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A Comparative Research on the Three Versions of *Amitabha Sutra*

The Buddha Speaks of the Amitabha Sutra as the main scripture of Pure Land School, it was translated by Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva of Yao Qin and has been the most popular version ever since ancient times because of its conciseness and fluency. The second version is called *The Sutra on Praising the Pure Land and Buddha's Protection*, translated by Tripitaka Master Hsuan-Tsang of the Tang Dynasty. This version is faithful to the original and more elaborate than Qin Version, but less concise, fluent and popular. The highly respected lay Buddhist Xia Lianju in modern times has combined the translations of Kumarajiva and Hsuan-Tsang to make a compilation of *the Amitabha Sutra*, following the advantages of the two versions.

On the basis of comparison, word by word, of these three versions, I shall sum up their distinctiveness and values by stating the main points.

I . The Titles of the Three Versions and the Characteristics of the Qin Version

Sakyamuni Buddha instructs that the title of this sutra be *Praising Inconceivable Merit and Virtue and Protection by All Buddhas Sutra*. But Venerable Master Kumarajiva translated the title in the Qin Version as *The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra*, which shows the skilful means of Kumarajiva's free translation. His aim is helping beings who see the title to know Amitabha Buddha and to intone his name once in reading it. The title of the Tang Version is *The Sutra on Praising the Pure Land and Buddha's Protection*, which indicates the characteristic of Master Hsuan-Tsang's literal translation and loyalty to the original. The title '*the compilation of the Amitabha Sutra*' is following the style of Qin Version, and it adds those words '*the compilation of Qin and Tang Versions*' to make it clear.

Master Kumarajiva, in his translation of *the Amitabha Sutra*, knowing that the ancient Chinese were fond of conciseness, simplified the original by removing complications to make it elegant and fluent. For example, 'In the land a Buddha named Amitabha now teaches the Dharma'¹ is succinct in the Qin Version. While the Tang Version interpretes as 'In that land is a World Honoured One whose names are Infinite Life and Infinite Light; Tathágata, Arhat and Samyaksambuddha, who attains the perfect ten epithets of a Buddha. He is now dwelling and upholding there, teaching the most

¹ Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva of Yao Qin Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. *The Buddha speaks Amitabha Sutra*, *Qian Long Buddhist Cannon* Vol.28, p.592.

profound and wonderful Dharma to sentient beings to attain the supreme benefits and bliss.’² Another example is the description of lotuses in the Qin Version, which is: ‘In the pools are lotuses as large as carriage wheels, green coloured of green light, yellow coloured of yellow light, red coloured of red light, white coloured of white light.’³ While it is described in the Tang Version as ‘Blue flowers radiate blue light, brilliance and splendour; yellow ones radiate yellow light, brilliance and splendour; red ones radiate red light, brilliance and splendour; white ones radiate white light, brilliance and splendour; four-coloured ones radiate four-coloured light, brilliance and splendour.’⁴ So, it is clear that the vocabulary and grammar of the Qin Version are much more succinct than in the Tang Version.

Moreover, Master Kumarajiva omitted some content of this Sutra. For instance, he only translated six directions of the Buddha-realms in which numberless Buddhas praise the merits of Amitabha Buddha and his pure land. While in the original, there are ten directions of Buddha-realms. This omission does not impair the essence of this Sutra. On the contrary, it is the conciseness that led to the Qin Version of *the Amitabha Sutra* becoming the most popular one.

II . The Characteristic and Values of the Tang Version

Master Hsuan-Tsang’s translation of *the Amitabha Sutra* is not as concise and fluent as the Qin Version, but it is close to the original, detailed and complete. Therefore, it has the unique value that it contains the omitted verses of the Qin Version.

For instance, after the verse ‘Filled with the waters of eight meritorious virtues, the Tang Version specifically gives the names of eight meritorious virtues which were deleted in the Qin Version.’⁵ Another example is the complete translation of thirty-seven practices leading to enlightenment in the Tang Version. ‘Namely, 1) four states of mindfulness, 2) four right efforts, 3) four bases of supernormal abilities, 4) five roots of goodness, 5) five powers, 6) seven factors of enlightenment, and 7) eightfold Noble path.’⁶ The Qin Version has omitted the first three fundamental steps of

² Tripitaka Master Hsuan-Tsang of the Tang Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. *The Sutra on Praising the Pure Land and Buddha’s Protection*, Qian Long Buddhist Cannon Vol.28, p.583.

³ Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva of Yao Qin Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. *The Buddha speaks Amitabha Sutra*, Qian Long Buddhist Cannon Vol.28, p.592.

⁴ Tripitaka Master Hsuan-Tsang of the Tang Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. *The Sutra on Praising the Pure Land and Buddha’s Protection*, Qian Long Buddhist Cannon Vol.28, p.584.

⁵ The eight meritorious virtues of water are 1) pureness, 2) cool and clear, 3) sweetly beautiful, 4) light and soft, 5) moist and glistening, 6) serene, 7) when drank, it quenches the inestimable suffering of hunger and thirst, and 8) having drank it, it supports the continuation of the multitudinous roots and elements of body and increase kinds of superior good roots .

⁶ Tripitaka Master Hsuan-Tsang of the Tang Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. *The Sutra on Praising the Pure Land and*

practices and the eight virtues of the water, which benefits beginners.

Another value of the Tang Version which is omitted in the Qin Version is the benefits and merits acquired by the sentient beings who living in the Western Pure Land, when they listen the wonderful sound and see the raining heavenly blossom. ‘In that pure Buddha-land of Utmost Bliss, infinite exquisite music is constantly and spontaneously played. This elegant and harmonious sound is most pleasant to be heard. When sentient beings hear this wonderful sound, their bad afflictions completely disappear, and numerous good actions increase, and they soon achieve Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. Again, Shariputra, in that pure Buddha-land of Utmost Bliss, six times during the day and night, various wonderful heavenly blossoms continuously rain down. Those wondrous flowers are shiny, fragrant, soft and variegated, pleasing to the mind and the senses when we see them. Sentient beings do not rouse greedy attachment but increase innumerable and inconceivable great merits. The beings in that land always offer those blossoms to Amitayus during the day and night.’⁷ Those scriptures above indicate that the wonderful music and heavenly blossoms are teaching tools of Amitabha. The benefits and merits of ending afflictions and attaining Enlightenment when one hears or sees them are similar to the benefits and merits of hearing the Dharma given by water or birds in the Pure Land or seeing the Bodhi Tree, smelling its fragrance or eating its fruits. All these manifest Amitabha’s great power of vow; the reason of Pure Land that the Buddha-nature is the same with phenomena and inner supreme wisdom is accordance with external scene. Readers can understand all about Pure-land’s if they have read those verses and consequently increase their wills and confidences of rebirthing in the Western Pure Land.

The Tang Version records that when a good man or woman who is eager to be reborn in the Western Pure Land is dying, Amitabha with innumerable Sravaka disciples and Bodhisattvas will appear before them and: ‘Compassionately give them power and protection to keep their minds undisturbed.’⁸ Those words which are missing in Qin Version indicate that dying people with the aid of Amitabha Buddha can keep undisturbed-one-mind and be born in the pure Buddha-land immediately. The full quotaion manifests the supreme greatness of the two powers (self and Amitabha) of the Pure Land School. These quoted words, kept in the Tang Version, can increase practitioners’ confidence in gaining rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Utmost Bliss. Moreover, this verse confirms Master Chuan-deng’s view that ‘In the saha earthly world, although sentient beings

Buddha’s Protection, Qian Long Buddhist Cannon Vol.28, p.585.

⁷ Tripitaka Master Hsuan-Tsang of the Tang Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. The Sutra on Praising the Pure Land and Buddha’s Protection, Qian Long Buddhist Cannon Vol.28, pp.584-585.

⁸ Ibid, p.587.

can chant Amitabha's name, their afflictions of views and perceptions does not end. They can keep their minds from confusion at their terminal moments. This is because of Amitabha's great vows to help them to maintain a single pure mind and then to be born, rather than relying on their own power.'⁹

Towards the end of the *Amitabha Sutra*, the Tang Version fully embodies Sakyamuni Buddha's ardent persuasion to sentient beings that 'all beings who hear Amitabha's name of inconceivable merits or learn of the Pure Buddha-land of Utmost Bliss should believe, arouse aspiration, practice the method as prescribed, and attain birth in that Buddha-land.'¹⁰ Sakyamuni Buddha talks three times about 'receive in faith and understand well' or 'believe deeply', three times about 'arouse aspiration' or 'aspire to be born there', and six times about 'practice the method as prescribed'.¹¹ While in the Qin Version Buddha only speaks once about 'have faith' and 'practice as prescribed', and three times about 'make the vow'. So, Tang Version manifests Sakyamuni Buddha's emphasis on 'faith', 'vow', and 'practice'.

Remarkably, in the Tang Version, Sakyamuni Buddha says four times that good men or women 'of pure faith', which is omitted in the Qin Version. Sakyamuni Buddha also speaks of Amitabha's great vows before he attained Supreme Perfect Enlightenment in another Sutra. One of the vows was: 'All sentient beings who live in other directions of Buddha-lands if when they hear the name of Amitayus Buddha and then arouse a thought of pure faith, joy, admiration, and dedicate all goodness and merits to being born in that Buddha-land; they will gain rebirth according to their hopes and will never retreat before achieving Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. Except those who has committed any of the Five Cardinal Sins and /or slandered the Dharma or the Saints.'¹² This quoted verse confirms the importance of 'pure faith'. If beings have a single thought of pure faith and dedicate all goodness to being born in the Pure Land, then they will be born as they wish. If one can be purely faithful to Amitabha or his Pure Land of Utmost Bliss, then one's aspiration and practice will be in one's faith. Therefore, from the words 'pure faith', we know the desired standards of 'a good man or woman' are not only the practice of The Three Blessings of Pure Land Doctrine but also the ripeness of one's

⁹ Masters Shi Da You and Shi Chuan Deng of the Ming Dynasty: *The Annotation on Amitabha Sutra Vol II*, 77 *Sequel Buddhist Canon*, from Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association Website: http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/ko/X22n0423_002 [Accessed on 14 Sep 2018]

¹⁰ Tripitaka Master Hsuan-Tsang of the Tang Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese. *The Sutra on Praising the Pure Land and Buddha's Protection*, *Qian Long Buddhist Cannon Vol.28*, p.589. Translate by myself.

¹¹ Ibid, pp.589-590.

¹² Tripitaka Master Bodhiruci of the Tang Dynasty trans. *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutra Vol.18*, *Qian Long Buddhist Cannon Vol.13*, p.278. The Five Cardinal Sins are 1) Shedding the blood of Buddha; 2) Killing one's father; 3) Killing one's mother; 4) Killing ordained monks or nuns; 5) Damaging the harmony of a Buddhist group or community.

goodness and merits: ‘pure faith’, ‘vow’, and ‘practice’.¹³

From the examples above, it can be seen that: The Tang Version of the Amitabha Sutra is much more comprehensive and detailed than the Qin Version. This makes the Tang Version favourable to those people who like full and repetitive writings. This version will add to their understanding about the reason and phenomena of Pure Land, also promote their faith and vows.

III . The Characteristics of the Compilation of the *Amitabha Sutra*

There are three characteristics of *the Compilation of the Qin and Tang Versions of the Amitabha Sutra*. Firstly, the Compilation Version adds the omitted verse in the Qin Version, so it is much completer and more detailed than the Qin Version. For example, the specific name of the water of the eight meritorious virtues, the benefits and merits acquired when one hears of wonderful music and sees the raining heavenly blossoms, the epithets of Amitabha Buddha, and twelve virtue names of Sakyamuni Buddha, are not contained in the Qin Version.

Secondly, the Compilation Version deletes the repetitive expressions or obscure vocabulary. For instance, Sakyamuni Buddha says ‘Shariputra, that Buddha-land is full of such glorious adornments of supreme qualities and merits, which are most pleasing to the mind. For this reason, that land is called “Utmost Bliss”.’ This sentence repeated five times in the Tang Version but was reduced in the Compilation. So, the Compilation is more succinct and fluent than the Tang Version.

Thirdly, The Compilation adds twenty-one Chinese characters after ‘with one heart unconfused’ from the ‘Xiang Yang Stone Inscription’ of *the Amitabha Sutra*. Those words are ‘undividedly chant Amitabha’s name; then all sins committed will be erased by chanting the Buddha’s name; this is the cultivation of many good roots, blessings, virtues and causal connections (to attain birth in that land).’¹⁴ Respected lay Buddhist Xia Lianju adds these words above according to some patriarchs’ arguments. Master Yuan Zhao of the Song Dynasty thought that those twenty-one characters were omitted verse during transcriptions of the Qin Version of *the Amitabha Sutra*.¹⁵ Master Chuan Deng

¹³ The Three Blessings of Pure Land Doctrine are: 1) Be filial and respectful to one’s parents; be respectful to one’s teachers and elders; be compassionate and do not kill any living being and abide by the Ten Wholesome Ways 2) Take the Three Refuges; abide by laws, precepts and conduct oneself in a proper and dignified manner. 3) Give rise to the Bodhi Mind; deeply believe in the Law of Cause and Effect; recite and uphold Mahayana Sutras and teachings and encourage others to advance on the path to Enlightenment.

¹⁴ あかまつ-れんじょう: The Different Edition of Amitabha Sutra, in *Sequel Buddhist Canon Vol1*, from Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association Website: http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/ko/X01n0006_001. [Accessed on 13 Sep 2018].

¹⁵ Master Shi Yuan Zhao of the Song Dynasty, *The Annotation of The Buddha speaks of Amitabha Sutra*. Chinese Buddhist Canon, Vol.37, from Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association Website: http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T37n1761_001. [Accessed on 13 Sep 2018].

of Ming Dynasty followed Master Yuan Zhao's opinion and advocated that: 'Since this verse has been omitted, the readers ought to add this verse according to the Xiang Yang Stone Inscription of *the Amitabha Sutra*.'¹⁶

However, in recent years someone refute the addition of the twenty-one characters of *the Compilation of the Amitabha Sutra*. One of the reasons is that neither these added words nor their meanings exist in the Tang Version. They doubt the added twenty-one words are original. If the Qin Version and the Tang Version of *the Amitabha Sutra* were translated from the same Sanskrit, and if the Qin Version omitted these characters, then these characters or meanings ought to exist in the Tang Version. And they do not. Another reason they object the Compilation is that the Patriarch Lian Chi of Pure Land School considered that the added characters were someone's annotation of the scripture and were mis-added in the Xiang Yang Stone Inscription of the Amitabha Sutra. He said the added sentence 'undividedly chant Amitabha's name' was repeated from the former verse 'hold Amitabha's name', so the added characters may not be the original scripture.¹⁷

In my opinion, it is difficult to check whether these twenty-one characters of Xiang Yang Stone Inscription of the Amitabha Sutra were the missing original scripture, unless we collect all kinds of language versions of *Amitabha Sutra*. But the meaning embodied by these twenty-one words is the same as Sakayamuni Buddha's teachings in other sutras.

The verse 'undividedly chant Amitabha's name' is identical to the meaning of 'give rise to Bodhi Mind and continuously concentrate on chanting Amitabha's name in *the Infinite Life Sutra*'.¹⁸ The verse 'then all sins committed will be erased by chanting Buddha's name is corresponding to the scriptures in *the Sutra of Contemplation on Amitayus Buddha*. 'Furthermore, this wise teacher advises him to join his palms and chant "Namo Amitabha Buddha". Having chanted the name of the Buddha, he will be freed from the sins which would otherwise involve him in births and deaths for fifty million kalpas..... "O good man, as you have chanted the name of that Buddha, all your sins have been destroyed and expiated, and therefore we now come to meet you."'¹⁹

2018]. Translate by myself.

¹⁶ Master Shi Chuan Deng of the Ming Dynasty, *The Annotation of the Amitabha Sutra*, 72nd Sequel Buddhist Canon, from Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association Website: http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/ko/X22n0423_002 [Accessed on 13 Sep 2018]. Translate by myself.

¹⁷ Master Shi Zhu Hong of the Ming Dynasty, *The Commentary of Buddha Speaks The Amitabha Sutra*, from *Qian Long Buddhist Canon* Vol.11, pp.419-420. Translate by myself.

¹⁸ The Bodhisattva Precepts Disciple Xia Lian Ju: *The Buddha Speaks the Mahayana, Infinite Life, Adornment, Purity, Impartiality, and Enlightenment Sutra. The Five Sutras of Pure Land*, p.99. Translate by myself.

¹⁹ Tripitaka Master Kālaṃ yaśas of the Liu Song Dynasty translated from Sanskrit to Chinese, *the Sutra of Contemplation on Amitayus*

The verse ‘this is the cultivation of many good roots, blessings, virtues and causal connections (to attain birth in that land)’ is similar to the verse in *the Infinite Life Sutra*. ‘If the good men and good women rise in a joyful thought of hearing the Name of Amitabha, hereafter take refuge in Him and esteem Him, practise as taught. It is known such a being will not only acquire the great benefit but also all the meritorious virtues mentioned previously. Neither inferiority nor haughtiness is harboured in mind. Roots of virtue are brought to perfection and all of which are enhanced. You should understand that such a being does not belong to Hinayana (the lesser path) but is a foremost disciple of my teaching of the dharmas.’²⁰

It can be seen from the above illustration that the supplementary twenty-one characters is keeping with Buddha’s words. If someone insists that those twenty-one characters is not the original verse and object *the Compilation of Amitabha Sutra* adding them, then he/she may not completely understand Buddha’s teaching.

The sentient beings living in the Dharma Ending Age have heavy karmic obstacles and few blessings, virtues, and good roots. I think it is reasonable that the Compilation adding these twenty-one characters, ‘undividedly chant Amitabha’s name; then all sins committed will be erased by chanting the Buddha’s name; this is the cultivation of many good roots, blessings, virtues and causal connections (to attain birth in that land)’. Firstly, this sentence show the method of erasing sins and the cause of being born in Pure Land and enhances the faith of readers and practitioners. So, it meets the needs of sentient beings in Dharma Ending Age and it is suitable in time. Secondly, the adding sentence is accordance with Buddha’s words spoken in other pure land school sutras. Thirdly, the adding sentence responds the verse that ‘one cannot have few good roots, blessings, virtues, and causal connections to attain birth in that land.’²¹ Thus, they are echoing each other in front and behind. Fourthly, the paragraph that the adding sentence located indicates the method of practice and the cause and effect of being born Pure Land. This paragraph as an example shows that the Compilation is the most completed and detailed during the three versions. It brings convenience and benefits to modern people who are busy working or learning and have little time to read all versions of *the Amitabha Sutra*. They can attain the full and detailed meanings from the Compilation also

Buddha, from *Qian Long Buddhist Canon* Vol.28, p.580.

²⁰ The Bodhisattva Precepts Disciple Xia Lian Ju: *The Buddha Speaks the Mahayana, Infinite Life, Adornment, Purity, Impartiality, and Enlightenment Sutra. The Five Sutras of Pure Land*, p.141. Translate by myself.

²¹ Xia Lian ju, *The Compilation of the Qin and Tang Versions of the Amitabha Sutra*.
http://faculty.stust.edu.tw/~tang/Mahayana/Amitabha_sutra_cmp.htm. [Accessed by 6 Sep 2018].

enjoy the fluence of writings. Therefore, the Compilation is an outstanding work to sentient beings in the Dharma Ending Age.

Conclusion

Every version of *the Amitabha Sutra* has its own advantages and values. They can be mutually studied but cannot be criticized each other. Because all versions of the Amitabha Sutra can lead sentient beings to understand Amitabha and Pure Land, and to practice as Buddha's teachings. Moreover, different version is favoured by different level or interest of sentient beings. The Qin Version is concise and extremely fluent. It was liked by the ancient Chinese who had firm virtuous roots and pure mind. They could understand the profound meanings from the succinct version and enhanced their faith, vows and practice. The Tang Version is complete and detailed. It is a supreme treasure to those who are fond of repetitive and detailed scriptures. The Compilation combines the advantages of the Qin and Tang Version, with detailed content and fluency. The adding twenty-one characters are especially suitable to the levels and needs of nowadays people and later generations.

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