

# Signs of transcendental experience in Chinese Buddhism



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## Summary

The aim of this study is to give examples of signs of Chinese Buddhism that might refer to transcendental experiences. These examples are based on personal experiences that I gathered during my travels in China and Nepal. The examples are related to different areas: the purpose of obtaining experience; tools or methods and steps to achieve experience; characteristics of the states lived during the experience; behavioral, ethical rules either used to get experience or learned during the experience itself.

In order to help understand the subject the study shortly presents Buddhism and its main branches. Buddhism is very heterogeneous, innumerable currents and schools treat Buddha as the base for its teaching, and these have different points of views on the transcendental experience. This study mainly deals with the Mahayana branch as this form of Buddhism dominates China in our times.

I had very limited possibility to make personal interviews, so I tried to get closer to non-everyday experiences via sacred books, sacred places and sacred beings. In China – after persecuting religions during the 70's – now it is possible to practice Buddhism, several temples are renovated and rebuilt. During my travels I found religious life with different levels of deepness: in some temples I met communities and people with good ambiance, other temples are used mainly for touristic or cultural purposes, and I found untidy, abandoned temples as well.

The main purpose for Buddhism is the liberation from suffering. One phrasing of this purpose is that the subject can achieve „Blow out”, Nirvana through abandoning desires and negative tendencies. This kind of liberation can be seen in the Historical Buddha statues immersed in meditation and contemplation, radiating silence and lack of desire. In the Mahayana schools, that are present in today's China, liberation is not just abandoning desire but it can be a joyful state, a „heaven”, where luminous, infinite Buddha or Buddhas are at the center. These experiences are present in the representation of mandalas, Buddha-lands, the Five Great Buddhas, Buddha of the Past and Buddha of the Future. In Mahayana the practitioner – driven by compassion – helps others to achieve enlightenment. This attitude can be seen in the representation of the Bodhisattvas, who are more dynamic and are actively involved in life by helping others, healing, teaching or performing miracles, etc.

Buddhist teachers often tried to establish a systematic way to achieve transcendental experiences and the purpose. Vast literature is dealing with achieving „wisdom”: examination of reality and of the operation of the consciousness, methods to liberate from the limits of the consciousness. Among these the Middle Way, the Mind-Only and the buddha-nature teachings are especially important, and they had a significant role in China as well. Some texts contain detailed descriptions of the steps to achieve meditation experiences and the characteristics of the achieved states. For example, in China the architecture of the temples reflects the process to achieve experience: courtyards and buildings can represent different states, and the gates can represent „thresholds” between these states.

Besides individual meditation, the most important tool for Mahayana is the common ceremonies. Buildings that are used to hold common ceremonies are important parts of the temples. These ceremonies can contain reciting texts and sometimes prostrations together with rhythmic music. In China reciting texts has an important role, especially reciting the Heart Sutra and texts to praise Amitufo (Amitabha) or other gods.

Scriptures contain how the subject should behave to achieve experience, and what kind of ethical rules indicate that the experience is achieved. The Noble Eightfold Path are frequently represented by the eight-spoke wheel. Compassion, wisdom and the six perfections are practically always present with the presentation of gods related to these qualities: Guanyin, Wenshu (Manjushri) and Puxian (Samanthabhadra).

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## Preliminary information

### *Approach, preconditions*

This study is a summary of a research that was performed between 2015 and 2019, directed towards Buddhism and especially towards its forms in China. The research is based on studying Chinese Buddhist texts and scientific studies, and experiences that I had during my travels to China and Nepal between 2015 and 2019. The research was inspired by the works of an Argentinian writer and thinker, Silo (1938-2010) and the communities established by him.

During the research I tried to find traces of transcendental experiences and the ways towards them.<sup>1</sup> Transcendental experience means for me such extraordinary experiences that are “decisive”, that can cause a deep change in a person. Ideal transcendental experience is an “organized”, “directed”, repeatable phenomenon, the experience is followed by the precise understanding of it „rules”.

Allusions, signs and “translations” can refer to the experience. Identifying the relation between signs and experience is strongly subjective, it depends on the point of view of the person making the study: besides my point of view it is possible to find references to the experience in the modified (elevated) level of energy or the higher level of resonance with matter. My study was based on the “Mental Discipline” elaborated by Silo which I will introduce in the next chapter. During the study I was looking for references to the following:

- experiencing suffering, starting a transformation process to overcome suffering,
- meditation, as a tool for this transformation,
- transformation, as a series of steps,
- definition of the consciousness, its components, its operation, its states and levels,
- experiencing the determination of the consciousness, experiencing the limits, conditions created by it,
- emptiness and solitude, experience notions related to them (nihilism, solipsism),
- overcome emptiness and solitude, experiencing the possibility of the communication between consciousnesses and non-duality,
- states experienced during the practices: emerging of doubt regarding the phenomena of the everyday world; certainty in the active nature of the consciousness, in non-duality and in unity; development of compassion, non-violence as a moral attitude.

During the study I tried to gain access to experiences that are expressed through Buddhism. I define Buddhism as all of the mental, social and artistic currents that are referring to Buddha as a source or as a transcendental basis. During my travels I searched for references to transcendental experience through:

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<sup>1</sup> Western works about Buddhism rarely study Buddhism from the point of view of transcendental experiences. Buddhism is frequently taken as a social movement, in this case they usually study how it relates to the social processes of that historical moment, for example, how it relates to politics, what is its role in the economy, education, what ethical values it has regarding the social behavior. In these cases studies can have several aims, topics, depending on the questions raised by the person making the study: it can study using different time frames, can focus on different geographical zones or social topics. Physical manifestations of the religions are frequently studied, for example, the institutions (eg. monasteries) established by them, organization of the studied religion, how it inspired different artistic branches and how its topics of interest manifest in a certain artistic branch.

- personal reports of people living through an experience,
- texts, written works about the experience (sacred texts),
- physical places to obtain experience (temples, pilgrimage centers),
- beings and spiritual places manifesting the purpose and the different states of consciousness (gods, heavens, hell worlds, etc.),
- practices leading to experience (ceremonies, accessories, images of visualization practices, body postures),
- religious accessories fixing the experience, helping future recollections (sculptures, talismans, amulets, etc.),
- moral, ethical rules (rules for monks or nuns, moral rules for laymen).

It was hard to make personal interviews during the research because of the lack of a common language (Chinese people often do not speak adequate English) and the different cultural background, so I could not rely on them. During this study I managed to get closer to the extraordinary experiences through sacred texts, holy places and sacred beings.

Because of the above this study is not aimed to cover its topics fully, it can be a starting point for further studies. The study presents sacred texts that are the most popular in China, structure of the Buddhist temples, gods frequently presented in China and their depiction forms.

### ***Mental Discipline***

The four Disciplines were elaborated by an Argentinian writer and thinker, Silo (1938-2010). The Disciplines are paths for the internal transformation, aiming to have transcendental experiences. He elaborated four paths, four Disciplines depending on what is used by the subject during the internal transformation to reach the “Profound”: Material Discipline using materials, Energetic Discipline using psycho-physical energy, Mental Discipline using mental objects and the Form Discipline using mental forms. The disciplines are practiced using “routine practices” that should be repeated in every step of the process until the subject reaches the indicated register. The process consists of 12 steps organized in three quaterns. All steps have a title to describe the register to be reached, the start of a quatern indicates a step to a new phase.

The essence of the Mental Discipline is the search for freedom that makes it possible for practitioners to liberate themselves from the determination and conditions of their own mind, and to overcome these by achieving universal structures. Among the Western sciences psychology and philosophy – especially phenomenology – are approximate to the topics of Mental Discipline. Mental Discipline treats Buddhism as its predecessor, several studies deal with their relationship (for details see *Other Sources* at the end of the study).

### ***Remarks on methodology***

The study contains the most important Chinese terms in traditional characters and pinyin transliteration. In case of important Mahayana terms Sanskrit transliteration is also provided as they are more frequently used in the scientific literature dealing with Buddhism. In case of Theravada terms – as the Three Baskets are written in the Pali language – Pali transliteration is provided.



During the writing of the study I faced some difficulties because of the several and significant changes in the territory of „China” during its history. When not noted otherwise, in this study we refer with the term China to the historical China not containing Tibet and East-Turkestan (the latter includes the currently Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region). We refer to the current territory of the People’s Republic of China as “today’s China”.

At the beginning of the study I provide a general introduction about Buddhism and Buddhist teaching in order to help the understanding of the China-specific topics. Pictures are intended to illustrate the forms of the 2500 year old Buddhism that is still working and progressing in this historical moment.

## General information about Buddhist teachings

Buddhism – similar to other religions – should not be viewed as a uniform spiritual current. During its 2500 years of history innumerable – sometimes contradictory – interpretations emerged about the teachings of Buddha. Several different schools arose and it is possible to group them into different branches. Aspects used to group and differentiate Buddhist currents are varying with schools, researchers or historical periods. My experience is that Western researchers and even Buddhists have difficulties to integrate this diversity: there are several cases referring to a teaching of a particular branch or school as the “Buddhist” teaching. The most commonly used grouping separates the Teaching into three branches: Theravada<sup>2</sup> (approx. “Elder’s Way”), Mahayana (approx. “Great Way”) and Vajrayana (approx. “Diamond Way”)<sup>3</sup>.

Theravada schools are working mostly in Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia), Theravada branch is predominant there (the name „Southern Buddhism” comes from here). This branch played and plays significant role only in the southern part of China.

Mahayana schools are more diverse in their thinking, practice and expressions than Theravada. During human history different schools of the Mahayana appeared in all parts of Asia, in the modern era it is a dominant branch in China, Japan and Korea, and it has a major role in Tibetan Buddhism as well (as it is spread in North Asia, it is called „Northern Buddhism” as well).



*Mahayana gods. Guangxiao temple, Guangzhou, China*

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<sup>2</sup> In this study we intentionally avoid the popular term Hinayana (“Small Way”), as originally it was used by the first teachers of the Mahayana schools as a pejorative term to refer to Theravada

<sup>3</sup> For example, some researcher, teacher classifies Chan/Zen Buddhism as a separate branch and not the part of Mahayana; some of them treats Vajrayana as a part of the Mahayana branch

The Vajrayana (or Tantrayana) way was practiced firstly in India then mostly in Tibet and in Mongolia. Throughout history it appeared in China and Japan, and during the last decades in Europe and in North America as well.

In Tibet Buddhism started to spread from the 8th century. Original shamanism, Mahayana and Vajrayana was mixed into a special branch there. In this study we call it Tibetan Buddhism (the term Lamaism is popular as well).<sup>4</sup> Later Tibetan Buddhism spread in Mongolia (including in the territory that is now part of today's China as Inner Mongolia). After the 60's Tibetan Buddhism has spread in and influenced the Western world as well: several communities based on the Tibetan Buddhism teachings were established in the United States and in Europe. The most influential „leader“ of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama received The Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.



*Tibetan-style stupa. Beihai Park, Beijing, China.*

Between the different branches of Buddhism there are and were conflicts regarding the interpretation of the teaching of Buddha, but mostly they do not treat each other as enemies. Theravada teachers do not treat Mahayana sutras and Tantric texts as the valid teachings of the Buddha. Mahayana admits Theravada practices as a base, their aim is not to defeat Theravada but to overcome its presumed

deficiencies. Mahayana and Vajrayana practitioners and teachers treat the Triple Basket as a sacred text and the basis of their practice, furthermore contemplative, insightful meditations are organic parts of their practices.

Dalai Lama expresses the above in relation to Tibetan Buddhism:

*“Understood thusly, one can see that the form of Buddhism that flourished in Tibet is a comprehensive form of Buddhism, embracing all the essential teachings of the Theravada, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana scriptures. It is very important to understand that the core teachings of the Theravada tradition embodied in the Pali scriptures are the foundation of the Buddha’s teachings. Beginning with these teachings, one can then draw on the insights contained in the detailed explanations of the Sanskrit Mahayana tradition. Finally, integrating techniques and perspectives from the Vajrayana texts can further enhance one’s understanding. But without a foundation in the core teachings embodied in the Pali tradition, simply proclaiming oneself a follower of the Mahayana is meaningless.*

*If one has this kind of deeper understanding of various scriptures and their interpretation, one is spared from harboring mistaken notions of conflicts between the “Greater” versus the “Lesser” Vehicle (Hinayana).”<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> Some use the Vajrayana and Tibetan Buddhism as a synonym, but this might not describe properly Buddhism of Tibet. In Tibet both Vajrayana (called there „Tantrayana“, Tantra Way) and Mahayana (called there „Sutrayana“, Sutra Way) teachers are living, most cases at the same monastery.

<sup>5</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama. *Essence of the Heart Sutra* (page 54).

After clarifying the main characteristics of the different branches we will make a general introduction to Buddhism. During the introduction we concentrate on the topics related to transcendental experience: purpose and methods to gain experience, the search for the experience of the reality, ethical rules, masters and gods who are treated as ideals, examples by the practitioners.

### *Purpose of the practice*

The main purpose of the practitioners of Buddhism is to eliminate suffering. The related message of the Buddha is summarized in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths: it is necessary to recognize the existence of human suffering, the cause of the suffering, the necessity to eliminate suffering and to recognize the way to eliminate it:

*“Thus I have heard.*

*[...]*

*Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.*

*“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.*



*Buddha is teaching. Jing'an temple, Shanghai, China.*

*“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it.*

*“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is this Noble Eightfold Path; right view,*

*right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right immersion.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> *Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma* (SN 56.11). Sutta Central



Practitioners of all branches are making effort to eliminate desire, to move from the realm of craving and permanent rebirth (*samsara*) towards the realm of the cessation of craving, of freedom, of the Blowing Out (in Pali *Nibbana*, in Sanskrit *Nirvana*).

Additionally Mahayana teachings are frequently describing the state regarded as the purpose with extremely colorful images, similarly to the descriptions of Paradise or Canaan. These are the so-called “Pure Lands”. The Pure Land of Amitabha, Sukhavati is described as follows:

*“1. Thus I have heard. [...]*

*2. Then the Buddha addressed Shariputra, the elder, and said, 'Beyond a hundred thousand kotis of Buddha-lands westwards from here, there is a world named Sukhavati. In that world there is a Buddha, Amita(-ayus) by name, now dwelling and preaching the law. Shariputra, why is that country named Sukhavati? The living beings in that country have no pains, but receive pleasures only. Therefore, it is called Sukhavati.*

*3. Again, Shariputra, in the land Sukhavati (there are) seven rows of balustrades, seven rows of fine nets, and seven rows of arrayed trees; they are all of four gems and surround and enclose (the land). For this reason the land is called Sukhavati.*

*4. Again, Shariputra, in the land Sukhavati there are lakes of the seven gems, in which is filled water with the eight meritorious qualities. The lake-bases are strewn with golden sand, and the stairs of the four sides are made of gold, silver, beryl, and crystal. On land there are stories and galleries adorned with gold, silver, beryl, crystal, white coral, red pearl and diamond [lit. agate]. The lotus-flowers in the lakes, large as chariot wheels, are blue-colored with blue splendor, yellow-colored with yellow splendor, red-colored with red splendor, white-colored with white splendor, and (they are all) the most exquisite and purely fragrant. Shariputra, the land Sukhavati is arrayed with such good qualities and adornments.*

*5. Again, Shariputra, in that Buddha-land there are heavenly musical instruments always played on; gold is spread on the ground; and six times every day and night it showers Mandarava blossoms. Usually in the serene morning [lit. dawn] all of those who live in that land fill their plates with those wonderful blossoms, and (go to) make offering to a hundred thousand kotis of Buddhas of other regions; and at the time of the meal they come back to their own country, and take their meal and have a walk. Shariputra, the Sukhavati land is arrayed with such good qualities and adornments.”<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> *The Smaller Sukhavativyuha Sutra*. The Educational Department of the West Hongwanji, Kyoto, Japan, 1924.

In the Lankavatara Sutra we can see an example of the colorful description of the illuminated state:

*“The Lord of Lanka was then immediately awakened [from his reflection], feeling a revulsion in his mind and realising that the world was nothing but his own mind: he was settled in the realm of non-discrimination, was urged by the stock of his past good deeds, acquired the cleverness of understanding all the texts, obtained the faculty of seeing things as they are, was no more dependent upon others, observed things excellently with his own wisdom, gained the insight that was not of discursive reasoning, was no more dependent upon others, became a great Yogin of the discipline, was able to manifest himself in all excellent forms, got thoroughly acquainted with all skillful means, had the knowledge of the characteristic aspects of every stage, by which he would surmount it skillfully, was delighted to look into the self-nature of Citta, Manas, Manovijnana, got a view whereby he could cut himself loose from the triple continuation, had the knowledge of disposing of every argument of the philosophers on causation, thoroughly understood the Tathagata-garbha, the stage of Buddhahood, the inmost self, found himself abiding in the Buddha-knowledge.”<sup>8</sup>*

Theravada practitioners tend to treat reaching enlightenment as an individual task, transferring teaching and community functions do not have so much importance (however the Theravada monks are living also in communities). Theravada ideals are the beggar-monks (in Pali *bhikkhu*) living in poverty or the saint who is not falling back to samsara (in Pali *arahant*, in Chinese 羅漢 *luohan*).

The purpose of the Mahayana and Vajrayana practitioners is not just individual enlightenment but the salvation of all sentient beings. Their ideals are the „enlightened being” (in Sanskrit *Bodhisattva*, in Chinese 菩薩 *pusa*), who’s main characteristics are wisdom (in Sanskrit *prajna*, in Chinese 般若 *bore*) and



*Disciples. Jiangshen temple, Changsha, China*

compassion (in Sanskrit *karuna*, in Chinese 悲 *bei*). Their wisdom and compassion leads them to – if necessary – wander in samsara for thousands or even millions of years to help those who are suffering. The ideal of the Vajrayana practitioners are also the Bodhisattva, but despite step-by-step enlightenment their aim is frequently to achieve enlightenment in their current life.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Lankavatara Sutra, a Mahayana Text.* George Routledge & Sons Ltd, 1932.

## *Methods of practice*

In all branches the method to reach the purpose is the meditation (in Pali *bhavana*) that is done using special body postures.

Theravada practitioners prefer sitting meditation done alone or using an individual way. The general aims of these practices are to silence the consciousness, to identify and eliminate discursive thoughts and negative emotions. Based on the Pali Canon it is possible to differentiate contemplative meditations (*samatha*) and more focused, concentrated meditations (*vipassana*). Object of the concentration practices are variable, but breathing is frequently used (*anapanasati*). Additionally in the Pali Canon one can find a practice called establishing of mindfulness (*satipatthana*), containing the “four foundations of mindfulness”: contemplating on the body, sensations, consciousness and contents in the consciousness.

*“And how, monks, does a monk dwell practicing body-contemplation on the body?”*

*Herein, monks, a monk having gone to the forest, to the foot of the tree, or to an empty place, sits down cross-legged, keeps his body erect and his mindfulness alert. Just mindful he breathes in and mindful he breathes out.*

*Breathing in a long breath, he knows »I breathe in a long breath«; breathing out a long breath, he knows »I breathe out a long breath«; breathing in a short breath, he knows »I breathe in a short breath«; breathing out a short breath, he knows »I breathe out a short breath«. »Conscious of the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe in«, thus he trains himself. »Conscious of the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe out«, thus he trains himself. »Calming the bodily function (of breathing), I shall breathe in«, thus he trains himself. »Calming the bodily function (of breathing), I shall breathe out«, thus he trains himself.*

*As a skilful turner or his apprentice, making a long turn, knows »I am making a long turn«, or making a short turn, knows »I am making a short turn«, just so the monk breathing in a long breath, knows »I breathe in a long breath«; breathing out a long breath, knows »I breathe out a long breath«, breathing in a short breath, knows »I breathe in a short breath«, breathing out a short breath, knows »I breathe out a short breath«. »Calming the bodily function (of breathing), I shall breathe in«, thus he trains himself. »Calming the bodily function (of breathing), I shall breathe out«, thus he trains himself.*

*Thus he dwells practising body-contemplation on the body internally, or externally, or both internally and externally. He dwells contemplating origination-factors in the body, or he dwells contemplating dissolution-factors in the body, or he dwells contemplating both origination-factors and dissolution-factors in the body. Or his mindfulness that »there is a body« is established in him to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness. Independent he dwells, clinging to nothing in the world.*

*Thus indeed, a monk dwells practicing body-contemplation on the body.”<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> *The Foundation of Mindfulness* (Pali Canon. Digha Nikaya 22, PTS D II 290). Translation in: Nyanaponika Thera. *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. (page 129)

Mahayana practitioners are also using sitting meditation, but other practices are also frequently used. Practices frequently contain movements: usual ceremonies contain walking, prostrations, going down on the knees. During services participants are reciting special words or sentences (in Sanskrit *dharanī* or *mantra*) that contain asking, expressing gratitude and/or honor. In addition to individual practices community-driven development is significant, common services are typical.



Common service. Xiyuan (Western Garden) temple, Suzhou, China.

Vajrayana schools, in addition to the above practices, are frequently using visualization practices and mantras connected to deities. Masters and person-to-person transfer of the teachings has a significant role, transfer of the teachings is done with initiation or regular empowerment. Everyday activities like eating, sleeping or even sex are used to try to overcome desires, practices are involved with these activities.

*„In early Buddhist practices desires are treated as the taint of the consciousness. Later Mahayana schools rather searched for the medicine. The same way as the peacock is eating poisonous plants, getting the shiny glitter of its feathers, so for the Tantra practitioners the desires, as a vast energy source, serve to reach enlightenment.”<sup>10</sup>*

In addition to meditation and ceremonies, in Buddhism a long tradition exists to study sacred texts, not just via reading but to deeply contemplate and recite their contents.

Teachings about transcendental experiences can be found in innumerable scriptures. The most important source of the Buddhist tradition is the Pali Canon (in Pali *Tipitaka*, in Sanskrit *Tripiṭaka*, meaning three baskets) which is a collection of scriptures (sutras) written in a north-Indian language called Pali. Theravada tradition treats Pali Canon as nearly the only valid source of the teachings of Buddha. The Tipitaka consists of three parts: scripture collection containing the teachings of Buddha (in Pali *Suttas*, in Sanskrit *Sutras*), texts dealing with moral, behavior and discipline topics of the monks (*Vinaya*) and philosophical treatises called Abhidhamma (in Sanskrit *Abhidharma*). According to the tradition the Pali Canon expresses truly the teachings and intentions of Buddha, but scientific research claims that the Tipitaka was codified in written form after several hundred years of the death of Buddha. Abhidharma remains to us in different versions, scientifically it is widely accepted that its composition was made later than the other two collections.

Mahayana schools treat innumerable other scriptures (in Pali *sutta*, in Sanskrit *sutra*) as originated from Buddha, they treat them as sacred and are studying them frequently (according to scientists Mahayana scriptures are mostly prepared later than the Tipitaka texts). These sutras are the sources of the Mahayana teachings, a lot of them dealing with topics

<sup>10</sup> Quote from His Holiness the XIV. Dalai Lama. Quoted in *The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple*. Thames&Hudson, 2000 . Translated from Hungarian by Ádám Hucker.



related to the Mental Discipline. For details about Mahayana texts having great influence in China, see the chapter titled “Sacred texts in China”.

Sacred texts particular to the Vajrayana are the tantras. These have little effect in China so they were not in the focus of the current study.

In all branches verbal teachings (that were later put down in writing) transferred by the masters have an important role.

### ***Searching for reality: perceived world, consciousness, states of consciousness***

In all Buddhist branches psychological and philosophical teachings have great importance. These topics are studied and used during contemplation and their aim is to contribute to achieve transcendental experience. Studying teachings is not for study's sake, it is important to lead the practitioner to reach the ultimate goal, the elimination of suffering.

*“What are the things unfit for attention that he attends to? [...] »Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?’ Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: ‘Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?’«*

*When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him. The view »self exists for me« arises in him as true and established; or the view »no self exists for me« arises in him as true and established; or the view »I perceive self with self« arises in him as true and established; or the view »I perceive not-self with self« arises in him as true and established; or the view »I perceive self with not-self« arises in him as true and established; or else he has some such view as this: »It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.«*

*This speculative view, bhikkhus, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, ageing, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say.”<sup>11</sup>*

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11 All the taints. Sutra Central

In all branches it is accepted that the world perceived by the different senses (the five senses and the sense of mind) is not identical to the reality, phenomena have no intrinsic value, they are „empty“. The Heart Sutra – that is very popular among monks and lay practitioners – gives a good summary of the teachings regarding components of the consciousness and emptiness:

*„Thus have I once heard:*

*In this way, Sariputra, all things are emptiness; they are without defining characteristics; they are not born, they do not cease, they are not defiled, they are not undefiled; they are not deficient, and they are not complete.*

*"Therefore, Sariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness. There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind. There is no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no texture, and no mental objects. There is no eye-element and so on up to no mind-element including no element of mental consciousness. There is no ignorance and no extinction of ignorance and so on up to no aging and death and no extinction of aging and death. Likewise, there is no suffering, origin, cessation, or path; there is no wisdom, no attainment, and even no non-attainment.*

*"Therefore, Sariputra, since the bodhisattvas have no attainments, they rely on the perfection of wisdom and abide in it. Having no obscuration in their minds, they have no fear, and by going utterly beyond error, they reach nirvana."*<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> His Holiness the Dalai Lama. *Essence of the Heart Sutra*. (p. 60)

The Pali Canon contains several detailed teachings about the operation of the consciousness. In this study I can only highlight some of them:

- the human being has five components, „aggregates” (in Pali *khandha*), four of them have a mental nature: form (*rupa*), feeling (*vedana*), perception (*sanna*), fabrications (*sankhara*), consciousness (*vinna*),
- all of the beings and the five aggregates have the following three characteristics: non-self (*anatta*), impermanence (*anicca*) and being full of / causing suffering (*dukkha*),
- teachings about the twelve dependent-origination: the ultimate cause, condition of the rebirth in the samsara is ignorance (*avidja*). Samsara is unraveling („born”) from ignorance via twelve factors depending on each other, leading to suffering. The ultimate method to eliminate suffering is to eliminate ignorance,
- suffering is caused by different „defilements”, the most important defilements are attachment or greed (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa* or *pratigha*) and delusion or confusion (*moha*).

The Abhidharma literature that was probably written later than the Pali Canon contains detailed, categorized lists of physiological and psychological elements of the consciousness, cause-effect relations between the elements and the processes of the consciousness. Teachings of the Sautrantika and Vaibhasika schools are based on these texts.

An important Mahayana representation of the samsara is the Wheel of Life (in Sanskrit *Bhavacakra*). The wheel consists of circles that are representing the following (starting from the inner circles):

- in the hub the pig, the bird and the snake represent the three defilements or poisons (ignorance, attachment, anger),
- black and white fields represent the good or bad result of the acts (*karma*),
- the six fields represent the six realms (starting from the top clockwise: gods, human beings, hungry ghosts, hell, animals, demigods),
- the most outer fields represent the twelve links of dependent origination.



Wheel of Life

The figure holding the wheel represents impermanence. On the left Guanyin (Avalokiteshvara), on the right Buddha is depicted. Buddha is pointing to the Moon that represents Nirvana, showing that liberation is possible.

In Mahayana wisdom is one of the most important characteristics of a Bodhisattva, and a large amount of philosophical / psychological literature is available to develop it. Out of the schools related to the Mental Discipline the most known are the Middle Way (*Madhyamaka*), the Mind-only (*Yogacara*) currents and teachings of the Buddha-nature (*tathagatagarbha*). These are based on the teachings of the Pali Canon, like the Four Noble Truths and the Depending Origination, and – even debating with each other – extending them with new thoughts and experiences regarding the components of the consciousness and the world, the intrinsic existence of the consciousness and the possibility to liberate oneself from the determination of the consciousness. These schools will be presented briefly in the chapter titled „Buddhist schools in China”.

### ***Rules of behavior, ethics***

The general rule followed in Buddhism for proper behavior is to find the appropriate middle way between self-mortification and being lost in pleasure, and to follow the Noble Eightfold Path:

*“Thus have I heard. [...]*

*– Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.*

*And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision ... which leads to Nibbāna?*

*It is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to*

*by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.”<sup>13</sup>*



*Wheel of Dharma. The eight spokes of the wheel are the symbols of the Noble Eightfold Path. Fayuan temple, Beijing, China*

<sup>13</sup> *Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma*. Sutta Central



The ideal of Mahayana is the Bodhisattva characterized by wisdom and compassion. A Bodhisattva during his mundane and heavenly lives develops and practices different virtues 波羅密 (in Sanskrit *paramita*), these are generosity (*dana*), discipline (*sila*), patience (*ksanti*), exertion (*virya*), concentration (*dhyana*) and wisdom (*prajna*).

### ***Masters and gods***

All Buddhist branches regard the Buddha as its founder, but his role and his characteristics are varying in different teachings.

The story of his life – containing several legendary stories – is described in the Pali Canon, and this story is adapted in the Western world as well.<sup>14</sup> His original name was Siddhartha Gautama, and he was born in Lumbini, a place near the borders of current India and Nepal. According to the tradition he was a prince of the Shakya clan, the Shakyamuni („sage of the Shakya”) title originates there. But Siddhartha – after meeting with an old man, a sick man and seeing a dead body – realized that richness and luxury do not cease suffering. Following the Indian customs he became an ascetic. He could not reach his goal to cease suffering with physical ascetics so he abandoned this practice.



*Prince Siddhartha meets the sick man. Yungang grottoes, Datong, China.*

According to the scriptures he reached enlightenment in Bodh-Gaya (currently in the northern part of India) during a meditation, earning the title Buddha (Enlightened). During his life he wandered through Northern India as a monk, a lot of people joined his teachings. They became the first members of his community.<sup>15</sup>

According to Theravada practitioners Buddha was mainly a „mundane” person and teacher, he reached enlightenment alone, and he achieved supra mundane powers but still he left this world forever when he died. According to this belief Theravada mainly venerate only Buddha, it is not common to honor other saints and gods.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see the book of Hermann Hesse titled Siddhartha and the film made based on this book with the same title (director Conrad Rooks)

<sup>15</sup> See the study of Hugo Novotny about experiences on three important Buddhist places (Bodh-Gaya, Benares and Nalanda)

Mahayana teachings – not disputing the significance of the historical Buddha – emphasize the transcendent, timeless characteristics of Buddha. According to the three body 三身 (in Sanskrit *trikaya*) teachings Buddha exists in several forms: his manifested body 應身 (*nirmanakaya*) relates to his human appearance, the enjoyment body 報身 (*sambhogakaya*) being in the Pure Lands are the subject of cults and imagery, and the law body 法身 (*dharmakaya*) represents the absolute nature of Buddha. In statues manifested body is represented by the visible physical body, enjoyment body is represented by the radiation of the body and law body is represented by the radiation of the head.



Shakyamuni Buddha. Jingci temple, Hangzhou, China

Besides Buddha, Mahayana teachings give importance to other supernatural beings: besides the present Buddha (Shakyamuni or „historical” Buddha) they respect Buddhas living in the past or in the future, before or after thousands or millions of years, and transcendent Buddhas (like the Buddhas of Five Directions), Bodhisattvas, protectors of the teaching (protectors of directions, kings, non-human beings) living in different realms. Besides the numerous Buddha and Bodhisattva the Mahayana cosmology is also much more diverse than the Theravada one. Besides the perceived mundane world other worlds (in Sanskrit *buddha-kshetra*) also have great significance, like heavens, hells, realms of gods, realms of ghosts. These diverse beings and realms can be the „translations” of non-everyday experiences (emotions, consciousness levels, consciousness states). We will be able to see examples in the chapter *Sacred beings*). These figures of the Mahayana cosmology serve as images for the meditation and visualization practices, as well.<sup>16</sup>

Mahayana cosmology is well represented by the following text from the Lotus Sutra:

*“Thus have I heard. Once upon a time the Lord was staying at Ragagriha, on the Gridhrakuta mountain, with a numerous assemblage of monks, twelve hundred monks, all of them Arhats, stainless, free from depravity, self-controlled, thoroughly emancipated in thought and knowledge, of noble breed, (like unto) great elephants, having done their task, done their duty, acquitted their charge, reached the goal; in whom the ties which bound them to existence were wholly destroyed, whose minds were thoroughly emancipated by perfect knowledge, who had reached the utmost perfection in subduing all their thoughts; who were possessed of the transcendent faculties; eminent disciples, [...] with them yet other great disciples [...] still under training, and two thousand other monks, some of whom still under training, the others masters; [...] (further) with eighty thousand Bodhisattvas, all unable to slide back, endowed with the spells of supreme, perfect enlightenment, firmly standing in wisdom; who moved onward the never deviating wheel of the law; who had propitiated many hundred thousands of Buddhas; who under many hundred thousands of Buddhas had*

<sup>16</sup> Note that several Buddhist teachers and scientists – especially the ones dealing with Theravada – reject this proliferation of gods and realms, and treat it as a deviation from the ancient, „original” Buddha teachings.

*planted the roots of goodness, had been intimate with many hundred thousands of Buddhas, were in body and mind fully penetrated with the feeling of charity; able in communicating the wisdom of the Tathagatas; very wise, having reached the perfection of wisdom; renowned in many hundred thousands of worlds; having saved many hundred thousand myriads of kotis of beings [...]*



*Scene with Buddha and innumerable Bodhisattvas. Yungang grottoes, Datong, China.*

*With them were also the sixteen virtuous men [...]; besides eighty thousand Bodhisattvas [...]; further Sakra, the ruler of the celestials, with twenty thousand gods, his followers [...] further, the four great rulers of the cardinal points with thirty thousand gods in their train [...]; further, Brahma Sahdmpati and his twelve thousand followers [...]; together with the eight Naga kings and many hundred thousand myriads of kotis of Nigas in their train [...]; further, the four Kinnara kings with*

*many hundred thousand myriads of kotis of followers [...]; besides, the four divine beings (called) Gandharvakayikas with many hundred thousand Gandharvas in their suite [...]; further, the four chiefs of the demons followed by many hundred thousand myriads of kotis of demons [...]; along with the four Garuda chiefs followed by many hundred thousand myriads of kotis of Garudas [...]"<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> *Saddharma-pundarika or the Lotus of the True Law*. Chapter I. Internet Sacred Text Archive.

## Transcendental experience in Chinese Buddhism

### *Buddhism in today's China*

As hopefully became clear from the previous chapters, throughout history Buddhist teachers and believers made continuous effort using different methods to achieve transcendental experience and their purpose. This search is certainly present in Chinese Buddhism as well, and my opinion is that references to transcendental experiences are present in the Chinese Buddhist schools, in their sacred texts, in the architecture of their sacred places (temples) and in their sacred beings (gods).

Firstly let me make a short introduction about Chinese Buddhism.

Buddhism 佛教 (*fojiao*) appeared in China about 2000 years ago, approximately in the first century CE. Its connection with transcendental experience seemed stronger during some periods, during other periods mundane views were more at the forefront. Relations and institutions were also variable: sometimes it received significant state support, for example, during the Tang era, sometimes it suffered from strong persecution (like in the '60s or '70s). During some periods it had a significant infrastructure with large institutions (monasteries, schools, even economic centers), during other periods it was represented only by wandering monks, forest hermits without any relation or cooperation with each other.

Buddhism was never the sole religion in China, transcendental experience was and even today is expressed through different religions, especially through Confucian 儒教 (*rujiao*) and Taoist 道教 (*daojiao*) practices which had appeared much earlier than Buddhism. Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism were and are influencing each other, teachings, practices, rites and gods are mixing.

From 1950 in China the central ideology is communism, which is based on materialism, and gives little importance to religions and spiritual practices and experience. In the '60s or '70s, during the Cultural Revolution all religions involving Buddhism were persecuted, most temples were closed, demolished or used for mundane activities, monks were killed or forced to return to everyday life. After the '70s anti-religious sentiment lessened: religious practices became authorized, operation of the five recognized religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestant Christianity) is supported, and – as a part of protecting „cultural relics” - the state is maintaining and renovating temples. Religious life is booming but is strictly under state control. During my travel I found different levels of religious expression: in some temples I found communities and practitioners with a good atmosphere, other temples are operating „formally”, acting as tourist or cultural centers and I found neglected, abandoned sites that lost their sacred forms.



*Buddhist temple under modern skyscrapers. Jing'an temple, Shanghai, China.*



In China three branches of Buddhism are distinguished. The dominant Mahayana current is called in China as „Chinese-speaking Buddhism” 汉语系佛教 (*hanyuxi-fojiao*). „Tibetan-speaking Buddhism” 藏语系佛教 (*zangyuxi-fojiao*), namely Tibetan Buddhism dominant in Tibet and Inner-Mongolia that are now parts of the People’s Republic of China, and sporadically exists in all parts of China (but Vajrayana practices are not spread out of Tibet). In Southwest China some minorities are following the „Pali-speaking Buddhism” 巴利语系佛教 (*baliyuxi-fojiao*) namely Theravada practices.

### ***Buddhist schools in China***

In China several teachers and communities dealt with achieving „wisdom”, studying reality, the operation of the consciousness and methods to eliminate limits of consciousness. The Middle-Way, the Mind-Only and the Buddha-nature teachings are the ones that are important regarding the topics of this study. These, although originating from India, had a significant role during the history of China.

Firstly it is important to mention that a large number of Chinese Buddhist teachers and communities existed. Distinguishing „schools” 宗 (*zong*) are ambiguous. The grouping of the schools used by Chinese scholars for several centuries (like Heavenly Terrace, Flower Garland, Chan, Pure Land) are generally known, but it is doubtful to what extent the members and teachings of these schools were separated from each other. It is sure that different schools functioned at different intensity at different historical moments, and are mixed. In Mahayana the Chan and Pure Land teachings are the most important, but the teachings of the older schools survived through its temples and objects (especially statues) created by its members. Pure Land teachings are centered around Amitufofo, Heavenly Terrace around the Lotus Sutra and the Flower Garland school around the Flower Garland Sutra, so in this study these teachings will be introduced together with these scriptures. In the following I will introduce Chan, Middle-Way, Mind-only and Buddha-nature teachings as these are the most relevant to our examined topics.

The Chinese character representing Chan 禪 is used to translate the Sanskrit word *dhyana* (meditation or meditation level), the school received its name from this word. Scholars distinguish several different schools inside Chan that can differ from each other in the teachings and practices. Chan Buddhism is often characterized by the rejection of sacred scriptures, preferring direct practice and experience, venerating teachers with extreme behavior. The way to achieve direct experience is the meditation. Gong’ans 公案 (literally meaning public note)<sup>18</sup> and meditation on them have an important role. Gong’ans are short talks between a master and a disciple that lead to the enlightenment of the latter:

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<sup>18</sup> In the Western world they are known by their Japanese pronunciation, koan

## 7. Joshu's "Wash Your Bowl"

*A monk said to Joshu, "I have just entered this monastery. Please teach me."*

*"Have you eaten your rice porridge?" asked Joshu.*

*"Yes, I have," replied the monk.*

*"Then you had better wash your bowl," said Joshu.*

*With this the monk gained insight.*

## 29. The Sixth Patriarch's "Your Mind Moves"

*The wind was flapping a temple flag, and two monks started an argument. One said the flag moved, the other said the wind moved; they argued back and forth but could not reach a conclusion.*

*The Sixth Patriarch said, "It is not the wind that moves, it is not the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves."*

*The two monks were awe-struck.<sup>19</sup>*

Buddhist tradition traces back the origin of Chan until the 6th century, the life of Bodhidharma 菩提達摩 (Putidamo) who was born in Central Asia or India. Modern scholars put the origin of Chan at the time of Huineng 惠能 who lived at the end of the 7th century. Chan Buddhism has spread in other Asian countries (Japan, Korea, South-East Asia) and gained great importance.<sup>20</sup> It was spread in Western Europe and in the United States from Japan, and it became widely known by the Japanese pronunciation of the character 禪 (Zen).

The origin of the Middle-Way 中觀見 (zhong-guanjian, in Sanskrit *madhyamaka*) school can be traced back until the life and teachings of the Indian master Nagarjuna 龍樹 (Long Shu) who supposedly live around the 2-3th century CE. Tradition claims that the original teachings came from god Wen-shu (Manjushri). According to the Middle-Way teachings the phenomena 法 (*fa*, in Sanskrit *dharma*) does not have „own-being” or intrinsic value 自性 (*zixing*, in Sanskrit *svabhava*), this own-being is empty 空 (*kong*, in Sanskrit *sunya*). Because they deny the existence of phenomena, Madhyamaka masters are often accused of being nihilists. They reject the accusations that they do not reject or claim anything, as the negative and positive judgments can not reflect properly the valid nature of reality.

Madhyamaka teachings had great influence on Indian teachings and had and still has a significant role in the thinking of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists. In China Madhyamaka expressed itself in the Three Treatises 三論 (*sanlun*) school. The school lived probably between the 4-7. century CE. It is doubtful whether they formed distinctive communities, and now they have influence through their works. Its most important representatives are Kumarajiva 鳩摩羅什 who was a famous translator originated from Central-Asia, and later Sengzhao 僧肇 and Jizang 吉藏 (549-623).

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<sup>19</sup> Wu-men Hui-hai. *The Gateless Gate*. Internet Sacred Texts Archive

<sup>20</sup> To read more about the spread of Chan in Japan and the Chan teachings itself see the study of Juan Espinoza about Eihei Dogen who spread the Chan teaching in Japan in the 13th century

Jizang in his short essay titled as Meaning of the Two Levels of Discourse 二諦義 (Erdi yi) explains the more and more profound level of emptiness as the following:

*“The four kinds of Two Levels of Truth all represent the principle of gradual rejection, like building a framework from the ground. Why? Conventional people say that phenomena are real without realizing that actually they are not real. So Buddha taught them that at the end all phenomena are empty. When it is said that phenomena are real, conventional people are saying that. This is a mundane truth, the truth of the conventional people. However saints and sages know that phenomena are intrinsically empty. This is the absolute truth, the truth of the sages. [He taught] the principle [of mundane and absolute truth] to make people moving forward from conventional truth to absolute truth, to renounce the [truth of] conventional people and accept the truth of the sages. This is the reason to expound the first level of the two truths.*

*Then comes the second level expounding that existence and non-existence are of the conventional truth, and non-duality [neither existence nor non-existence] are of the absolute truth. This clears out that existence and non-existence are two extremes, one is the existence, other is the non-existence. And so on, permanence and impermanence, samsara and nirvana are also extremes. The absolute and conventional, samsara and nirvana are two extremes, so this is the conventional truth. The neither absolute nor conventional, neither samsara nor nirvana the middle way without duality. This is the absolute truth.*

*Then comes the third level where duality and non-duality are the conventional truth, and the neither duality nor non-duality is the highest truth. Previously we expounded that the conventional and absolute, samsara and nirvana are two extremes. Because of its one-sidedness this is the conventional truth. The neither absolute nor conventional, neither samsara nor nirvana, the middle way without duality is the absolute truth. But these two are also extremes. Why? The duality is one-sided, the non-duality is middle. But one-sidedness is extreme and being-in-the-middle is extreme as well. As they are two extremes they are called conventional truth. Only neither one-sidedness nor being-in-the-middle can be treated as middle way or absolute truth.”<sup>21</sup>*

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21 Hamar, Imre. *A kínai buddhizmus története*. Pages 75-76. Translated to English from Hungarian by Ádám Hucker.

The interest of Mind-only 唯識 (Weishi) or Yogacara 瑜伽行派 teaching is focused also on psychological and philosophical questions. Its teachers make an attempt to organize the experiences obtained during the meditation („yoga”), and at the center of the teaching stands the examination of the consciousness 識 (*shi*, in Sanskrit *citta* or *vijnana*). Scholars regard the Indian Asanga 无着 (Wu-zhuo) as the founder of the school, who lived around the 4th century CE. According to the tradition Asanga received the inspiration from Bodhisattva Maitreya. Major teachers of the school were Vasubandhu 世親, Sthiramatī 安慧 and Dharmapala 護法. Yogacara teachings can be summarized as follows:

- objects of the cognition, for example, objects perceived as external are unknowable or do not have an intrinsic nature, they are flowing, born and cease to exist continuously. We make a mistake when we attribute different qualities to the different phenomena,
- perceiving subject and perceived object can not be separated, they form a structure, it is a mistake to distinguish the two. „Consciousness” is beyond the subject-object relation,
- Yogacara distinguishes different levels of consciousness (usually eight, but sometimes seven or nine): the five sense-consciousnesses, the mind-consciousness (in Sanskrit *mano-vijnana*), defiled consciousness (*manas-vijnana*) and the eighth is the alaya consciousness<sup>22</sup>. The sense-consciousnesses, mind-consciousness and defiled consciousness are responsible for the subsistence of the subject-object illusory relation and for rebirth in the samsara. At the highest level stands a final consciousness, the source of Buddhahood,
- one is separated from enlightenment by mind-nature phenomena. Enlightenment can be realized by mental practices, via learning about and cleaning consciousness,
- only the highest consciousness and the imaginatively constructed separation from final Nirvana (in Sanskrit *abhutaparikalpa*) has an intrinsic existence.

According to the Buddha-nature<sup>23</sup> school there is a basic Buddha-nature that is essential, non-changing and non-moving. Buddha-nature exists but it is hidden in the beings, but it can be recognized by the Buddha and advanced Bodhisattvas. In mundane humans Buddha-nature contains defilements (however this does not cease its ultimate lightness and clearness), and for these people the tathagatagarbha is non-understandable, transcendent. Buddha-nature makes it possible for all beings to reach enlightenment.

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22 Different teachers and scholars translate alaya differently. Sometimes it is translated as storehouse-consciousness, referring to the fact that this consciousness stores the sprouts of the future phenomena, the karma-seeds. Based on other teachers explanations the home-consciousness, abode-consciousness translation seems valid (see Hima-alaya, the abode of the Snow)

23 In Sanskrit tathagatagarbha or buddha-dhatu. Tathagata means Honorable, it is one of the title or name of Buddha, while garbha has two meanings: embryo or womb. In Chinese it has two forms, 如来藏 ru-lai-zang, buddha-storehouse or 佛性 fo-xing, buddha-nature. In this study we use the term buddha-nature.



In India the Mind-only and the Buddha-nature teachings are formed separately, but they arrived in China at the same time. Chinese teachers had to spend a lot of effort to harmonize alaya-consciousness and Buddha-nature teachings, and these teachings are mixed significantly. Mind-only and the Buddha-nature teachings were expressed, for example, in the Ten Stages 地論 (Dilun) and the Dharma Character 法相 (Faxiang) schools which were formed during the 6-7th centuries CE. The most well known representatives of these schools are on the one hand some Indian monks living in China, like Bodhiruci 菩提流支, Ratnamati 勒那摩提 and Paramartha (真諦, Zhen-di), and on the other hand Xuan-zang 玄奘 who is still today renowned for his legendary travel to India and Kui-ji 窥基. Mind-only and Buddha-nature teachings were and are often accused – especially by Madhyamaka teachers – of treating consciousness and especially alaya-consciousness as a being in itself and is contradicting other teachings of Buddha on emptiness, especially the ones written in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra.



Giant Wild Goose Pagoda, Xian, China. The Buddhist scriptures brought by Xuan-zang to China were probably stored here

Lankavatara Sutra tells us the following about the different consciousnesses:

*“The Blessed One said: With the Manovijnana as cause and supporter, Mahamati, there rise the seven Vijnanas. Again, Mahamati, the Manovijnana is kept functioning, as it discerns a world of objects and becomes attached to it, and by means of manifold habit-energy [or memory] (127) it nourishes the Alayavijnana. The Manas is evolved along with the notion of an ego and its belongings, to which it clings and on which it reflects. It has no body of its own, nor its own marks; the Alayavijnana is its cause and support. Because the world which is the Mind itself is imagined real and attached to as such, the whole psychic system evolves mutually conditioning. Like the waves of the ocean, Mahamati, the world which is the mind-manifested, is stirred up by the wind of objectivity, it evolves and dissolves. Thus, Mahamati, when the Manovijnana is got rid of, the seven Vijnanas are also got rid of. So it is said:*

*179. I enter not into Nirvana by means of being, of work, of individual signs; I enter into Nirvana when the Vijnana which is caused by discrimination ceases.*

*180. With it [i. e. the Manovijnana] for its cause and support, the Manas secures its use; the Vijnana causes the Citta to function, and is supported [by it].*

*181. Like a great flood where no waves are stirred because of its being dried up, the Vijnana [-system] in its various forms ceases to work when there is the annihilation [of the Manovijnana].”<sup>24</sup>*

<sup>24</sup> Lankavatara Sutra, a Mahayana Text. George Routledge and Sons, 1932, London.

### *Buddhist sacred texts in China*

During the 2000 years of history of Chinese Buddhism an enormous amount of Buddhist literature was created in Chinese with the intention to help transcendental experience, or „wisdom“. Partly these are translations of sutras 經 (*jing*) from other languages, another part was written in China.

During this long history different officially accepted (“canonical”) collections were created using these texts, Today the most used edition is the so-called Taisho edition, containing 100 volumes, that was published between 1924 and 1934. Besides the Pali Canon this edition contains a lot of Mahayana sutras, and it contains Vajrayana scriptures, commentaries and even pictures as well. Below I would like to highlight some basic Mahayana sutras that are widely known and quoted in China.

Perfection of Wisdom Sutra 般若波羅密 (in Sanskrit *Prajnaparamita Sutra*) is the most widely known text of the Mahayana, it is popular in all schools. Several versions exist with different lengths (containing 300 to 100.000 lines), in the Western world the most widely

known is a short version named as the “Diamond Sutra”. The central theme of the scripture is that those who wish to achieve enlightenment must have ceased their belief in the existence of things, in the existence of states of being (like Nirvana or Enlightenment) or notions of the consciousness (like the I, being, spirit, individual). The sutra claims that this teaching is the only truth and that this truth can not be grasped by a mundane mind and can not be transmitted. The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra (or shortly Heart Sutra) 心經 (Xin Jing) is the synthesis or „heart” of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra. It is one of the most popular



*The text of the Heart Sutra graved into a wall. Lingyin temple, Hangzhou, China*

sutras, monks and laypeople are regularly reciting and chanting it during different ceremonies. The chapter *Searching for reality: perceived world, consciousness, states of consciousness* contains a quote from the Heart Sutra.

The Sutra on the White Lotus of the True Dharma or shortly Lotus Sutra 妙法蓮華經 (in Sanskrit *Saddharmapundarika Sutra*), according to scholars, in its current form is more a collection of scriptures than one scripture, its different parts were written in different periods. The oldest parts of the sutra were probably written around 200 BCE, the youngest parts around 200 CE. The most important teachings of the sutra:

- Buddha used skillful means (*upaya*) during his teachings, he changed his teachings according to the needs and level of his disciple; even if he showed different paths, there is only one way, the perfect enlightenment,
- Buddha did not die, but he exists continuously, he existed in the past and will live in the future as well; his death is just a skillful means to strengthen the intention of his disciples toward enlightenment,
- reading or reciting Lotus Sutra can make amends even for very serious sins,
- to receive teaching physical sacrifice may be necessary (in one chapter of the Lotus Sutra the later Medicine Buddha even burnt his body to reach enlightenment).



*Bell carved with the text of the Lotus Sutra. Jingci temple, Hangzhou, China.*

In the sutra Guanyin has an important role, an entire chapter pays homage to her and introduces her power and good deeds.

Several schools were organized throughout Chinese history or even exist today to study the Lotus Sutra. In China the Heavenly Terrace 天台(*Tiantai*) school was centered around the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. The name originates from the name of the mountain place where the founder, Zhiyi 智顗 lived. The school existed between the 6th and 9th centuries. Lotus Sutra had great impact in Japan (through the Tendai and Nichiren schools) and in Korea. The teachings of the Nichiren school are spread throughout the world and active even today.

The Flower Garland Sutra 華嚴經 (in Sanskrit *Avatamsaka Sutra*) is a scripture collection with a mystical, suggestive language. The collection was probably compiled in Central Asia, in Khotan. The Chinese Flower Garland 華嚴 (*Huayan*) school was active between the 7th and 9th centuries, and its centre was the study of the Flower Garland Sutra. Throughout history recitation of the sutra in groups received great importance. The teachings of the school were spread to Japan and Korea as well.

Two chapters of the Avatamsaka Sutra, the *Ten Stages* and the *Entering the Dharma Realm* became very important, these are studied as separate texts. The Ten Stages Sutra 十地經 (in Sanskrit *Dasabhumika sutra*, in Chinese *Shi di jing*) describes the ten steps of the Bodhisattva path and thus of the enlightenment. The Entering the Dharma Realm 入法界 (in Sanskrit *Gandavyuha sutra*, in Chinese *Ru fa jie*) tells the story of Sudhana, a boy searching for enlightenment. Sudhana – with the help of Manjusri – went for a pilgrimage and during his journey he received teachings from more than 50 different masters, like Buddhas as Maitreya or Samanthabhadra, or even from a prostitute.

The Scripture of the Descent into the Island 楞伽經 (in Sanskrit *Lankavatara Sutra*) probably aimed to summarize the Mahayana teachings valid at the time of its preparation. It contains mostly Yogacara and buddha-nature teachings that were introduced in the previous chapters of this study.

### ***Sacred places, sacred beings***

In China – like in other cultures – temples are the most important places to obtain transcendental experience.

The architecture of the temples, as well as its objects (sculptures, natural objects, etc.) either can give help to obtain experiences or they are „signs” referencing to the experience. After visiting several temples I had the feeling that the arrangement of their internal space is similar to each other. As a result of the visits I understood the following „ideal” process to achieve transcendental experience:

*The temple fence or wall separates the mundane space from the sacred space. One can enter only through the gate. Without preparation or without appropriate preparation the sacred place is not just not giving help but even sets back the enlightenment.*

*Only through the gate one can enter into the sacred place. At the gate the warrior-like, frightening Guardians of the Directions and Wei Tuo help the practitioner to leave mundane problems behind, to be free from external and internal demons.*

*At the gate or the building following the gate the practitioner honors Mi-le bringing the promise of future happiness and freedom.*

*The practitioner goes through several courtyards, gates and buildings. In all courtyards, holds incense in his hands, bows towards the four directions, murmuring a prayer. Inside the buildings in front of each sculpture the practitioner makes a prayer and prostrates three times. The practitioner circles the pagodas from left to right. Even during the common ceremonies the practitioner makes a lot of prostrations and walks a lot. These are followed by rhythmic music and the repetition of mantras. Physical exertion and concentration cause altered consciousness and trance.*

*Inside the temple, at the courtyards and the buildings the practitioner is looking at the objects and symbols related to the teachings. Circles the pagodas, looks into the mirror of the artificial lake, sits by the lake, views the rocks and reads the quotes engraved into them. All of these help him to be able to concentrate on the teachings and the enlightenment.*

*The practitioner goes along the main axis towards the north, towards the „interior” of the temple. He crosses several buildings decorated by sculptures and paintings of gods. Meditating on the Buddhas of the Past, Present and Future*



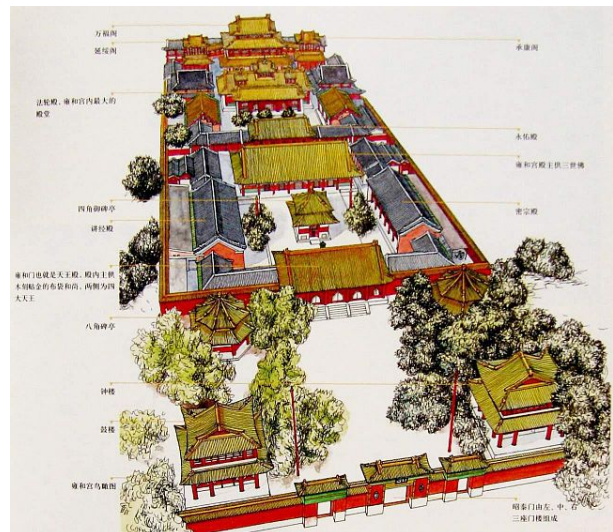
*widens the time horizon, diminishing the ego. Honoring the gods representing the Bodhisattva virtues (eg. wisdom, compassion, healing) the practitioner can strengthen herself in all these virtues, he can ask their help and can show gratitude towards them. The final stage of the visit is the internal center, achieving enlightenment, represented in the physical world by the main hall of the temple, where the practitioner can honor the sculpture(s) of the Buddha, the heart of the Teaching, representing enlightenment.*

This ideal process rarely prevails in today's temples. Architecture and placement of buildings and statues changed during history, current architecture might not represent ancient traditions.<sup>25</sup> Lack of money and attention, and the requirements of modern tourism frequently distort the architecture of the temples, the functions of the buildings and the courtyards. For example, in some cases the original temple must have been shrunk to a smaller size, some of the buildings were changed to place souvenir shops, some courtyards were used as parking places.

During the following chapters I will present more details about the architecture of temples and the gods of Chinese Buddhism.

### *Layout of the temples*

In China the temples are composed of multiple buildings, not just one. These buildings are placed according to a specific order, courtyards separate the buildings from each other. The space is based on a north-south axis, the most important buildings (in case of smaller temples two buildings, but in case of bigger ones even 4-5 buildings) are located on this axis, they are symmetrical to it. The entrance is located on the southern end of the axis. In the courtyards smaller buildings, religious instruments and symbols are placed.



*Plan of the Yonghe (Lama) temple. Beijing, China.*

The function of the buildings placed parallel to the axis are very variable: in some temples they are providing accommodation to the monks or have other service functions, in bigger temples religious objects (like god statues) are enshrined in them. Especially in case of bigger temples the buildings used by monks for living or for services are not located near the axis, but they are placed in a separate area.

<sup>25</sup> For example, the statues of the Four Heavenly Kings (the Guardians of the Directions) were originally placed at the Main Hall to protect the most important gods. Their role was changed during the Tang period, at that time they were moved to the Gate. The statue of Budai Mi-le was placed at the Gate from the 14th century.

### Buildings on the central axis

The first building is the Gate, which is situated on the southern end of the north-south axis. The Gate separates the mundane and the sacred spaces. It has one, three or five archways that can be used to enter into the temple area.



*Gate of the Guangxiao temple. Guangzhou, China*

Not far from the Gate, on the two sides of the axis, symmetrical to each other two „towers” are located. The Drum Tower 鼓樓 is on the east side (right), the Bell Tower 鐘樓 is located on the west (left) side of the axis. The towers are two-storey buildings with a square layout. A bell is stored in the Bell Tower and a drum in the Drum Tower. The bell is usually decorated by a text of a sutra.

The next building on the axis is the Hall of Four Heavenly Kings 天王殿 (in smaller temples the Gate and the Hall of Four Heavenly Kings are built as one building). Inside the hall the statues of the Four Heavenly Kings are enshrined (two on the left side, two on the right side), their task is to protect the temple from evil forces and ghosts. Inside the hall they place the representation of Budai Mile facing south (towards the Gate or the outer world) and Wei Tuo facing towards the north (towards the temple).

Buildings of the axis are situated after these halls and the statues enshrined in them vary in the different temples. Advancing towards the north the „rank” of the gods is increasing. In most cases the last building is called the Precious Hall of the Great Hero 大雄寶. The statue of Sakyamuni Buddha usually enshrined here, alone or with other statues (Amitufo, Medicine Buddha, Guanyin). In Pure Land temples Amitufo is enshrined in the Main Hall, accompanied by Guanyin and Dashizhi. In some temples Guanyin or the Buddhas of the Five Directions are placed here. Behind the main statues, facing north often Guanyin is enshrined or a scene with Guanyin and other gods and disciples. Frequently the disciples of Buddha, the arahants are represented, whose number varies: 4, 16, 18, 60 or even 500 arahants are placed. They are enshrined in the Main Hall or even inside their own building.

In some temples further smaller buildings are placed north of the Main Hall, the statues and gods enshrined in them are usually less important than in the Main Hall.



*Precious Hall of the Great Hero. Gushan temple, Changsha, China.*

### Other building, symbols

In the spaces between the buildings, symbols important for Buddhists and objects necessary for ceremonies are placed. Frequently used objects are incense burners, wheels (symbolizing the start of the Teaching), stone slabs or stelae (recording important moments of the temple) and the fish.

Pagodas and arranged natural objects (lake, rocks, stones) are special components of a temple.

Pagodas 塔 (ta, in Sanskrit *stupa*) are structures originated in India and were built for the veneration of the historical Buddha and/or to store the relics of Buddha or other saints. The Indian form of the stupa has changed significantly in



*Small lake with rocks. Jingci temple, Hangzhou, China*

Central-Asia and China, and finally received its specific form known today: the originally dome-shaped form replaced by a multi-storey, square or polygon-based form and the circular pathway disappeared in most cases. In some cases pagodas were built for mundane purposes.

The role and place of the pagodas were changed significantly during the centuries so pagodas in the temples have a variable location, form and size.

Lakes are placed in different parts of the temples, and special stones, rocks, plants and writings are arranged at the center of the lake or at the lakeside.

### *Sacred beings*

One of the important characteristics of Mahayana Buddhism is that it contains a multitude of sacred beings. In Chinese temples – in line with the Mahayana view – out of the historical Buddha a lot of sacred beings are presented, in various shapes and artistic forms (paintings, statues, pictures, etc).

Sacred beings and the objects presenting them (like statues, paintings, etc.) can refer to transcendental experiences. Various experiences reached during meditation (light, virtues, harmful effects, etc.) can be manifested as human or other beings when the practitioner arrives back to the mundane world. Presentation can be done in different materials: statues, paintings, textile. Ideally, in case of the objects representing a certain being, the used method and the process of the creation is connected with lived experience, so the object contains the experience. Events during the everyday life of the object can further charge it with energy and images, for example, through the miracles performed by it. Thus these objects are not just symbolizing the lived experience, but they can even help to reach them.

Moreover gods are representations of mundane desires and hopes. During difficult times they can manifest future hope (like Maitreya), during violent times compassion (like Guanyin) and during sickness healing or medicine (like Medicine Buddha).

In the following chapters we can see some examples of the gods presented in Chinese temples.



### Protection against harmful influences

In temples protector gods are responsible for defending the temple and the believers against harmful effects. Moreover they can be treated as manifestations of forces that protect the practitioner from evil influences (often symbolized by monsters or demons) during meditation and everyday life. Harmful influences can be mental as well, like the previously mentioned three „defilements”: attachment, anger and delusion. But these beings can provide protection against more mundane attacks like sickness, unhappiness or poverty.

Protectors are needed at the level of communities, as well: they can protect the community of the monks and the church against external political and economical attacks or internal division.

An example of such powerful beings are the Four Great Heavenly Kings 四大天王 (Si Da Tian Wang). The Kings are living in the mountains that are located in the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, west) of the sacred Mount Sumeru, and they are protecting the Buddha and the Teachings.



*Wei Tuo. Jing'an temple, Shanghai, China.*

The Four Great Heavenly Kings are presented with armors and carrying their typical weapons and ritual objects. The statues of the kings are placed close to the entrance of the temple, at a Hall not far from the Gate. Most probably they originated in India as Guardians of the Directions (loka-palas).

Wei Tuo 韋馱 (Skanda or Vajrapani) serves also as the protector of the Teaching. According to the Goldenlight Sutra he leads the 24 celestial protector gods. He is presented with armor, weapons (sword or scepter) and enshrined in the Hall not far from the Temple Gate.

There are several theories about how he became a Buddhist god. Some scholars think that he originated as a Chinese protector god, others claim that Hindu gods (Kartikaya or Heracles-Vajrapani) served as a predecessor.

### Past, present, future

According to the Mahayana view the world exists for a very long time, several millions or several billions of years, and it will exist further millions and millions of years. This vast history consists of several aeons (in Sanskrit *kalpa*). This idea can be derived from meditation experiences: during the practice, the sensation of time is expanding for the practitioner, and



besides the sensation of the present the sensation of the future and the past strengthen as well. Paralelly the „I”, that has its root in the present, weakens. In one of the sutras of the Three Baskets Buddha told the following about a step in his enlightenment:

*„When my concentrated mind was thus purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to knowledge of the recollection of past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, that is, one birth, two births, three births, four births, five births, ten births, twenty births, thirty births, forty births, fifty births, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, many aeons of world-contraction, many aeons of world-expansion, many aeons of world-contraction and expansion”<sup>26</sup>*

During this long time several Buddhas arrived to the world. Historical Buddha is just one out of these innumerable number of Buddhas, apart from him other Buddhas appeared in the past and other Buddhas will appear in the future as well. The next, the Future Buddha is *Mile* 彌勒 (in Sanskrit Maitreya). He will come back only when the Teaching has almost disappeared, and he will purify and restore Buddhist teachings and the order of the world.

*„What will happen then is not possible to describe in detail. But several thousand myriad years after this happens, Maitreya will descend to be Buddha in the world. All-under-Heaven will enjoy peace, prosperity, and equality; the pestilential vapors will be dispersed and expelled. The rain will be suitable to growth and no more, and the Five Grains will grow and flourish. Trees will grow large, and men will be eight feet tall. All of them will live eighty-four thousand years. It is impossible to count how many living things will be able to be saved.”<sup>27</sup>*

Mile is living in the Doulü 兜率 (in Sanskrit Tusita) Pure Land until his birth in the world.

Beside this transcendental interpretation Mile also continuously symbolizes the hope for a future blissful period, and in past cases of social disturbances he represented great inspiration for Chinese mass movements. Mile inspired the Yogacara teachings, he directly inspired Asanga who established the Yogacara school.

Maitreya is the only god whose cult is accepted by the Theravada schools, he is mentioned in Pali language scriptures as well.

In China Mile is represented as a smiling and laughing man with a large belly protruding from his clothes: he is Budai Mile 布袋 (meaning „Cloth Sack Mile”). According to the – mostly Chan – legends he was a wandering monk who rambled through the countryside with his big sack and



*Budai Mile. Jing'an temple, Shanghai, China.*

<sup>26</sup> The Greater Discourse to Saccaka. Sutta Central.

<sup>27</sup> The Sutra Preached by the Buddha on the Total Extinction of the Dharma. Taisho Tripitaka 0396

became famous because of his extravagance, happiness, and his simple and wise advice. In the legends children also play a significant role, as he is always happy to give gifts to kids from his bag.

Budai statues are enshrined in the Hall near the Gate together with Wei Tuo and the Four Great Heavenly Kings. In the Western world this representation of Mile became known as the Laughing Buddha.

### Good deeds and virtues

As the practitioner is deepening into the experience, the question arises: apart from meditation and practices, how must he relate with other people, the society, what kind of lifestyle he must establish and what behavior rules he must adopt. As previously mentioned, the ideal of the Mahayana teachings, the Bodhisattva is characterized by wisdom and compassion, who develops additional virtues (patience, generosity, etc.) as well. These virtues are used in helping others, like teaching or healing.

In the following we will talk about the sacred beings who manifest the virtues (positive characteristics) of a Bodhisattva: these beings can be, for example, the Medicine Buddha, Guanyin, Wensu and Puxian.



*Medicine Buddha and his two disciples. Lingyin temple, Hangzhou, China*

Transcendental experience can heal both the body and the soul. In Chinese Buddhism the *Medicine Buddha* 藥師佛 (Yaoshifo, in Sanskrit Bhaisajya-guru) represents healing not only in the physical realm, but spiritually or mentally (like from desire, aversion) as well. He is the one who helps people in case of different sicknesses.

According to the Lotus Sutra the Medicine Buddha (at that time just Medicine King) in one of his previous lives, as a Bodhisattva, burned up his own body, and in another previous life he burned up one of his arm to achieve enlightenment (after that his body made a miraculous recovery). As a gift for these sacrifices he was chosen by Buddha to receive teachings about the importance of the Lotus Sutra, its safeguarding and its veneration. The Medicine King undertook the task to receive, safeguard and transfer the Lotus Sutra and he gave magical formulas (dharanís) to protect those who propagate the text and its teaching.

He is represented with a medicine jar in his left hand. On his two sides two disciples accompany him, Sunlight 日光 (Riguang, in Sanskrit Suryaprabha) and Moonlight 月光 (Yueguang, in Sanskrit Candraprabha).

Guanyin 觀音 (in Sanskrit Avalokitesvara, „One Who Sees the World with Mercy”) is the Bodhisattva of compassion. She pays attention to those who are suffering and tries to save them, she gives fearlessness to those who are scared. She can appear in different forms depending on how she can provide help. Guanyin has a role in the very popular Heart Sutra as well.

About her mercy the Lotus Sutra tells us the following:

*„All the hundred thousands of myriads of kolis of creatures, young man of good family, who in this world are suffering troubles will, if they hear the name of the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Avalokitesvara, be released from that mass of troubles.*

*Those who shall keep the name of this Bodhisattva*

*Mahāsattva Avalokitesvara, young man of good family, will, if they fall into a great mass of fire, be delivered therefrom by virtue of the lustre of the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva. In case, young man of good family, creatures, carried off by the current of rivers, should implore the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Avalokitesvara, all rivers will afford them a ford. In case, young man of good family, many hundred thousand myriads of kotis of creatures, sailing in a ship on the ocean, should see their bullion, gold, gems, pearls, lapis lazuli, conch shells, stones (?), corals, emeralds, Musāragalvas, red pearls (?), and other goods lost, and the ship by a vehement, untimely gale cast on the island of Giantesses, and if in that ship a single being implores Avalokitesvara, all will be saved from that island of Giantesses. [...]*



Guanyin with thousand arms and four faces.  
Longhua temple, Shanghai, China.

*[...] If a woman, desirous of male offspring, young man of good family, adores the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, she shall get a son, nice, handsome, and beautiful; one possessed of the characteristics of a male child, generally beloved and winning, who has planted good roots. If a woman is desirous of getting a daughter, a nice, handsome, beautiful girl shall be born to her; one possessed of the (good) characteristics of a girl, generally beloved and winning, who has planted good roots. Such, young man of good family, is the power of the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Avalokitesvara.”<sup>28</sup>*

<sup>28</sup> Saddharma-pundarika or the Lotus of the True Law. Chapter XXIV. Internet Sacred Text Archive



Guanyin is the most popular and most frequently presented Bodhisattva in China. However Avalokitesvara originally was a male god, in China he is presented in a female form, during the centuries the female representation replaced the male one. She is represented in several forms and different myths were created regarding the different manifestations.



*Wenshu. Jiangsen temple, Changsha, China.*

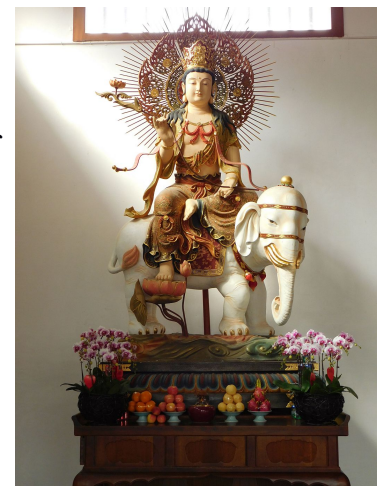
*Wenshu* 文殊 (Manjushri) is a Bodhisattva representing wisdom, the other main virtue of the Bodhisattva. Wenshu is a frequent figure in the Buddhist scriptures popular in China. For example, in the Vimalakirti Sutra he is the only one who dares to talk with Vimalakirti who has extraordinary wisdom.

Besides China Manjushri was and still is popular in Tibet and Nepal as well. Several Tibetan Buddhist teacher were inspired by Manjushri, different Mongolian and Chinese emperors were treated by the Dalai Lama as the manifestation of him. In Nepal the creation of the Kathmandu valley around the Nepalese capital is attributed to Manjushri.

The first representations of Wenshu appeared in the 5-6th centuries CE. His statues are often enshrined together with Vairocana and Puxian, and his figure is presented as riding on a lion holding a

special scepter („rui”) or a scripture roll symbolizing wisdom.

*Puxian* 普賢 („The Universal Virtue”, in Sanskrit Samanthabhadra) represents the virtues, the positive characteristics (paramitas) of the Bodhisattva. He has a role in several sutras (Lotus Sutra, Flower Garland Sutra) that are popular in China. Among Chinese Buddhists the ten vows of Puxian written in the Flower Garland Sutra are well known: being respectful and venerate the Buddhas, to make offerings from one’s heart, to repent misdeeds of the past (even committed in past lives), rejoice merits, to request the Buddhas to start teaching, to request the Buddhas to keep teaching, to follow the teachings of the Buddhas at all times, being in line with the world around us, to transfer virtues and merits to everybody around us. The statue of Puxian is enshrined usually together with Vairocana and Wenshu. Puxian can be identified by riding a white elephant. The special characteristic of the white elephant is that it has six tusks, representing the six universal virtues (or according to other views the six senses).



*Puxian. Gushan temple, Changsha, China.*

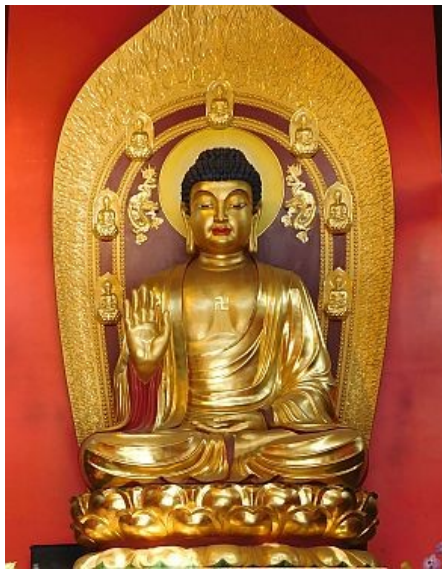
The Lotus Sutra tells us the following about this:

*„[...] when walking for three weeks, (or) twenty-one days, to them will I show my body, at the sight of which all beings rejoice. Mounted on that same white elephant with six tusks, and surrounded by a troop of Bodhisattvas, I shall on the twenty-first day betake myself to the place where the preachers are walking; there I shall rouse, excite, and stimulate them, and give them spells whereby those preachers shall become inviolable, so that no being, either human or not human, shall be able to surprise them, and no women able to beguile them.”<sup>29</sup>*

In Tibetan Buddhism the role of Samanthabhadra is different from the Chinese view, in Tibet some branches treat him as the ancestor of all Buddhas.

### Transcendental experience

In transcendental experience often appear beings, places and feelings that are not experienced in everyday life. These beings and places are radiating light, the practitioner is fulfilled by the perception of freedom. In Mahayana Buddhism these experiences are represented by the Historical Buddha, the Buddhas of the Five Directions, Amitufo and the Pure Lands. These manifestations are usually enshrined in the northernmost (thus the „innermost”) and largest building, that is the most sacred place.



*Sakyamuni Buddha. Jiangshen temple, Changsha, China.*

In Mahayana there can be innumerable Buddhas, however the *Sakyamuni Buddha* 釋迦牟尼 (Shijiamouni), who appeared in the mundane history, is still the central figure of Buddhism. According to the Mahayana view Sakyamuni Buddha is the physical manifestation („body”) of the Buddha living in the present aeon. He is the symbol of the Teaching, the aspiration towards enlightenment, the enlightenment itself and the related virtues.

Before the 1st century CE most probably he is depicted only with symbols (footprint, the tree of enlightenment, dharma-wheel or a stupa), he is started to be represented after that as a human figure (probably as a result of Greek influence). He is often depicted either as a sitting, standing or lying figure. In a sitting position he is represented in a lotus throne in meditation posture, with legs crossed, back kept straight, eyes often half-closed and using special hand gestures („mudras”). Although according to the generally accepted biography Buddha was male, his depictions do not highlight his sexual characteristics showing a transgender nature. Light and radiation surrounding the head and body of Sakyamuni Buddha are also often represented.

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29 *Saddharma-pundarika or the Lotus of the True Law*. Chapter XXVI. Internet Sacred Text Archive



*Buddhas of the Five Directions* 五方佛 (Wu Fang Fo) are the representations of the transcendent, heavenly Buddhas. They can not be sensed by mundane organs, only in a spiritual way, in meditation, in ecstatic state of consciousness. They are living in the Pure Lands that are beyond the samsara, characterized by light and unlimited freedom.

According to the traditions they are the mental parents of Buddhas appearing in the physical world. The name „Buddhas of the Five Directions” shows that they are representing the four cardinal directions and the center. The Five Buddhas are usually: at the center Piluzhena 毘盧遮那 (in Sanskrit Vairocana), then Bukongchengjiufo 不空成就佛 (Amoghasiddhi), Amituofo 阿彌陀佛 (Amitabha), Baoshengfo 宝生佛 (Ratnasambhava) and Achufu 阿閼佛 (Akshobhya). The names and roles of the Buddhas can be different in different traditions and scriptures.



*Buddhas of the Five Directions. Gushan temple, Changsha, China.*



*Amitabha. Yonghe (Lama) temple, Beijing, China.*

*Amituofo* 阿彌陀佛 (Amitabha) is one of the Buddhas that had a vast influence on China. Amituofo is the Buddha of the Infinite Light (or Infinite Life). A special belief system was born around the figure of Amituofo, the so-called „Pure Land Buddhism” that had enormous influence on China and several countries in Southeast Asia. According to the believers of Pure Land Buddhism our epoch is a declining epoch, and thus the strength of the practitioner is not enough to reach enlightenment, but a transcendental „external force” is needed, the force of Amituofo. Based on the Pure Land teaching Amituofo is ruling the Pure Land (in Sanskrit Sukhavati) that is free from desire, viciousness and defilement. The purpose of the practitioners is the rebirth in this Pure Land, and to reach this purpose they have the following practices: frequent reciting / chanting of the sentence „Namo Amituofo” 南无阿彌陀佛 („Honor to Amitabha Buddha”), reading sutras related to Amituofo, meditation, visualization practices on Amituofo, the Bodhisattvas and the Pure Land, prostrations in front of the sacred objects connected with Amituofo, etc.

*“To receive true benefits in this very life, the practitioner should follow the Pure Land method, reciting the Buddha’s name with Faith and Vows, seeking rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Escape from the wasteland of Birth and Death will then be assured.”*

*“The main tenets of Pure Land are Faith, Vows and Practice”<sup>30</sup>*

30 Yin, Kuang Patriarch: *Pure-Land Zen, Zen Pure-Land*. Letter 11, Awakening is Still within the Realm of Birth and Death and Letter 13, Open Letters to Cultivators. Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada.

The Pure Land cult – however, frequently mentioned as school – probably never functioned as a separated school, for example, there were no Pure Land monasteries, but the Pure Land beliefs pervade all other Buddhist branches and schools.

Besides Amitufo, Pure Land practitioners also venerate Guanyin and Dashizhi 大勢至 (in Sanskrit Mahasthamaprapta), visualization practices can be directed towards them as well.

In some temples the statue of Amitufo is enshrined in the central building, demonstrating the special respect towards Amitufo in China. Amitufo is often represented together with Guanyin and Dashizhi Bodhisattva.

## Closing thoughts

In the previous chapters hopefully I succeeded in showing examples of how transcendental experience could and can be manifested in objects and ideas related to Buddhism.

During the preparation of the study I had the opportunity to note the difficulties related to the research itself. The study of the experience can be made through object, notions, texts, practices, but all of these are just „translations” of it. A lot of difficulties emerge with these „codes”. One problem is that the translations are intertwined with topics, desires, hopes, fears of the mundane world. For example, the figure of Mile (Maitreya) for the Chinese people represents both the idea of the Future Buddha and the hope for the better, fairer world, or they turn to the Medicine Buddha to be healed not only in case of spiritual, but also in case physical sicknesses. Another problem is that the representation is deeply embedded in the culture and thus it is very difficult to identify experiences. Forms can change significantly caused by the variations in the deepness of the experience, changes in the life conditions and the mixture of different cultures. For example, besides the figure of Buddha the appearance and popularity of other gods, like Amitufo (Amitabha) or Guanyin (Avalokitesvara).

However, it is inspiring to see that even after several thousand years it is possible to connect to these translations and to feel behind them the transcendental experience. This gives a strong hope that there is an experience that is permanent, can be felt by all members of the human species and is independent of time and space. This can show that the sensibility to experiences appears in all ages and all cultures. Without living experience why would these objects, practices and scriptures have been conserved during so many centuries and millennia?

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