

On the Vows in the Earliest Version of the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*

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1. Introduction

Among the five Chinese translations of the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha sūtra* (*LSukh*), only the two earliest versions, the *Da Amituo jing* (T12, no. 362, hereafter the *DA*) and the *Ping-dengjue jing* (T12, no. 361, hereafter the *PDJ*), hold to the twenty-four vows, but their content and order presents marked differences. Although it is commonly believed that: (i) the *DA* represents the earliest form of devotion to Amitābha that formed in India, and that the formation of the vows in the *LSukh* evolved from the twenty-four vows system in the *DA*, to the twenty-four vows in the *PDJ* and then to the forty-eight vows system in the later versions of *LSukh*, and; (ii) the vows of Amitābha in the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka* were derived from the system of the forty-eight vows in the *LSukh*,¹⁾ no evidence can support these two assumptions at all. In accordance with this assumption, those marked differences present in the different versions are generally regarded as being derived from the diverse systems of the manuscripts from different Indian regions. However, no scholar has presented a good interpretation of how and why the twenty-four vows of the *PDJ* were a revision of those found in the *DA*; after all the two versions of the twenty-four vows in the early Recension²⁾ of the *LSukh* have a close relationship with each other. Moreover, it is hard to find a similar example, according to which two versions are not only markedly different but closely related to each other, a phenomenon with an equivalent expression among early Chinese Buddhist translations or Sanskrit texts. This suggests that there might be another possibility which has been overlooked by scholars. Because this is not only a key issue in early Pure Land sūtras, but in early Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, even in early Chinese translations etc., and all of the previous research regarding the *LSukh* was undertaken based on this view until the recent publications of my own research series about this issue, it is necessary to reconsider the formation of the two earliest versions of the twenty-four vows of

LSukh. On the other hand, I found out that there is a set practical system consisting of some special terms (see below) relating to the cultivation of the bodhisattva path to perfection (six perfections), which is markedly different between the *DA* and the Sanskrit version, considered to be purposely compiled into the *DA* based on the translator's own Mahāyāna ideas.³⁾ This paper is a study of the formation of those twenty-four vows of the *DA* depending on a series of publications of mine about this issue.

2. The significance of the *PDJ* and special terms in the *DA*

In my recent research, I summarized the most significant characteristics of the *DA* in twenty-four points. Some important characteristics related to the issue of this paper are the following.

Firstly, the *PDJ* plays an important role in the field of the research of the *LSukh.*, especially as a reference for the research of the *DA*. (i) Because its translation period was very close to that of the *DA*, it is the most integral text to be used as a reference for the study of the *DA*. Meanwhile, the *PDJ* is not only an objective text to compare with the *DA*, but the process of its formation is a pivotal issue as well. Unfortunately, there is almost no research regarding the *PDJ* except my preliminary research on this version.⁴⁾ (ii) The original Indian text of the *PDJ* probably did not hold to the twenty-four vows system which is found in the present Chinese translation, but rather a system akin to the existent Sanskrit version with the forty-seven vows.⁵⁾ (iii) Without the *PDJ*, we would not be able to determine that those assumptions held in common and mentioned above are not backed by any evidence.

Secondly, there are over two dozens of special terms related to the cultivation of the bodhisattva path to perfection found in the *DA*, which do not have any parallels in the Sanskrit version. Accordingly, if only one can carefully analyze these special terms, the original form of the *DA*, and the intention of the translator might be revealed.⁶⁾

Moreover, the physical lengths of the vows in the *DA* are generally longer than their counterparts in all later versions. The average number of characters in the vows of the *DA* is 62 characters; almost two times those in the other versions.⁷⁾ The most significant three vows in the *DA* (the fifth–seventh vows) are the longest ones. It is of interest that these longer vows are comprised of some special terms related to the six perfections.

3. The three significant vows in the *DA*

Undoubtedly, the most significant vows are those regarding rebirth in Amitābha's land, the foremost goal in the Pure Land school. Although the three vows, the fifth–seventh vows, corresponding to the three-grade system of rebirth in the *DA*, have been discussed in advance, it is likely that the scholars have overlooked that this kind of corresponding relationship has unexpectedly disappeared in the subsequent versions, especially in the Sanskrit version. Importantly, the scholars overlooked the reason why this corresponding relationship between the vows and their fulfillment regarding the three-grade system of rebirth only appears in the *DA*. The following table presents the corresponding relationship between the vows and their fulfillment regarding the three-grade system rebirth in different versions of the *LSukh*.⁸⁾

大阿弥陀經		平等覺經		無量壽經		梵本	
願文	成就文	願文	成就文	願文	成就文	願文	成就文
第5願	下輩往生	第19願	下輩往生	20願	下輩往生	第19願	第三類
第6願	中輩往生	N/A	中輩往生	N/A	中輩往生	N/A	第二類
第7願	上輩往生	第18願	上輩往生	第19願	上輩往生	第18願	第一類

3.1) The seventh vow in the *DA*

The seventh vow of *DA* (T12, 301b27–c5) which concerns the higher grade of rebirth consists of 119 characters and is the longest vow among all versions of the *LSukh*. It consists of three parts.⁹⁾ The first part regards the coming of Amitābha surrounded by a multitude of bodhisattvas and arhats to welcome the aspirants who meet one of the following two prerequisites: (i) lay good men or women who cultivate the bodhisattva path to perfection for the sake of rebirth in the land of Amitābha; (ii) those Buddhist monks who aspire for rebirth in the land of Amitābha and strictly adhere to ascetic precepts. It is noteworthy that these two prerequisites simply consist of those special terms indicated in my recent paper. If one tries to delete these special terms, such as 作菩薩道, 六波羅蜜經, 若作沙門, 經戒, 斷愛欲, 齋戒清淨, the remaining content of this part becomes quite similar in meaning with the counterparts in the nineteenth vow of the *WLSJ* (T12, 268a29–b2) and the Sanskrit version (Fujita 2011, 17–18) which is labeled as *Rinju raigō* 臨終來迎.

The remaining text consists of two parts; the stage of Non-retrogression and unsurpassed wisdom, thus, addressing the fruits of those aspirants who have been reborn. It is noteworthy

thy that if separate, the second part concerning 阿惟越致 “*avivartika*”, or, “*avaivartya*” is equivalent with the forty-seventh vow of the *WLSJ*, and the forty-sixth vow of the Sanskrit version. Obviously, this item was quite probably purposely compiled into the seventh vow by the translator. In sum, this vow was deliberately compiled by the Chinese translator in order to highlight the importance of the ascetic precepts for the aspirants who desire rebirth in the land of Amitābha. The last part explains that those who have been reborn will attain unsurpassed wisdom as that of Amitābha, a pivotal feature purposely highlighted in the *DA*.¹⁰⁾

3.2) The sixth vow in the *DA*

The sixth vow of the *DA* concerns the middle-grade of rebirth, regarded as one of the typical features of early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism as suggested by Hirakawa.¹¹⁾ Although “stupa veneration” is one of the typical features of early Mahāyāna, Hirakawa did not fully understand the structure of this vow which consists of three parts. The first part can be abbreviated as 善男子, 善女人作善 “good men or women who cultivate good merit.” The second is the list of the six kinds of donations, and the stupa veneration is just one of the six sources of merit. The third concerns ascetic precepts, ethical conduct being one the six perfections. This vow simply consists of special terms, such as 善男子, 善女人, 作善, 分檀布施, 遶塔燒香, 散花然燈, 懸雜綵, 飯食沙門, 起塔作寺, 斷愛欲, 齋戒清淨. Accordingly, this vow was quite possibly created by the translator. Only this interpretation can explain why this important vow unexpectedly disappeared in all subsequent versions (see Xiao 2015, 18–19).

3.3) The fifth vow in the *Da amituo jing*

The importance of the fifth vow lies in its reference to aspirants who committed evils in their previous lives. This vow still focuses on cultivation, and more specifically calls aspirants to: (i) correct and confess their mistakes ; (ii) cultivate good merit ; (iii) adhere to the Buddhist precepts, and (iv) constantly aspire to be reborn in the land of Amitābha. Although the nineteenth vow of the *PDJ* also concerns those who committed evils in their previous lives and aspire to be reborn, it does not mean that this concept is derived from the original Indian text of the *DA* or the *PDJ*, but rather was deliberately fabricated by the translator of the *DA*. Firstly, the character 惡 “evil” was found over 120 times in the *DA*, while the term 作惡 “committed evils” is a special term repeatedly found in the paragraphs on the Five Evils, which were deliberately compiled by the Chinese translator of the *DA*.

Secondly, the terms 前世, 悔過, 經戒 are all special terms which do not have a Sanskrit parallel. Especially, the notion concerning people who committed evils and aspire to be re-born in the land of Amitābha must be derived from the fifth vow of the *DA*; this notion has influenced the *Guan-jing* 觀經 (T12, no. 365).

Conclusions

The twenty-four vows system in the *DA* is not the one representing the original Indian text of the *DA*, but was rather purposely compiled by the translator. The translator purposely included a set practical system, the cultivation of the bodhisattva path to perfection, into the *DA* in order to highlight the importance of the cultivation of the bodhisattva path to perfection for those who aspire for rebirth in the Land of Amitābha. According to my series of research, the syntax of the vows in the *DA* is quite similar to that in the Sanskrit version. In addition, the conclusions of my series of research are mutually supportive, and the *DA* is a revision largely based on the translator's own Mahāyāna understanding. The original Indian text of the *DA* and the *PDJ* were probably similar to the extant Sanskrit version, with the forty-eight vows system. The translator of the *DA* purposely edited them to present a version which highlights the importance of the cultivation of the bodhisattva path to perfection, especially adhering to ascetic precepts. The translator of the *PDJ* re-translated the vows, in part, using as a reference those of the *DA*, and maintained the same number of vows as the *DA*, twenty-four. This is the exact reason the vows of the *PDJ* are quite corresponding to the first half of the vows of the Sanskrit version and the *WLSJ*, both in content and order.

Notes

1) Even though the vows in the *KP* cannot be discussed in this paper owing to space constrains, this issue is closely related to those in the *DA*.

2) Regarding the Early Recension of *LSukh*, cf. Xiao (2015, 25).

3) See Xiao 2018b.

4) See Xiao 2010.

5) See Xiao 2010, cf. Mitani 2014, 21–22. Regarding the further study on the *PDJ*, see Xiao (2018c), and forthcoming

6) Regarding those special terms found in the vows of the *DA* and their characteristics, see Xiao (2016, 63–65).

7) Regarding the physical length of the vows in the *DA*, see Xiao (2017, 8–9).

8) See Ōta (2004, 54–55). Although the corresponding relationship is presented in the table, only the three vows in the *DA* are quite corresponding to the fulfillment regarding the three-grade system rebirth.

For instance, the twentieth vow in the *Wuliangshou jing* (T12, no. 360, siglum: *WLSJ*) and the nineteenth vow in the Sanskrit version do not share the content regarding the rebirth of people who committed evil karma as in the fifth vow in the *DA*. For some comments regarding the seventeenth–nineteenth vows in the *PDJ*, see Xiao 2018c, 195–197.

9) Regarding the formation of these three vows, see Xiao 2017. For an annotated English translation of these vows, see Xiao 2018b.

10) See Xiao (2015, 18–19).

11) See Hirakawa 1968, 781–788.

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