through Iranian gods and goddesses such as *Ardoxsho*, *Atar*, *Verethragna*, and *Mithra*. In Philostratus's Life of Apollonius, *Apollonius*'s description of a temple of *Mithra* in Taxila further supports the spread of the *Mithra* cult in northwest India. Recently, archaeologists recognized this temple through the discovery of a stone statue of the Sun-god in the excavations at Taxila.(58) In addition, according to College's Parthians, this temple of Taxila (Jandial) clearly shows both Greek and Iranian features in its architectural style.(59)

Another important archeological proof of the existence of the *Mithra* cult in northwest India is the finding of Indo-Parthian coins with the image and name of *Mithra*. In Mithraic Studies, D.M.Durham discusses the Kushan coinage:

The gold and copper coinage of the Great *Kuṣāṇas* under *Kaniṣka* and *Huviṣka* in the second century A.C. use as their reverse types a most remarkable and varied range of deities -- more than thirty in all -- with Greek, Iranian and Indian names. They constitute a pantheon unrivalled in antiquity. Prominent among them is the solar deity, sometimes with the Greek name of HAIOC and sometimes with the Iranian name of MIOPO -- the ancient Indo-Iranian solar deity *Mithra* or *Mihr*.(60)

Thus, a cultural synthesis is clearly indicated in the pantheon of *Kaniṣka* and *Huviṣka*'s coins. In Dynastic Arts of the Kushans, J.M. Rosenfield also attributes the motif of the king flanked by the Sun and Moon Gods in the coins to a peculiarly Iranian tradition.(61)

The cult of *Mithra* even influenced the cult of *Sol Invictus*, the Invincible Sun, in the Roman Empire, particularly in the fringes of the empire such as Syria in the second century IE. Mithraism and the Syrian cult of *Sol Invictus* had many features, including their tenets, in common, and owed each other much in the recruitment of adherents.(62) This can be explained by the fact that the Romans and the Kushans had a close relationship with each other as a counter to the Parthians, because the Kushans controlled the trade routes to China that ran north from the ports of India.(63)

Thus, we can tell from various archeological evidence that the cult of *Mithra* prevailed around the vast area from Syria to northwest India during the second century IE. It seems likely that Buddhist sculptures of this period began to reflect the idea of *Khvarenah*, which originated from the God *Mithra*. This becomes more convincing when we note that the appearance of the nimbus in Buddhist sculptures also coincides with the period when Amida Buddha obtained another name, *Amitābha*, or Infinite Light, as we saw in the development of the Lotus Sutra and the *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtras*.

8. Parallel Features with Iranian Religion

The possibility that the Amida cult was formed through encounter with a foreign religious tradition could explain its various exotic features. In particular, there are some parallel characteristics between Pure Land Buddhism and Zoroastrianism.

First, in Introduction a l'étude d'Avalokiteçvara, Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann points a connection between the Pure Land triad and the Zoroastrian trinity:

Nous constatons que, si Amitāyus-Amitābha se prête à un rapprochement tant avec Zurvān qu'avec le grand dieu de la lumière iranien, Avalokiteçvara et Mahāsthāma offrent des rapports avec les éléments Lumière et Force des tétrades de type zervanite.(64)

Zurvan Akaranak, the god of fate in later Zoroastrianism, and Amida Buddha both signify infinite time and space. *Mithra* shares the meaning of luminosity with *Avalokiteçvara*, and *Vr̥thragna* symbolizes force and wisdom just as *Mahāsthāma* does in Buddhism. Thus, instead of a connection between Mithra and Amida Buddha, de Mallmann sees a parallel between *Zurvan Akaranak* and Amida. In any event, further research on this subject would undoubtedly require investigation of the role of Roman mediation in the spread of Mithraism and other aspects of Iranian religions. It is quite possible that such influences were operative even as far as in northwest India and may have been partially responsible for the introduction of Iranian elements in the development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Furthermore, much before de Mallmann, in Buddhism in China, Samuel Beal pointed out the similarity between *Amitāyus* and *Zurvan Akaranak* as well as *Amitābha* (Infinite Light) and *Mithra* as the sun god.(65) In recent times, E. Conze, J. Hackin, J. Przyluski, L.V. Poussin, P. Mus, J. Filliozat, H. de Lubac, etc. have shared similar views with Beal and de Mallmann.

When we realize that the Zoroastrians believed in a heaven of boundless light presided over by *Ahura Mazda* just as the Pure Land Buddhists believe in *Sukhāvatī*, the luminous land of bliss where *Amitābha* resides, it is not difficult to imagine the influence of Iranian mythology on Pure Land Buddhism. In *Amida*, H. de Lubac writes:

Censé apparaître, à l'heure du soleil couchant, derrière la montagne occidentale, *Amitābha* fait encore figure de divinité non seulement lumineuse mais solaire, et --- de même que pour *Maitreya* --- l'on songe alors naturellement à *Mithra*. (66)

Thus, de Lubac finds the consistent tradition of sun worship behind *Mithra*, *Sūrya*, and *Amitābha* throughout Iranian and Indian history. He even relates *Mithra* to *Maitreya*. In particular, according to de Lubac, the concept of *Amitābha* also corresponds to the idea of *Vohu-Manah*, "Good Purpose," in the Avesta. *Vohu-Manah* is understood as the personification of spiritual light and abstract good thought in the doctrine of the *Amesha Spentas*, the "beneficent immortals." In one of the *Gāthās*, there is a description of Zoroaster and *Vohu-Manah*:

Zoroaster saw on the bank a shining Being, who revealed himself as *Vohu-Manah* "Good Purpose"; and this Being led Zoroaster into the presence of *Ahura Mazda* and five other radiant figures, before whom he did not see his own shadow upon the earth, owing to their great heptad, that he received his revelation. (67)

As clearly indicated here, all the divine beings in Zoroastrianism cannot be separated from the notion of luminosity.

Then, in consideration of the influence of Iranian religion on the Kushans, we can imagine that the northern Buddhist belief in *Amitābha*, or Infinite Light, owes something significant to the Zoroastrian traditional worship of luminosity.

Ernest J. Eitel is another scholar who refers to Persian influence on the cult of Amida Buddha. Eitel suggests that there is a parallel between the one thousand fictitious Buddhas of the *Mahāyāna* school and the one thousand Zarathustras of the Persians. In addition, he mentions Manichaeism influencing Buddhism.(68) Manichaeism originated during the first half of the third century IE in Mesopotamia, a region where the Roman empire and the Parthian empire bordered each other. Its doctrine places great importance on the dualistic concept of light and darkness, and seems to be deeply rooted in Zoroastrian religious thought. The gnostic religion, Manichaeism, holds that knowledge leads to salvation, and that this is achieved through the victory of the good light over evil darkness. In Manichaeism, S.N.C. Lieu quotes a phrase from a Chinese Manichaean handbook called *Moni Kuang Fo Chiao Fa Yilue* (摩尼光仏教法儀略):

Everyone who wishes to join the sect ... must know that the Light and Darkness are principles, each in their own right and that their natures are completely distinct. If he does not perceive this how will he be able to practice the religion?
(69)

Manichaeism is permeated by a deep and radical pessimism toward the world which is seen as dominated by evil powers, and by a strong desire to break the chains holding the divine and luminous

principle inside the the prison of matter and of the body.(70)
This reminds one of the pessimistic worldview of Pure Land Buddhism. Almost all Pure Land Buddhist scriptures repeatedly stress the sinfulness of human beings and the wickedness of the hither shore (此岸), or the dark world of ignorance, in contrast to the yonder shore (彼岸), or the luminous world of bliss, namely, *Sukhāvatī*. Because of the despair in the era of the degeneration and extinction of the Dharma (末法), Pure Land Buddhists seek for salvation within *Amida's* luminosity through their devotional faith.

However, because it was not until early third century IE that Manichaeism emerged, we cannot be sure whether it could have influenced the cult of Amida, or not. Moreover, recent studies of Manichaeism indicate that at the time of Mani's visit to India, Buddhism had already made a considerable impact on the cultural and religious outlook of the regions under the power of the Kushan kings. It is said that Mani had to prepare himself with a knowledge of Buddhism through the reading of Buddhist writings before setting foot in India.(71)

Then, we find an interesting remark by M. Boyce in terms of the large-scale influence of Zoroastrianism as the oldest of the revealed world-religions:

Iran's power and wealth lent it [Zoroastrianism] immense prestige, and some of its leading doctrines were adopted by Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as by a host of Gnostic faiths, while in the East it had some influence on the developement of northern Buddhism.(72)

In this context, "a host of Gnostic faiths" should include Manichaeism. Therefore, it may be more reasonable to see both Manichaeism and Amidism as peer religious movements under the heavy influence of Persian religious tradition, namely, Zoroastrianism, which had been widespread in northwest India for centuries.

9. The Old Religion of the Indo-Iranians

Through our discussion so far, we have found significant connections of the Amida cult to both the Indian and Iranian religions. However, when we go further back to less known epochs of human history, we find it difficult to distinguish these two religions from one another. Boyce writes about a pre-historical people even before the Iranians and the Indians appeared in human history:

In still remoter times the ancestors of both the Iranians and the Indians had formed one people, identified as the proto-Indo-Iranians. They were a branch of the Indo-European family of nations, and they lived, it is thought, as pastoralists on the south Russian steppes, to the east of the Volga.(73)

The Indo-Iranians were said to have moved from the Russian steppes to the south and then diverged to become the Iranians and the Indo-Āryans respectively. Many historians assume that there was an old religion of the Indo-Iranians which was the original source for both the Vedic and Zoroastrian religions. A strong archeological indication of the existence of such a religion is an inscription found in the village of Boghaz Köy in Eastern

Anatolia, which celebrates the treaty between an *Āryan* ruler and a Hittite king in the fourteenth century BIE. The inscription provides evidence that people at that time were already worshippers of *Mithra* and *Varuṇa*.(74)

For example, according to Boyce, the proto-Indo-Iranian faith held a "natural law," as the universal order:

The Indo-Iranians held that there was a natural law which ensured that the sun would thus maintain its regular movement, the seasons change, and existence continue in an orderly way. This law was known to the Indians as "*ṛta*," to the Avestan people by the corresponding word "*asha*."(75)

The "natural law" implied not only the order of the physical world, but also the ethical order of human conduct. People of the old religion eventually personified the "natural law" as *Mithra* and *Varuṇa*. The solemn oath called *varuṇa* is derived from the Indo-European verbal root, "*ver*," (bind, tie), and the covenant *mithra* is derived from that of "*mer*" (exchange). *Varuṇa*, lord of the oath, or of Loyalty, and *Mithra*, lord of the covenant, or of Truth, are found both in the Veda and Avesta. The title of "lord" for these gods is "*asura*" in the Veda, "*ahura*" in the Avesta.(76)

The concept of *Ahura-Mithra* seems to have been the origin of the the third and greatest divinity, *Ahura Mazda*, lord of Wisdom, in the Avesta. *Ahura Mazda* is exalted above the fraternal pair, *Mithra* and *Varuṇa*. Among Indo-Iranian gods, another important divine being associated with *Mithra* and *Varuṇa* is *Khvarenah* as the personification of the divine glory.

In addition, the Indo-Iranians respected the spoken pledge, the utterance of the words, such as "Through truth protect me, *Varuṇa*." (77) This also reminds us of the Pure Land Buddhist practice, *Nien Fo*, which is the vocal recitation of Amida Buddha's name. Thus, in the old religion of the Indo-Iranians, we can find numerous prototype concepts for both Vedic and Avestan religion. Boyce's following statement about Indo-Iranian gods is especially relevant to our discussion of the origin of the Amida cult:

The title "Immortal" (in Vedic "*Amṛta*", in Avestan "*Amesha*") was one of those used by the Indo-Iranians for the gods. Another was "Shining One", in Vedic "*Deva*", in Avestan "*Daeva*". Both words are Indo-European in origin. (78)

Here, we can find a strong link between the old religion of the Indo-Iranians and the cult of *Amitāyus/Amitābha* in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Since we know that the Indo-Āryans as a branch of Indo-Iranians were settled in northwest India, it is quite understandable that we find an interweaving of Vedic and Avestan religion in Parthian and Kushan culture. In other words, these two religions, Vedism and Zoroastrianism, were not originally separated, but one in the faith of Indo-Iranians. The cultural heterogeneity of northwest India made it possible for these two religions to be reunited in a new form, namely, the Amida cult, when this particular area received cultural and religious stimulation from Buddhism.

10. Conclusion

It may not make very much sense to argue whether Indian or Iranian religion really produced Amidism, considering both seem to have originated from the same source, the old religion of the Indo-Iranians. Nevertheless, we are also aware of the fact that the formation of the Amida cult was largely dependent on geopolitical elements in Indian history. In particular, the idea of *Amitābha*, or Infinite Light, emerged under the heavy influence of the *Mithra* cult, which prevailed in the vast area of northwest India. What is most important is the role of the Indus Valley as a "melting pot," for mixing different cultural elements and eventually producing the new religious cult of Amida Buddha.

Buddhism was originally confined to the Gangetic Valley for the first two centuries after the Buddha's death. During this period, Buddhism might have been purely oriented toward a belief in one's sole responsibility for one's life. In other words, only religious practice that emphasized salvation through one's own effort (Jpn., *jiriki*), and hence which valued asceticism congruent with the *Upaniṣadic* tradition, may have been dominant in India proper. On the other hand, a religiosity that sought help from without (Jpn., *tariki*), and hence which strove for salvation through devotional practice, may have been given little attention in early Indian Buddhism. Thus, in order to achieve the cessation (*nirodha*) of *karma* and rebirth, early Buddhists may have been interested in the idea of *nirvāṇa* as the ultimate libera-

tion, or *mokṣa*, only for themselves. According to Edward Conze, Indian Buddhism has fifteen epithets of *nirvāṇa* such as "permanent," "without end," "unchanging," "imperishable," "lasting endlessly," and so on.(79) This indicates how essential freedom from the cycle of rebirth was for early Buddhists. Their religious concern was centered around an impersonal absolute notion of *nirvāṇa*, and not an emotional faith in salvation based on belief in transcendence such as that to be found in Amida Buddha.

It is possible that Buddhists who encountered exotic religious cults in northwest India were attracted to a mystical and more personal image of the Buddhahood. They might have gradually personified the Buddhahood, and over a few centuries may have finally formed the image of Amida Buddha.

It was the great Indian monarch *Aśoka*, a king of the Mauryan Dynasty, who for the first time gave Buddhism a large influence over the Indus Valley in the third century BIE. According to Conze:

King *Aśoka* (274-236 B.C.), who first made Buddhism into a world-religion, spread Buddhism through the length and breadth of India, brought it to Ceylon, Kashmir and Gandhara, and even sent missions to the Greek princes of his time -- Antiochos II of Syria, Ptolemy Philadelphos and Antigonos Gonatas of Macedonia.(80)

Because Kashmir and Gandhara were successively conquered by Alexander the Great, the Mauryas, Bactrians, Parthians, *Sakas* (Scythians), and Kushans, these regions became the meeting place of Indian and Mediterranean cultural influences. During the

period from the third century BIE to the third century IE, a number of different religious and philosophical schools were actively present in Kashmir and Gandhara, notably Hellenistic thought, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Buddhism.(81) The famous philosophical dialogue between the Greek king *Milinda* (Menandros) of the Bactrian empire and the Buddhist monk *Nāgasena* in the *Milindapañhā* indicates the extent to which Buddhism had spread in northwest India.

As we discussed above, the syncretic culture of the Kushans is symbolized in the coin finds from northwest India. King *Kaniṣka* of the Kushan dynasty adorned his coins with Hellenistic or Roman deities, Iranian deities as well as with the Hindu Śiva, and finally the figure of the Buddha.(82) The gold coinage of the Kushans, unlike the silver one of the Parthians as the preference of nomads, shows that the Kushans were perhaps the heir of the Greeks of Bactria.(83) Consequently, we can understand why King *Kaniṣka* adapted the Greek alphabet to record the Iranian language in his kingdom.(84) However, Boyce refers to the important cultural transition of the Kushans around the first century IE:

Later the Kushans, growing more Indianized, abandoned both the Bactrian language and the Zoroastrian elements in their faith, and became speakers of Prakrit and noted patrons of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Buddhism was thus helped to spread into the Iranian borderlands and Inner Asia, where it flourished as a vigorous rival to Zoroastrianism until the coming of Islam.(85)

What Boyce writes here explains why numerous Buddhist texts were

possibly written in *Gāndhārī*, which is a form of Prakrit. Thus, the Kushans seem to have played a crucial role in the historical encounter of the Iranian and Indian religions. Furthermore, when we learn that 24 out of 30 translators of the scriptures which refer to Amida Buddha came from either Central Asia or northwest India, we can conjecture that it is in those areas that belief in *Amida* first developed.(86)

We should also investigate the idea of *Sukhāvatī* as one of the essential components through which the cult of Amida Buddha could have emerged. The term *Jile* (極樂) in Chinese, as a translation of *Sukhāvatī*, did not appear until *Kumārajīva* came to China in the fifth century IE. Before his translation, *Sukhāvatī* was transliterated as *Xumoti* (須磨提), or *Xuhemoti* (須呵摩提) in Pure Land Buddhist texts.(87) According to Iwamoto, these are closer to a *Gāndhārī* term, *Suhamadi*, than to a Sanskrit term, *Sukhāvatī*.

According to Fujita Kōtatsu (藤田宏達), the Pure Land Buddhist scriptures describe *Sukhāvatī*, where wealthy merchants stand high socially, as being filled with gold and jewels. This reflects the social situation of the Kushan empire, which might have developed a capitalistic system through frequent trading with the Roman empire and the Hellenistic world.(88)

It is also difficult to imagine that the idea of *Sukhāvatī*, where people are absolutely equal, could be popular in India proper where the caste system was strongly embedded in the cul-

ture. In contrast, the concept of *Sukhāvatī* could have been welcomed by people from somewhere like the Kushan empire, which had a more egalitarian society.(89)

Furthermore, as we discussed before, we can trace back the origin of the Great Vow, or *pūrva-praṇidhāna*, to the Hindu idea of *bhakti*, or devotion. Even though the term, *bhakti*, already appeared in the *Ṛg-Veda*, according to Iwamoto, it did not play an important role in the poly-theistic Vedic religion. It was only after the *Bhāgavata* religion, which emerged in northwest India around the first century BIE/IE, compiled its recension of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, that the idea of *bhakti* became emphasized. We should also note that this is during the same time and at the same place where the Amida cult seems to have developed.(90)

The syncretic and eclectic trends of the Amida cult, which absorbed various elements of both Vedic Indian and Persian religion, prepared a fertile soil in which the later growth of Pure Land Buddhism became possible. In the religious and cultural heterogeneity of the Gandhara and Kashmir regions, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism seems to have achieved one of its most significant metamorphic stages. By exposure to the cosmopolitan intellectual climate in northwest India and by passing through the extent of Central Asia, the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist tradition developed its religious and philosophical richness, and reached one of the peaks in its own history during the *Tang* dynasty of China.

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(To make a small note here, Iwamoto even relates *Sukhāvatī* with *Eden* in Hebrew, which originated from *eden* in Aramaic. However, we need to make a more careful linguistic examination elsewhere.)
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