

# **Recollecting and Envisioning: Buddha in Theravada and Mahayana Practice**

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The popular devotional chant reproduced here (see next page) represents the Theravāda continuation of one of the most ancient forms of meditation—remembrance or recollection of the Buddha. In his classic fifth-century meditation manual, the *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification), Buddhaghosa explains how to practice this particular method of concentrating the mind:

Now a meditator with absolute confidence who wants to develop firstly the recollection of the Enlightened One ... should go into solitary retreat in a favourable abode and recollect the special qualities of the Enlightened One, the Blessed One, as follows:

‘That Blessed One is such since he is accomplished, fully enlightened, endowed with [clear] vision and [virtuous] conduct, sublime, the knower of worlds, the incomparable leader of men to be tamed, the teacher of gods and men, enlightened and blessed.’<sup>1</sup>

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Regarding the fruits of this practice, Buddhaghosa notes its psychological effects on the meditator:

He attains fullness of faith, mindfulness, understanding and merit. He has much happiness and gladness. He conquers fear

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and dread. He is able to endure pain. He comes to feel as if he were living in the Master's presence...His mind tends towards the plane of the Buddhas.<sup>2</sup>

	<i>BUDDHANUSSATI<sup>3</sup></i>	<i>RECOLLECTION OF THE BUDDHA</i>
1.	savāsane kileseso eko sabbe nighātiya. ahū susuddasantāno pūjānañca sadāraho.	Destroyed he alone all the defilements, without a trace. Fully purified was his mental continuum, And he was ever worthy of offerings.
2.	sabbakālagate dhamme sabbe sammā sayam muṇi sabbākārena bhujjhitvā eko sabbaññutaṃ gato.	Having perfectly understood All temporal dhammas In every way, The Sage alone attained to omniscience.
3.	vipassanādi vijjāhi sīlādicaraṇehi ca susamiddhehi sampanno gaganābhehi nāyako.	With knowledge born of insight, With conduct born of virtue, Endowed with accomplishments was he, as the sun in the sky.
4.	sammāgato subhaṃ ṭhānaṃ amogha vacano ca so. tividhassāpi lokassa ñātā niravasesato.	He attained the best state. Never vain were his words. Knower in full Of the threefold world was he.
5.	anekehi guṇoghehi sabbasattuttamo ahu. anekehi upāyehi naradamme dāmesi ca.	By his ocean of virtue, Highest of all beings became he. And with methods diverse, The tamable he tamed.
6.	eko sabbassa lokassa sabbasattānūsāko. bhāgya-issariyādīnaṃ guṇānaṃ paramo nidhi.	For the entire world, He alone teacher of all beings became. The blissful Lord of qualities supreme, and treasury of all virtues was he.

The Theravāda practice concentrates on the Buddha's extraordinary personal qualities without reference to the image of the Buddha or his physical features. The meditator brings to mind and contemplates, point by point, the qualities that make the Buddha a buddha, thereby developing devotion towards the Buddha, gaining confidence in the Buddha as a teacher, and inspiration to follow the Dharma as a path.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, however, recollection of the Buddha comes to be a method by which the practitioner is able to directly perceive the form of the Buddha—whichever of the multitude of celestial

buddhas that arose with the Mahāyāna movement to whom the practitioner is devoted. This new type of meditation appears in one of the earliest of the Mahāyāna sutras, the “*Samādhi* of the Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present” (*Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra*).<sup>4</sup> Here the practitioner is instructed to recall the standard ten special qualities, as well as the archetypal physical features of a Buddha:

What then, sons of good family, is the calling to mind of the Buddha? It is when one concentrates on the Tathāgata in this way: ‘He, the Tathāgata, Arhat and Perfectly Awakened One, the Accomplished in Knowledge and Conduct, the Sugata, the Knower of the World, the Leader of All Men Capable of Conversion, the Supreme One, the Teacher of Devas and Humankind, the Buddha and Lord, endowed with the thirty-two marks of the Great man and a body with a colour like gold, resembling a bright, shining, and well-set golden image, and well adorned like a bejewelled pillar . . .’<sup>5</sup>

The PraS explains the practice of attaining a vision of the Buddha Amitāyus in this way:

*Bodhisattvas*, whether they be householders or renunciates, go alone to a secluded spot and sit down, and in accordance with what they have learned they concentrate their thoughts on the . . . Perfectly Awakened One Amitāyus; . . . If they concentrate their thoughts with undistracted minds on the Tathāgata Amitāyus for seven days and nights, then, when a full seven days and nights have elapsed, they see the Lord and Tathāgata Amitāyus. Should they not see that Lord during the daytime, then the Lord and Tathāgata Amitāyus will show his face to them in a dream while they are sleeping.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification)*. Trans. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli (Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 1975, 1991), p. 192, 7:2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 209, 7:67.

<sup>3</sup> Chant and translation from the *Bhāvanā Vandana* compiled by Dr.

Henepola Gunaratana Nayaka Thera. Daily devotions of the Bh~van~ Society, West Virginia, U.S.A.

<sup>4</sup> The earliest firm date for the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra*, or *PraS*, is 179 C.E., the year it was translated into Chinese. See Paul Harrison, trans., *The Samādhi of the Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present: An Annotated English Translation of the Tibetan Version of the Pratyutpanna-Buddha-Sammukhāvasthita-Samādhi-Sūtra*, *Studia Philologica Buddhica Monograph Series*, vol. 5 (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1990), viii.

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, *SSamādhi of the Direct Encounter*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

