Some Aspects of the Cult of Akṣobhya in Mahāyāna Scriptures

Naomi SATO

1 Introduction : As the terms *Akṣobhya* or *Abhirati* are mentioned in many Mahāyāna scriptures¹⁾, we can assume that the Buddha Akṣobhya and his eastern buddha-field Abhirati were quite popular when they were composed. Although most of the texts use these two words without any explanations, only a few of them provide any details : the **Akṣobhyavyūha-sūtra* (*Av*)²⁾, the main and oldest text which is fully devoted to explaining the Buddha Akṣobhya's career and the merits of Abhirati, the early *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* group (e. g. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*AṣṭP*)), the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* (*Vn*), the *Saddharmapuṇḍarika-sūtra* (*Sp*), the *Karuṇā-puṇḍarika-sūtra* (*Kp*) and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* (*Mp*). In this paper, I would like to examine the latter five texts to see how *Mahāyāna* scriptures besides *Av* describe the cult of Akṣobhya and the universe (*lokadhātu*) Abhirati. I used the Sanskrit edition primarily, or the oldest Tibetan and Chinese translations when a Sanskrit text has not survived to the present.

2 *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* : *AṣṭP* is one of the earliest Mahāyāna scriptures, and is known as the first to use the term *mahāyāna*. The Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha* is also a famous early Mahāyāna scripture written about the Buddha Amitābha (or Amitāyus) and his buddha-field (*buddhakṣetra*). *AṣṭP* never refers to the Buddha Amitābha (or Amitāyus), whereas the Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha* does not mention the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*). Thus they are assumed to be in a different group at the very beginning of the Mahāyāna Buddhism. The term *Akṣobhya* is quoted in Chap.19,27, and 28.

2.1 Chap.19 *Gaṅgadevībhaginīparivarta* Vaidya [1960a] 180,21-181,28 : Chap.19 describes Gaṅgadevī's vows (*praṇidhānas*) and her prediction (*vyākaraṇa*). Here, the universe Abhirati is referred to as the locus of Gaṅgadevī's rebirth. After hearing Śākyamuni's teachings, such as "the bodhisattva who searches for the *prajñāpāramitā*

should not be afraid in any occasion,” Gaṅgadevī made a vow as follows : “I will never be afraid of a wilderness with savage beasts, robbers, without water, which has plague, without food, nor being in any other unpleasant situation. Without any fear, I will preach the Dharma for all sentient beings (*sattvas*)”³⁾. Then the Buddha Śākyamuni told Ānanda that after transforming into a man, she would be reborn in Abhirati where she will practice ascetic training (*brahmacaryā*), wander from one buddha-field to another, and always meet many Buddhas, and finally become the Buddha Suvarṇapuṣpa in the future.⁴⁾

2.2 Chap. 27 *Sāraparivarta* Vaidya [1960a] 222,7-224,8 : Chap. 27 is about the qualities of a bodhisattva who searches for the *prajñāpāramitā*. Such an admirable bodhisattva is called an *avaivartaniya* (不退転, incapable of retrogression) bodhisattva who imitates Akṣobhya’s bodhisattva-practices in the past or the *brahmacaryā* of the Bodhisattva Gandhahasti or Śikhiṇ living in the universe Abhirati.

2.3 Chap. 28 *Avakīrṇakusumaparivarta* Vaidya [1960a] 229-230,234 : In chap. 28, the Buddha Śākyamuni entrusted the *prajñāpāramitā* to Ānanda after explaining the significance of preaching it to others. The bodhisattva who seeks the *prajñāpāramitā* is the as same as the bodhisattva who pursues the doctrines that “every existence is invisible in nature, so that people does not perceive anything”⁵⁾ etc. To make the audience consent to those doctrines, the Buddha Śākyamuni displayed the buddha-field of Akṣobhya in his right hand and returned it to its place by his miraculous power. At the end of this chapter, he introduced the Bodhisattva Gandhahasti, practicing the *brahmacaryā* under the Buddha Akṣobhya, as an admirable bodhisattva who is cultivating the *prajñāpāramitā* everyday.

2.4 The cult of Akṣobhya in *AṣṭP* : From the above information, we may conclude that *AṣṭP* pays more attention to the practices, such as the *brahmacaryā*, of the bodhisattva in the universe Abhirati than to the merits of the universe Abhirati. Furthermore, we can also say that *AṣṭP* uses these cults of Akṣobhya to manifest the wonderfulness of the *prajñāpāramitā*.

3 *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* : Several similarities between *Vn* and *AṣṭP* are pointed out.⁶⁾ It is well known for the questions and answers between the Buddha Śākyamuni’s disciples and Vimalakīrti. In Chap. 11, the universe Abhirati is introduced as a place from where Vimalakīrti came.

3.1 Chap. 11 *Abhiratīloka dhātāvānayanākṣobhyatathāgatadarśanaparivarta*⁷⁾ Oshika [1970] 230-232 : Vimalakīrti, reincarnated voluntarily in the impure buddha-field in order to purify the sentient beings, makes the light of wisdom shine and clear away the darkness as if the sun rises to illuminate the world and eliminate the darkness. Hearing this fact, the whole audience desired to behold the universe Abhirati, so Vimalakīrti picked it up in his right hand by his miraculous power. It contains its watery base, its *Cakravāḍa* Mountains, its Mount *Sumeru*, and its abodes of Brahmā up to its *Akaniṣṭa* heaven. The Tathāgata Akṣobhya seated in the middle of the assembly vast as an ocean, teaching the Dharma. The gods and the living beings are coming and going by ladders with three jewels raised from its earth to its *Trāyatrimśa* heaven. The Buddha Śākyamuni suggested his audience train themselves in all the bodhisattva-practices of Akṣobhya if one wishes to gain such a buddha-field. Finally, Vimalakīrti returned the universe Abhirati exactly to its former place.

3.2 The cult of Akṣobhya in *Vn* : Comparing with *AṣṭP*, *Vn* has further information about the circumstances of the universe Abhirati than its bodhisattva-practices. Thus *Vn* places a high value on the universe Abhirati itself which is very pure, but not on its bodhisattva-practices. Since the universe Abhirati is Vimalakīrti's birthplace, we can conclude that *Vn* used the cult of Akṣobhya for praising Vimalakīrti who dared to reborn in this impure universe Sahā.

4 *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* : *Sp*, one of the early Mahāyāna scriptures supposed to be formed in the early second century, styles itself "the king of all the *sūtras*". The Buddha Akṣobhya is mentioned in the story of the Buddha Śākyamuni's former life in Chap. 7.

4.1 Chap. 7 *Pūrvayogaparivarta* Vaidya [1960b] 106,8-9,219,10-26 : Incalculable ages ago, the Tathāgata Mahābhijñānābhībhū who in his bodhisattva stage had sixteen sons before retirement, preached the great scripture (*mahāvaiṇya-sūtrānta*) called the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*. After listening to his sermon, his first son became the Tathāgata Akṣobhya presiding over the eastern universe, Abhirati. His ninth son became the Tathāgata Amitāyus in the western universe and the sixteenth became the Tathāgata Śākyamuni in the center. They are still preaching the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* in each universe.

4.2 The cult of Akṣobhya in *Sp* : Compared with *AṣṭP* and *Vn*, *Sp* has far less

information about the Buddha Akṣobhya and the universe Abhirati. Instead of referring to the purity of the universe Abhirati or the *brahmacaryā* of the bodhisattva, it treats the Buddha Akṣobhya as equivalent to the Buddha Amitāyus and situates him in the east. Thus, the adherents or the authors of *Sp* seem to have recognized the Buddha Akṣobhya as one of the contemporary Buddhas (現在他方仏). *Sp* probably intended to use the Buddha Akṣobhya to prove the excellence of the *Sp* by saying that even such a famous Buddha could be enlightened by hearing it.

5 *Karuṇāpuṇḍarika* : *Kp* came into existence presumably in the fourth century and is classified as a middle period Mahāyāna scripture. It explains the reason why the Buddha Śākyamuni chose this impure buddha-field instead of another pure universe. The Buddha Akṣobhya is described as the Buddha who chose the pure buddha-field (*pariśuddha-buddhakṣetra*) in Chap. 4.

5.1 Chap. 4 *Bodhisattvavyākaraṇaparivarta* Yamada [1968] 161-178 : Chap. 4 is written about the *prañidhānas* and the *vyākaraṇa* of the Buddhas who have chosen a pure buddha-field. At the time of the past Buddha called Ratnagarbha, the Brahman Samudrareṇu, King Araṇemin and his thousand princes had been listening to his sermon. Then the Buddha Ratnagarbha gave them the *vyākaraṇas* according to their *prañidhānas*. The Brahman Samudrareṇu is the very man who is to become the Buddha Śākyamuni, though this story is written in the next chapter. In this chapter, King Araṇemin vowed first, longing for the pure buddha-field, and was given the *vyākaraṇa* to become the Buddha Amitāyus (or Amitābha) in the western buddha-field, Sukhāvatī. Secondly, the *prañidhānas* of the thousand princes and their *vyākaraṇas* were described. The ninth prince Amigha/Amiṣa vowed as follows : after achieving the highest enlightenment may my buddha-field be absolutely flat, shine like gold, readily provide food and clothing, be pure, and not be attacked by the demons (*māra*), etc. He was given the *vyākaraṇa* that “you will become the Buddha Akṣobhya in the eastern universe Abhirati, a thousand buddha-fields from here”.

5.2 The cult of Akṣobhya in *Kp* : While *AṣṭP* refers to the *brahmacaryā* of the bodhisattva, *Kp* mentions only to the *prañidhānas* of Akṣobhya and the merits of his buddha-field, especially its pureness. From this information, we can see that the cult of Akṣobhya is used for praising the Buddha Śākyamuni who dared to

reborn in this impure Universe Sahā.

6 Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra : The scriptures called *Mp* have both Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna versions. It is only the latter that refers to the Akṣobhya and the Abhirati. This *Mp*, one of the middle period Mahāyāna scriptures, must have been compiled no later than 400 A.D. The descriptions of *Akṣobhya* in Chap. 2 insist on the concepts of the permanence of the *dharmakāya* of the Buddha and the importance of the protection of the true Dharma (正法護持). Since the Buddha Śākyamuni protected the true Dharma by taking up arms in his past life, he attained a body which is permanent and will never be broken (*abhedakāya*). The Buddha Akṣobhya is mentioned in the story of the Buddha Śākyamuni's former life.

6.1 Chap. 2 *Vajrābhedyakāya⁸⁾ T.12 867a, P [31] 47b2-49a3 : A long time ago, in the age of the past Buddha Nandavardana, the world was very fruitful like the universe Sukhāvātī, and the people never experienced famine. After his *parinirvāṇa*, depraved monks were common and the true Dharma was gradually destroyed. It was then that the monk called Buddhadatta appeared who observed the *Vinaya* strictly and preached the true Dharma. In opposition to the monk Buddhadatta, the depraved monks approached him carrying weapons along with them. After hearing this fact, King Bhavadatta, as well as other people took their weapons to protect the true Dharma and guarded the monk Buddhadatta. Those who protected the true Dharma all attained the highest enlightenment. The monk Buddhadatta and King Bhavadatta were reborn in the universe Abhirati and became the first and second disciples (*śrāvakas*) of the Buddha Akṣobhya. This monk is the past Buddha Kāśyapa and the King is the Buddha Śākyamuni.

6.2 The cult of Akṣobhya in *Mp* : Unlike the other texts, *Mp* mentions the universe Abhirati as a place where the protectors of the true Dharma gather instead of referring to its purity and to the *brahmacaryā*. Thus, *Mp* used "Akṣobhya" to recommend protecting the true Dharma.

7 Conclusion : We have seen five scriptures that enter into details about Akṣobhya. The aims of using Akṣobhya in each text are as follows :

AṣṭP : to manifest the wonderfulness of the *prajñāpāramitā*

Vn : to praise Vimalakīrti who dared to be reborn in this impure universe, Sahā

Sp : to prove the excellence of *Sp*

Kp : to praise Śākyamuni who dared to be reborn in this impure universe, *Sahā*
Mp : to recommend protecting the true Dharma

None of these aims, however, are mentioned in *Av* itself. Namely, the terms Akṣobhya and Abhirati were well known though the doctrine written in *Av* was not familiar to the early and middle period Mahāyānists. Examining these investigations, I conclude that the cult of Akṣobhya lacks consistency and varies its style according to scriptures. Thus it seems that the cult of Akṣobhya was not as familiar as that of Amitābha (or Amitāyus).

*I would like to give my gratitude to Mr. Tom Dreitlein for correcting my English. Any errors that remain are my own.

〈Abbreviations〉 *AṣṭP* = *Aṣṭāsahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, *Av* = *Akṣobhyavyūha-sūtra*, *Kp* = *Karuṇapūṇḍarika-sūtra*, *Mp* = *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, *P* = Peking Edition, *Sp* = *Saddharmapūṇḍarika-sūtra*, *T.* = *Taisho Tripitakas* 大正新脩大藏經, *Vn* = *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*.

〈Bibliography〉 Y. Okamoto [1979] “Ashukubukkokukyo shiyaku - fu, Ashukubutsu ni genkyūsuru kyoten ichiranhyo -” (in Japanese), *Toyodaigaku Daigakuinkyo* 16 : 33-51, J. Oshika [1970] “Chibettobun Yuimakyō tekisuto”, *Indokotenkenkyū* 265 : 135-240 (in Japanese), N. Sato [2002] “The Bodhisattva and the Śrāvaka in the Akṣobhya Buddha-field”, *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* 51-1 : 465-469, M. Shizutani [1974] *Shokidaijobukkyo no seiritsukatei* (in Japanese), Hyakkaen, P. L. Vaidya [1960a] ed. *Aṣṭāsahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Darbhanga (Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 4), P. L. Vaidya [1960b] ed. *Saddharmapūṇḍarikasūtra*, Darbhanga (Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 6), H. Yaita [2003] “Yuimakyōshahonkenkyūgenkyō” (in Japanese), Paper presented at 54th Conference of Japanese Indian and Buddhist Studies, 6-7 September, at Bukkyō University, Kyoto, I. Yamada [1968] ed. *Karuṇapūṇḍarika*, with introduction and notes, vol. 2, London, G. M. Bongard-Levin [1986] *New Sanskrit Fragments of the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, *Central Asian Manuscript Collection at Leningrad*, Tokyo (Studia Philologica Buddhica, Occasional Paper Series 5).

1) 96 scriptures are found in 大正新脩大藏經. 93 *sūtras* are listed in Okamoto [1979] and I found 3 more. 2) *Av* is one of the oldest Mahāyāna scriptures which does not use the term *mahāyāna*. Since no Sanskrit nor Prakrit version has survived, the Sanskrit title can only be assumed from the transcription in its Tibetan translations. See Sato [2002] 466 note 1. 3) Vaidya [1960a] 180,23-24. 4) Vaidya [1960a] 181,2-3, Vaidya [1960a] 181,5-10. 5) Vaidya [1960a] 230,15. 6) Shizutani [1974] 340. 7) This title is referred in Yaita [2003]. 8) Reduced by Bongard-Levin [1986] from the Tibetan translation.

〈Key Words〉 Akṣobhya, 八千頌般若經, 維摩經, 法華經, 悲華經, 大般涅槃經

(Part-time Lecturer, Shuchiin University)