

KUMĀRAJĪVA'S MEDITATIVE LEGACY IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The article shows that in China and other Far East countries, where Chinese Buddhism spread at the early stages of Mahāyāna Buddhism, traditional methods of Buddhist practice, as explained in the *Āgamas*, were in practice, but reinterpreted from the Mahāyānistic understanding. Eventually, in the periods following the decline of the Tang Dynasty those practices were mostly abandoned and replaced by pure Mahāyānistic meditation practices, especially those of the Chan (Zen) and Pure Land schools. It can be clearly seen from the meditation treatises discussed in this article, which are attributed to Kumārajīva, the most popular translator of Indian Buddhist literature in China. Actually, as Western researchers show, these treatises are likely to be notes of Kumārajīva's disciples, introduced into meditation by him.

Key words

Kumārajīva, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, meditation treatise

1 Legacy of Kumārajīva

All schools of Chinese Buddhism can claim link to the works translated by Kumārajīva, consisting of almost forty titles that are included in the *Chinese Tripitaka*. Some of them remained the most widely read and commented Buddhist scriptures in the Far East to the present day.

The profound influence that Kumārajīva exerted on Chinese intellectuals and yogis can be explained not just by his linguistic talents, but it must also be attributed to the power of his practice, which is unquestionable. There is a story about him saying that after his return to Kucha from Kashmir, where he went through his studies, a daughter of the king whose preceptor he was, fell in love with him and he consented to marry her. When his perplexed disciples enquired whether they should follow guru's example, he is said to have swallowed and digested a hand full of sharp needles, proclaiming that anyone who

can perform the same deed can indeed follow him.

In his late years, while translating Buddhist literature in changing, he is said to have been attempted by swarms of a beautiful female attendance presented to him by the emperor, who did not hinder in any way his working vigor, which is indeed prodigious. Kumārajīva is known in Chinese history especially as the translator of Mahāyāna sūtras, of which his translations of the *Lotus Sūtra* (T.262), the *Sūtra of the Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (T.475), the *Śūraṅgama Samādhi Sūtra* (T.642), the *Daśabhūmikā Sūtra*, and the corpus of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (T.223, 227, 235, 245) remain some of the most commented works.

His translations of philosophical treatises like Nāgārjuna's *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra* (T.1509), *Mūlamādhjamika Śāstra* with Piṅgalacakṣu's commentary (T.1564), *Dvādaśamukha Śāstra* (K.1668), *Daśabhūmivibhāsa Śāstra* (K.584), Āryadeva's *Śataka Śāstra* (T.1569) and Harivarman's *Tattvasiddhi Śāstra* (T.1646) led to a foundation of different philosophical schools.

His translation of the *Amitābha Sūtra* (K.192) and some other works related to the visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Light (T.382, etc.), and his personal engagement in the Pure Land practice, contributed to the foundation of the Pure Land school, the most popular cult in the Far East to the present day.

His translation of the *Maitreyavyākaraṇa Sūtra* (K.198) and other works related to the cult of the Maitreya (K.195, etc.) also exercised a profound influence on many Buddhist thinkers and yogis.

His translation of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* in ten recitations (K.810), the *Sarvāstivādaprātimokṣa Sūtra* (T.1436), the *Mahāyānavinayabrahmasāla Sūtra* (T.1484), and many other works on Vinaya (K.527, 539), some of which, like Buddha's *Dispensation Legacy Sūtra* (K.453), are still regularly recited in Chinese monasteries, greatly contributed to study of Vinaya in China and to establishment of a separate Vinaya school. These great contributions of Kumārajīva to Chinese Buddhism are well known to all students of Buddhism in the Far East.

In order to understand how Kumārajīva managed to combine many aspects of the Buddhist learning into a harmonious whole for achieving the aim of Buddhist study, namely to benefit oneself and others, it is worthwhile to study one of the least known part of his work, his translation of the meditation treatises.

Most of them are grouped together in the *Chinese Tripitaka* under the numbers T.613–616, and we shall devote this study to descriptive analysis of them. They show clearly how the Vaibhāsika Sautrāntika meditation methods coexisted from an early stage with a new Mahāyāna Mādhyamika ideological outlook forming a convergent whole.

The Mahāyāna teachings were at first addressed to Śrāvakas well versed in the traditional Buddhist lore with the aim to enlarge the horizons of their understanding of already well-known practices. The success of Mahāyāna in China in the period when the so called *Hīnayāna Canon* was already known is practically due to the skill with which the traditional stuff was presented in the new

Mahāyāna containers emphasizing *bodhicitta* and a deeper understanding of Emptiness.

Kumārajīva, who is also the translator of treatise *On Arising Bodhicitta* (T.1659) and the propagator of *bodhicitta* in China, was especially skillful in preserving the old wine in new barrels, and the following treatises on meditation are witnesses of his skill.

The first meditation treatise we propose to discuss here is entitled *The Sūtra Concerned with Samādhi in Sitting Meditation* (坐禅三昧经, T.614, K.991). It is called *sūtra*, but in fact it is a typical treatise on meditation, which may have been compiled and taught by the translator himself.

After a masterly presentation of the theme of impermanence and urgency with a brief mention of the need of purification by morality and repentance for sin, the author introduces five practices leading to *samādhi*.

They are to be chosen after investigating, which of the three poisons is prevalent in the yogis. It is to be decided after a study of inclinations manifested in behavior. If craving is prevalent, it is to be countered by *contemplation of the repulsive* (*aśubhabhāvanā*). If it is hatred, it must be countered by *meditation on love* (*maitrī*), and delusion is countered by *contemplation of causality* (*pratīyasamutpāda*). To counterpart useless thinking, there is the *mindfulness of breathing* (*anapānasmṛti*), and finally for yogis of all inclinations, to purify the mind from past sins, there is the *recollection of Buddha* (*Buddhānusmṛti*).

There are seven innovations this treatise brings about in dealing with well-known material. To start with it extends the traditional

division of yogis into beginners (初习行), advanced (已习行) and well versed (久习行), used normally (see *Abhidharmakośa*, *Samyuktābhidharma*) for contemplation of the skeleton (白骨), to all meditation themes presented.

So in case of the *loving kindness meditation*, the beginner contemplates with *maitrī* persons dear to him, an intermediate those neither liked nor disliked, and only an advanced yogi brings enemies to mind.

As for the *contemplation of causality*, a beginner contemplates just two links, first and last. An intermediate contemplates the first ten links, and only an advanced yogi extends his meditation to all twelve links in three times. In *mindfulness of breath*, a beginner does counting, an intermediate follows the breath in whole body, and an advanced yogi calms the breath by entering successively the *four dhyānas* and does the transitional sixteen exercises to get the mastery of the object. In the *recollection of the Buddha meditation*, a beginner trains in concentration on an image of Buddha, an intermediate contemplates the primary and secondary marks of great man, and an advanced yogi extends his contemplation to countless Buddhas in all directions and listens to them preaching the Law. He contemplates both their *physical bodies* (身身) and their *body of Law* (法身), seeing one Buddha as endless Buddhas and innumerable Buddhas as one. After explanation of these five meditation topics the treatise examines the practice of five worldly supernatural powers followed by a brief mention on insight meditation by contemplation of sixteen aspects of the *Four Noble Truths*.

Next topic is a successive realization of the *four roots of merit* (四善根), leading through the path of seeing and meditation to the attainment of Arhathood. Following this, the author explains three kinds of realization: *Śrāvaka*, *Pratyekabuddha*, and *Bodhisattva*, and praises the practice of bodhicitta, leading to the attainment of Buddhahood.

The last part of the treatise takes us through the first three practices counteracting greed, hatred, and delusion, but with a perspective of the highest realization. Here, the Bodhisattva with craving being predominant, contemplates the thirty-six bodily parts until he becomes disgusted with body. When disenchanted by it, he gives rise to a great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) and bodhicitta. Then he takes vows to save himself together with all sentient beings from suffering caused by rejoicing at bodily impurities and other perfections, such as seeing permanence in impermanence and self in non self.

With the deepening of his contemplation he attains the true mark of all phenomena, Emptiness. In it all distinctions between pure and impure cease to exist.

If a Bodhisattva inclines to hatred, he meditates on love (*maitrī*), being its opposite. When he succeeds to spread it in all directions without getting involved in discrimination between different kinds of individuals, he takes a vow to save all beings without difference by leading them to the ultimate happiness of Nirvāṇa. Due to this practice his mind becomes like a great ocean, which cannot be affected by little dirt or burning afflictions that harm other beings, and he learns to practice the perfect *maitrī samādhi* of Bud-

dhas that is without object and continuous (*apranihita samādhi*, 无缘三昧).

A Bodhisattva with the predominance of delusion, after mastering the *samādhi on the twelve links of interdependent origination* together with the *practice of the thirty-seven factors of Enlightenment*, contemplates the *absence of self-existent nature of all entities* (*niḥsvabhāva*, 无自性), while cultivating bodhicitta. Thus he learns the *middle path* as being non different from Nirvāṇa, the true state of all beings.

Besides these we find several other innovations, making it different from the standard Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna literature. So, for example, we have a division of the objects of the concentration of the repulsive dead bodies according to seven kinds of thirst (*trshna*) instead of the usual six or four (see *Abhidharmakośa*, *Yogācārabhūmi*, etc.). The objects of *maitrī meditation* are three, as in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, but the first, sentient being is related to the practice of Śrāvakas, the second, dharmas is related to the practice of Śrāvakas and Pratyekabuddhas, while the third, objectless maitrī refers to the practice of Bodhisattvas only.

The second meditation treatise (T.616) entitled *A Basic Explanation of the Methods of Meditation* (禅法要解) is about the same length as the previous work. It emphasizes the practice of the *eight attainments* (*samāpattis*) as a base for insight meditation. After it supplies a rather detailed description of the practice of the five worldly supernatural powers with a Mahāyāna emphasis on using them for realization of Emptiness.

The treatise starts with a brief reminder of

importance of morality, then it handles the meditation on impurities as the first contemplation, because sensual desires, which it counters, are said to be the main obstacle of deep meditation. This meditation is of two kinds, with repulsive feelings, that is *meditation on dead bodies in different stages of decay* (*avijñānaka*, 无识身), and *meditation on the thirty-six bodily parts* (*savijñāna*, 有识身), and *without repulsive feelings* (非恶严). The second is *meditation on bare bones* (白骨), particularly on a spot between the eyebrows, which leads to higher absorptions in subtle forms (*rūpa dhyānas*, 色界禅).

The meditation on dead bodies is divided into six groups in accordance with six kinds of desires, which it counters. It is said, together with the contemplation of the thirty-six bodily parts, to lead to disgust not only with sensual desires, but also with the whole sphere of perceptions dominated by them (*Kāmadhātu*, 欲界). In this connection verses attributed to Maudgalyāna, one of the foremost disciples of Buddha, are quoted.

He is said to have uttered them to a beautiful woman trying to seduce him. They make an interesting comparison with the verses we find in *Theragāthā*.

After describing the *practice of understanding and leaving the five obstacles to meditation* (*nīvaranas*, 五盖), the treatise leads us from the first to the fourth *dhyāna* with some interesting discussions on the difference between the five factors of absorption (*dhyānāṅga*, 禅支). It lays a particular emphasis on the mastery of the *fourth dhyāna* as the base for the attainment of all important dharmas of meditation, naming the *Four Divine Abodes*,

four foundations of mindfulness, four formless meditations, four truths, and the six supernatural knowledges.

The second set of themes, discussed as most suitable objects for the attainment of appeasement, are the Four Divine Abodes (*brahmavihāras*), where only the description of *meditation on loving kindness* (*maitrī*) is more detailed. The treatise proclaims that a yogi practices the *maitrī* meditation until he can actually see all beings happy due to the power of his loving kindness determination. There a question arises, if so, can it be considered a perverted view (*viparyāsa*)?

The answer is no, because a Bodhisattva has to practice two kinds of *samādhi*, namely that of seeing of the true characteristic of all things, i.e. their Emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and that, which sees things in accordance with their use in benefiting oneself and others (观法利用). This is an interesting variant of two kinds of attention often discussed in Sarvāstivāda and Mahāyāna literature (see *Abhidharmakośa*, *Tattvasiddhi Śāstra*, *Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra*, etc.), namely attention in accordance with facts (*tattvamanasikāra*, 真理作意), and attention according to one's determination (*adhimokṣikīmanasikāra*, 胜解作意).

The treatise emphasizes that a Bodhisattva should practice loving kindness to make happy even the beings in evil states of existence, and to avoid being harmed by others. Then he practices compassion, identifying himself with the suffering of all beings and actually seeing them suffering, but this is to lead him to the realization that all dharmas have no fixed nature, they change according to the conditioning of the mind.

If he can see this truth clearly, the supreme Enlightenment becomes easy to achieve, not to speak of all the other dharmas. Thus contemplating the impermanence of all feelings, he masters all feelings by means of the elevated feelings of the Four Divine Abodes. Their mastery leads to a perfect detachment with equanimity. The equanimity (*upekṣā*), which leads to the state of awakening, is, however, mastered by a Bodhisattva only after attaining the perfection in the previous three abodes. After discussing the absorption in the realm of subtle forms (*rūpa dhyāna*) with the help of the two above-mentioned themes, the treatise discusses formless absorption (*arūpa dhyāna*). It says that in the sphere dominated by sensual desires (*kāma*), the aggregate of corporeality (*rūpa*) is dominant. In the sphere of perception dominated by subtle forms (*rūpa dhātu*), the aggregate of feelings is predominant, while in the formless sphere, it is the aggregate of consciousness that dominates. Thus the experience of all three is important.

After experiencing all planes of perception, a yogi is led to contemplate all the compounded as sickness, prison, etc., and to insight meditation with the penetration into the Four Noble Truths. According to the state of a yogi, the Four Noble Truths are said to be of two kinds, namely truths and Noble Truths. The first belong to the unenlightened persons, while the second are realized after the path of seeing. The treatise is concluded with a rather detailed description of the *practice of the five supernatural knowledges* (*abhijñā*, 神通).

In the explanation the emphasis is on the Bo-

dhisattva practice of benefiting others while contemplating Emptiness, where all things remain in the state of being free from all real characteristics (无相). Thus, for example a Bodhisattva, while practicing the divine seeing, sees all sentient beings as being reborn and dying in accordance with their karma, but never gives rise to the concept of beings. He sees their corporeality without grasping the sign of corporeality, etc., and in the same way for all the other phenomena of perception, including the perception itself.

The third treatise on meditation (K.1010) entitled *A Brief Consideration of the Essential [Meditation] Methods* (思维略要法) can be described in terms of eleven themes, starting with emphasis laid on one's own effort without which much learning is said to be of no use.

After that, the first meditation introduces the readers into the *practice of the Four Divine Abodes* (*brahmavihāras*). The treatise proclaims them to be the first meditation to be practiced by all wishing to attain the supreme Enlightenment. However only the practice of loving kindness is dealt with in this part. It is said that by meditation on breath the boundaries between those who are liked, disliked or neither liked or disliked, a yogi can easily get an intuitive understanding of the sameness of all dharmas with certainty concerning the *non arising of dharmas* (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*, 无生法忍).

The next meditation discussed is the *contemplation of the repulsive* (*aśubhabhāvanā*) in terms of thirty-six bodily parts that are said to lead for a Mahāyāna yogi to a rebirth in the Tusita heaven at the presence of Buddha Maitreya.

The next topic is *meditation on skeleton* (白骨), connected with perception of light inside and outside, which leads to such a clarity of vision that the continuity of impermanent mind appears in the purified skeleton as clearly as a thread inside a bored jewel. (Well-known comparison appearing in the *Samaññaphala Sutta*, and elsewhere.) Afterwards, the *practice of recollection of Buddha* (*Buddhānusmṛti*, 佛随念) is discussed, being the main meditation theme of this treatise, with which all other topics are connected.

Here, the first meditation is a visualization of a Buddha image, where a yogi is led to keep it in front of his mind continually, in whatever posture he may be. This will lead him to an intuitive understanding that the clarity of the image is due to the power of concentration.

Next meditation theme is the *visualization of the born body of Śākyamuni Buddha* (生身, i.e. *nirmānakāya*) with the marks of the great man and with a visualization of the important events of his life. It is said to lead to a limitless joy, and it is connected to the next *meditation on the dharma body* (法身).

This body, however, is not understood as suchness in the Mahāyānistic sense, but refers to unthinkable qualities of Buddha like ten powers, etc. A concentrated contemplation of these qualities is said to lead away from the bondage of *saṃsāra* to the realization of certainty of non-arising.

Next mediation starts with the visualization of one Buddha in the East direction, sitting in the lotus posture and preaching the Law, increasing the number by ten, hundred and so on until infinite Buddhas are seen. The same procedure is to be adopted for the south and

all other eight directions.

The next meditation is the *recollection of the Buddha Amitāyus and his Pure Land*. It is to be visualized step by step by those of dull faculties, while a yogi of sharp intellect is to visualize bright space in front of him with a Buddha seated in its middle with determination to be born there.

Next meditation is on the true characteristics of all dharmas (*śūnyatā*). A yogi contemplates all dharmas as born of causes and conditions without his free choice. They are to be seen as illusionary names and concepts without any dwelling of their own, unborn in reality and therefore uncompounded and ultimately pure. This is to lead to certainty of non-arising. However, if a yogi does not succeed to attain it, he is to contemplate all arising and passing away of phenomena as a disease, cancer etc., till his mind becomes so subtle that all kinds of colors radiate from his body. This is to be seen as a true nature of all things inside and outside. He visualizes Amitāyus Buddha in this radiance, contemplating the *saṃsāra* as unreal, like a dream, giving rise to compassion for all caught in it due to their perverted minds. This is said to lead to two certainties (忍), the certainty as to sentient beings as non-arisen (众生忍), without giving rise to any false views, and the certainty as to dharmas non-arisen (法忍), seeing them as ultimately pure and empty. He transfers his merits to all sentient beings with the determination to be reborn together with them in the Pure Land of Amitāyus.

Finally the meditation leading to the *samādhi of lotus flower* is discussed (法华三昧观). Here, a yogi visualizes the Śākyamuni Buddha sit-

ting together with the Buddha of Many Jewels (多宝佛) in a stūpa made of seven precious substances on the vulture peak, preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* and revealing Infinite Buddha lands in all directions. He preaches one vehicle for all beings, which is the ultimate appeased nature of all dharmas. They all possess one characteristic – a complete purity. If a yogi practices in this way, all desires and obstacles are said to disappear naturally, effortlessly.

The last sūtra belonging to this group of meditation scriptures, expounding the Mahayana ideas on the bases of the traditional meditation methods, is entitled *The Sūtra of the Secret Principles of Meditation* (K.798) (禅密要法经, T.7613; K.798). It is the longest scripture in this group, consisting of three scrolls. The description of the great variety of meditation techniques and stories that it contains is beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless a brief note of its interesting structure can broaden our understanding.

The meditations expounded here are loosely related to three topics expounded by Buddha to three monks on three different occasions. They are the *contemplation of the repulsive*, the *mindfulness of breath (anapānasmṛti)*, and the *analysis of the four elements* (大分别). These three expositions form a background to further discussion on more than twenty other meditation topics addressed to Ānanda, and are interspersed by other questions to Buddha asked by yogis – such as how beings in the future are to purify themselves from sins. In connection with the contemplation of the repulsive, a yogi is led to visualize various kinds of worms inhabiting the human body.

Then he meditates on light emitted from his skeleton, illumining beings in all the Buddha regions. This is followed by samādhi contemplating the selfless nature of all phenomena, where the scattered thoughts are visualized as fires burning ones body and emptiness as refuge from them. Various kinds of other contemplations on the repulsive are then linked to the meditation on the four elements, connected again to contemplation of the selfless nature of all corporealities (*rūpas*) and to their mastery by such techniques as the exchange of oneself for others and enlarging objects to infinite dimension and focusing them at one point alternatively.

After that we find an exposition on meditation on loving kindness and the Four Noble Truths, and another long exposition on analysis of the four elements related to meditation on their essential purity. Here, a yogi visualizes a lotus in the heart along with elements originating from it one by one filling the universe and returning back to it again. This is followed by contemplation on unreality of the *four elements* and of the *five aggregates of existence* in general, as they are bound to them. They are all to be seen as mere names, results of causes and conditions, and empty of an independent nature. After this, a yogi is led to visualize the four elements again, going out from all pores of his body into emptiness, which is extended to all universes. This visualization is linked to an exposition on the *three liberating samādhis*, the *three doors to Nirvāṇa* as they are often called, that is the *samādhi of Emptiness* (空三昧), *desirelessness* (无愿三昧), and *signlessness* (无相三昧), by the realization of which a yogi is led to realize the perfect state of neither rejoicing in Nirvāṇa

nor disliking samsāra. On the other hand, the meditations connected with objects, like the meditation on impurities, on breath or on the elements, are said to lead to rebirth in Tusitain presence of Maitreya.

The treatise ends with a long prediction of the future decline of the Law.

2 Conclusion

The present article is to show that at the early stage of spreading of Mahāyāna teachings in China traditional Sarvāstivāda methods of meditation were used together with the new Mahāyānist methods and evaluations that became eventually completely predominant by the end of the Tang Dynasty and in the period of five dynasties following it.

The emphasis on analytical meditations characteristic for the early history of Buddhism in China has been gradually abandoned in favor of meditations emphasizing the Buddha nature and Pure Land contemplation. The study of treatises translated by Ven. Xuan Zang and Kumārajīva, which put emphasis on the practice of the *four foundations of mindfulness*, were discontinued in most of the monastic institutions in China. The revival of this tradition appeared only by the end of Qing Dynasty, when many Chinese monks, such as Ven. Tai Xu, but especially lay followers like Han Qing Jing or Liang Qi Chao or even Chan masters like Xu Yun, pointed out their importance for understanding of Buddhism in general.

The meditation treatises attributed to Kumārajīva represent a transitional period in Chinese Buddhism, when the so called *Hīnayāna scriptures* were still widely studied

and appreciated. In that period of history, even in the first motherland of Buddhism, in India, there seems to have not been any significant rift between the communities of monks practicing the path to Arahathood, and those practicing the path of Bodhisattvas. This fact is well attested by travel reports of Chinese monks visiting India at that time like Ven. Fa Xian and Xuan Zang.

The meditation treatises discussed in this paper seem to have served as notes by disciples of Kumārajīva to his teachings on meditation. It seems that neither them nor Kumārajīva himself were interested in drawing a sharp line between the so-called Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, and purposefully avoided any conflicting views. If emphasizing the path of Bodhisattva, they did it without belittling the achievements of Arahats as in the later period. They rather, as in the early teachings of the *Transcendental Wisdom sūtras*, put emphasis on a unitary nature of all Buddhist teachings, only trying to show the advantages of the teachings emphasizing Emptiness.

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About the author

Ven. Dhammadipa (1949) has been a Buddhist monk since 1986 in both Southern (Theravāda) and Northern (Chinese) traditions of Buddhism. He has published several books in Chinese, which are collections of his teachings in Taiwan collected by his students, mainly concerned with meditation in the Theravāda Abhidharma tradition such as: *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, *The Introduction into Abhidharma*, *The Four Noble Truths*, *The Four Divine Abodes*. He also translated Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* into Czech, and some other treatises like Aśvaghoṣa's *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* from Chinese, and Mahāyāna *Sandhinirmocanasūtra* also from Chinese to be published next year. He also translated *The Short Introduction to Meditation Methods* by Kumārajīva, which is briefly discussed in the present paper.

Dhammadipa has been teaching Buddhism at several Buddhist institutes and universities such as Fa gu shan, Fa guan shan, Yuan guan in Taiwan, Hong Kong University, Pune University, Somaiya University in Mumbai, and Nalanda University in India.

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