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 *Aksobhyavyūha-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. Astasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra (AśtP)), the Vimalakirtinirdesa-sūtra (Vn), the Saddharma-puṇḍarika-sūtra (Sp), the Karunā-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 (lokadhatu) 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 Astasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra: AśtP 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 (buddhayāna). AśtP 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 Gaṅgadevikībhaginīparivarta Vaidya [1960a] 180,21-181,28: Chap.19 describes Gaṅgadevi’s vows (pranidhāna) and her prediction (vyākaraṇa). Here, the universe Abhirati is referred to as the locus of Gaṅgadevi’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 (brahmacarya), 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 Sārāparivartavaiḍya [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 brahmacarya of the Bodhisattva Gandhāhasti or Śikhin living in the universe Abhirati.

2.3 Chap. 28 Avakarnakusumaparivarta 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 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 Aksobhya in his right hand and returned it to its place by his miraculous power. At the end of this chapter, he introduced the Bodhisattva Gandhāhasti, practicing the brahmacarya under the Buddha Akṣobhya, as an admirable bodhisattva who is cultivating the prajñāpāramitā everyday.

2.4 The cult of Aksobhya in AṣṭP: From the above information, we may conclude that AṣṭP pays more attention to the practices, such as the brahmacarya, 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 Vimalakirtinirdeśa: 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 Vimalakirti. In Chap. 11, the universe Abhirati is introduced as a place from where Vimalakirti came.
3.1 Chap. 11 Abhiratilokadhātvanāyanākṣobhyatathāgatadarśanaparivarta\(^7\) Oshika [1970] 230-232: Vimalakirti, 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 Vimalakirti picked it up in his right hand by his miraculous power. It contains its watery base, its Cakravāda Mountains, its Mount Sumeru, and its abodes of Brahmā up to its Akaṇiṣṭha heaven. The Tathāgata Aksobhya 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 Aksobhya if one wishes to gain such a buddha-field. Finally, Vimalakirti returned the universe Abhirati exactly to its former place.

3.2 The cult of Aksobhya 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 Vimalakirti’s birthplace, we can conclude that Vn used the cult of Aksobhya for praising Vimalakirti who dared to reborn in this impure universe Saha.

4 Saddharmapūndarīka: 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 Aksobhya is mentioned in the story of the Buddha Śākyamuni’s former life in Chap.7.

4.1 Chap. 7 Pūrvakgoparivarta Vaidya [1960b] 106,8-9,219,10-26: Incalculable ages ago, the Tathāgata Mahābhijñānābhibhū who in his bodhisattva stage had sixteen sons before retirement, preached the great scripture (mahāvaiḍūpyasūtraṇa) called the Saddharmapūndarīka. After listening to his sermon, his first son became the Tathāgata Aksobhya 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 Saddharmapūnda-rīka in each universe.

4.2 The cult of Aksobhya 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 Šp seem to have recognized the Buddha Akṣobhya as one of the contemporary Buddhas (現在他方仏). Šp probably intended to use the Buddha Akṣobhya to prove the excellence of the Šp by saying that even such a famous Buddha could be enlightened by hearing it.

5 Karunāpunḍarikā: 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-buddhaksetra) in Chap. 4.

5.1 Chap. 4 Bodhisattvavyākaraṇaparīvarta Yamada [1968] 161-178: Chap. 4 is written about the prāṇidhānas 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 Aranemin and his thousand princes had been listening to his sermon. Then the Buddha Ratnagarbha gave them the vyākaraṇas according to their prāṇidhānas. 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 Aranemin 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 prāṇidhānas 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 prāṇidhānas 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

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reborn in this impure Universe Sahā.

6 Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra: The scriptures called Mp have both Hinayāna and the Mahāyāna versions. It is only the latter that refers to the Aksobhya 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 Aksobhya 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 (abheda-kāya). The Buddha Aksobhya is mentioned in the story of the Buddha Śākyamuni’s former life.

6.1 Chap. 2·Vajrābhedyakāyam8) 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 Sukhāvatī, 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 Aksobhya. This monk is the past Buddha Kāśyapa and the King is the Buddha Śākyamuni.

6.2 The cult of Aksobhya 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 “Aksobhya” to recommend protecting the true Dharma.

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

AṣṭP: to manifest the wonderfulness of the prajñāpāramitā
Vn: to praise Vimalakirti who dared to be reborn in this impure universe, Sahā
Sp: to prove the excellence of Sp
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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).

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Abbreviations

Bibliography


Key Words  Akṣobhya, 八千頌般若経, 維摩経, 法華経, 悲華経, 大般涅槃経

(Part-time Lecturer, Shuchii University)