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The Creation of Avalokiteśvara:
Exploring His Origin in the Northern Āgamas

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The Creation of Avalokiteśvara: Exploring His Origin in the Northern Āgamas

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Abstract

Through intertextual analyses between the northern *Āgamas*, Avalokiteśvara's (A.) iconography-quality, and the early A.-related texts, this research argues that A. is a composite character representing the Buddha's entire bodhisattva aspect. His iconography is based on Sumedha in the *Dīpaṃkara Buddha* story; his title is based on the narrative through which the Buddha recounted how he surveyed the world upon awakening. They are respectively the starting point and the ending point of the Bodhisattva Path. The research also demonstrates that the eleven-headed A. is based on the eleven benefits of and the eleven directions in practicing the *brahmavihāras* (divine abidings). The research proposes that A.'s identity first became dissociated with the Buddha-to-be likely due to the Amitābha cult.

Keywords: Avalokiteśvara, Āgamas, the *Dīpaṃkara Buddha* story, Sumedha

Introduction

Avalokiteśvara (A.) is called the “cult of half Asia.”¹ There are many myths about him. He is always regarded as a god: He embodies compassion and mercy;² he is the saviour from perils;³ he is even called the “Lord of the World;”⁴ he can appear in many forms to save sentient beings;⁵ he is an acolyte of Amitābha.⁶ But exactly where he came from has long been a mystery. Even the meaning of his title has been an issue. In Fussman’s words: “The origin of that *bodhisattva* was probably as obscure for most Indian Buddhists as it is for us. Although much better acquainted with Middle-Indian and Sanskrit than we are, they were unable to etymologize his name...” “Indeed no one even now can say wherefrom and by whom Avalokiteśvara was introduced into the Buddhist pantheon.”⁷

When Chinese monk Faxian (337-c.422 CE) arrived in the “Middle Country” in India, he reported that:

[W]here a community of monks resides, they erect topes to Śāriputtra, to Mahāmaudgalyāyana... The bhikṣuṇīs for the most part make their offerings at the tope of Ānanda... The Śrāmaṇeras mostly make their offerings to Rāhula.... students of the Mahāyāna present offerings to the *Prajñāpāramitā*, to Mañjuśrī, and to Kwan-she-yin [Avalokiteśvara]... From the Nirvāṇa of Buddha, the forms of ceremony, laws, and rules, practiced by the sa-

¹ Tay, *Kuan-yin: The Cult of Half Asia*, 147-177.

² Getty, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism*, 40, 45.

³ Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, 11.

⁴ Getty, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism*, 233.

⁵ Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 221.

⁶ Yu, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, 45.

⁷ Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography*, 36, 40.

cred communities, have been handed down from one generation to another without interruption.⁸

It is important to note that these Mahāyānists lived in the *saṃgha*; A. and Mañjuśrī were worshipped along with historical Buddhist figures, such as Śāriputtra and Mahā-maudgalyāyana. When the Buddha was alive, he instructed that the monks “should not worship gods.”⁹ The laws of the *saṃgha* (*vinaya*) also forbade making offerings to gods.¹⁰ According to Faxian, the laws practiced in the *saṃgha* had little change “from the Nirvāṇa of Buddha.”

As we know, in history the *vinaya* is not always categorically followed. However, the above report seems to have veracity to it. Faxian went to India to study the *vinaya*. When he was in China, “deploring the mutilated and imperfect state of the collection of the Books of Discipline [*vinaya*],” Faxian, who was then sixty-five years old and had been a monk for sixty-two years, decided, “to go to India and seek for the Disciplinary Rules.”¹¹ After studying in India for years, he went to Shizi guo 師子國 (Today’s Sri Lanka), where he studied *vinaya* for two more years. When he returned to China thirteen years later, Faxian and his colleagues translated the Mahāsāmghika-*vinaya*, Sarvāstivāda-*vinaya*, and Mahīśāsaka-*vinaya*, among others. All these mean that Faxian systematically studied and compared the *vinaya* and its practices in South Asia. He

⁸ Faxian, *Buddhistic Kingdoms*, 46.

⁹ T1452.24.0425b14, *shigu rudeng yu zhu tianshen wuwei jinshi* 是故汝等於諸天神勿為敬事 (“Therefore you should not worship gods.”) In *Genben shuo yiqie you bu ni tuo na* 根本說一切有部尼陀那 (*Mūlasarvāstivāda-nidānamāṭṛkā*, *Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin School*), translated by I-ching 義淨 (635-713 CE).

¹⁰ T1458.24.0583a05, *bichu buying gongyang tianshen* 苾芻不應供養天神 (“The Bhikṣus shall not make offerings to gods.”) In *Genben shuo yiqie youbu binaiye song* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶頌 (*Mūlasarvāstivāda-*vinaya*-kārikā*, *Verse Compendium of the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādin School*), translated by I-ching.

¹¹ Faxian, *Buddhistic Kingdoms*, 9.

thus had credible knowledge about what he wrote. He was not an impressionable foreign pilgrim. In addition, the “Middle Country,” or Madhyadeśa, where Faxian made his observation, was the birthplace, cradle, and the most important area of early Buddhism.¹² These facts raise several interesting questions: If A. is a god, as the myths hold, why was he worshipped in the saṃgha that forbade worshipping gods? Could he be a historical figure like the Buddha, who became deified in later ages? If he is, is it possible to identify such a figure in the Early Buddhist Texts (EBTs) that the saṃgha used as the source of authority?¹³

In fact, Paul M. Harrison has noted that the so-called “celestial bodhisattvas,” or gods, are not a useful concept and do not have clear indigenous referent in identifying the origin of Mañjuśrī and some other bodhisattvas, except for Maitreya.¹⁴ Williams also pointed out that in its early development, Mahāyāna was a development within the saṃgha, and those who followed the Bodhisattva Path belonged to the early schools.¹⁵ These make Faxian’s report even more perplexing.

Scholars have proposed many theories on the origin of A. Since very few Indic language texts about A. have survived, scholars have begun to use Indian Buddhist literature preserved in other languages,

¹² See more on the “Middle Country” in Ling, *The Buddha*, 53-54: “the ‘middle’ or ‘central country’...was regarded as the most important area of India by all the ancient writers...as with the brahmanical Aryans, so with the Buddhists, Middle Country was the cradle on which they staged the entire drama.”

¹³ Sujato and Brahmali defined the EBTs as “texts spoken by the historical Buddha and his contemporary disciples. These are the bulk of the Suttas in the main four Pali Nikāyas and parallel Āgama literature in Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and other Indian dialects; the *pātimokkhas* and some Vinaya material from the *khandhakas*; a small portion of the Khuddaka Nikāya.” Sujato and Brahmali, “Authenticity,” 11-12.

¹⁴ Harrison, “Mañjuśrī and the Cult of the Celestial Bodhisattvas,” 180.

¹⁵ Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 222.

above all in Chinese, to explore the origin of A. in South Asia.¹⁶ So far, however, such efforts have mostly focused on the so-called “Mahāyāna” texts translated into Chinese. Few have attempted to explore A.’s origin using the northern *Āgamas*, which, in particular the *Ekottara Āgama* (EA), are known to contain some Mahāyāna influence. Through intertextual analysis between A.’s iconographic qualities, the early A.-related texts, and the *Āgamas*, this research is a partial effort to fill this lacuna.

Early A.-related texts translated into Chinese

The A.-related texts were first translated into Chinese during the second to third centuries CE. These texts show that A.’s origin was very likely an issue from the beginning. The following is a review of the major A.-related sutras that were translated into Chinese before the early fifth century CE.¹⁷ Sutras after the fifth century CE are not reviewed because texts of dubious origin appeared in China.¹⁸

1. *Guanshiyin pusa pumen pin* 觀世音菩薩普門品 (Avalokiteśvara-vikurvaṇa-nirdeśaḥ, The Universal Door of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, the UDAB). This text was first translated as part of the *Zheng fahua jing* 正法華經¹⁹ by Dharmarakṣa (Zhufahu 竺法護, ca. 233-310/11 CE), and was retranslated by Kumārajīva (Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什, 334-413 CE) as part of the *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮花經, which are two versions of the *Sad-*

¹⁶ Nattier, “Avalokiteśvara in Early Chinese Buddhist Translations,” 181.

¹⁷ Some early texts translated into Chinese mentioned a bodhisattva whose name appears to be A. They are not reviewed here because they had no information on his origin or identity. See more in Nattier, *Avalokiteśvara*.

¹⁸ Since the fourth century CE, Chinese Buddhists started to question the authenticity of some A.-related texts. See Yu, “Apocryphal Sutras.” Boucher (2008) suggests that the fourth to fifth century represents a watershed in the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

¹⁹ T0263.09.

dharma puṇḍarīka sūtra (Lotus Sutra).²⁰ It is regarded as the source and foundation of the faith in A.²¹ In the sutra, the Buddha speaks of the advantages of worshipping A. The *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra* was compiled in phases, and the chapter on A. was incorporated into it during the last phase in around 150 CE.²² Goto argues that the UDAB was an independent sutra before it was included in the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra*, and that its composition was earlier than the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra*.²³

²⁰ T0262.09.

²¹ Goto, *Research on Avalokiteśvara*, 234.

²² According to Fuse Kogaku, the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra* was composed in four phases, respectively in the first century BC, first century CE, 100 CE, and 150 CE (cited from Machida, “Life and Light,” 12). A similar view suggests that in the first phase, Chapter 2 to Chapter 9 were composed. The second phase, at around 100 CE, involved the composition of a new introduction (Chapter 1), new conclusion (Chapter 22), Chapter 10 to Chapter 21, but not including Chapter 12. The third phase, at around 150 CE, encompassed Chapter 23 to Chapter 28, as well as Chapter 12. See Teiser and Stone, *Lotus Sutra*, 8. The new chapters are biographies of bodhisattvas. This means that the devotionism toward A. existed before the chapter was added to the sutra.

²³ See Goto, *Research on Avalokiteśvara*, 233-241. Based on earlier studies, Goto argues that the title of A. and the devotionism toward him appeared earlier than the UDAB; that the UDAB was composed in the Indus valley, along the sea coast, or in Potalaka; and that the UDAB was originally an independent text, but was later included in the *Lotus Sutra*. His arguments are as follows: 1. The prose section of the UDAB is extremely plain and simple. The benefits of worshipping A. reflect the very basic wishes to keep away from dangers. Both are characteristic of primitive religions. Thus, it is a very early religious text. 2. The audience in the UDAB is Bodhisattva Aksayama, who is one of the earliest Mahāyāna bodhisattvas, indicating that the prose section was a forerunner of the Mahāyāna sutras. 3. In the prose, A. could manifest himself as gods based on the *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda*. The period of “manifestations,” in which Hindu devas were introduced into Buddhism and were regarded as the manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas, occurred after the *Āgamas* were compiled and before the Mahāyāna sutras, such as the *prajñā* sutras and the *Lotus Sutra*, were composed. 4. The verses of the UDAB were composed later than the prose. They do not contain any *dhāraṇīs*, indicating that they were composed at the latest during the Middle of Mahāyāna literature. 5. The Dhara-nidhara bodhisattva in the verse section was one of the earliest bodhisattvas. He was

2. *Bore boluomiduo xinjing* 般若波羅蜜多心經 (Prajñā-pāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra, The Heart Sutra).²⁴ Kumārajīva is said to have first translated the text and it was retranslated by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664 CE). Nattier argues that Xuanzang possibly composed it.²⁵ In the sutra, it appears that A. instructs Śāriputra on emptiness.

3. *Foshuo wuliang qingjing pingdeng jue jing* 佛說無量清淨平等覺經 (Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra, The Buddha Speaks of Infinite Purity, Impartiality, and Enlightenment Sutra).²⁶ The text is believed to be translated first by Lokakṣema 支婁迦讖 (Zhiloujiachen) between 167 CE and 186 CE. Harrison argues that Zhi Qian translated it.²⁷ It only has a passing reference to A. in which the Buddha says that A. is an acolyte of Amitābha.

4. *Guanshiyin pusa shouji jing* 觀世音菩薩受記經 (Māyopamasamādhi-sūtra, Sutra of the Prophecy Bestowed Upon Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva).²⁸ The text was first translated by Dharmarakṣa between 265 CE and 317 CE, and was retranslated by Dharmadōgata 曇無竭 (Tanwujie, fourth to fifth century CE). The sutra says that A. was born out of a lotus blossom.

5. *Guanshiyin pusa wangsheng jingtu benyuan jing* 觀世音菩薩往生淨土本緣經 (Sutra on The Causes of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva's Birth

later worshipped in the *Śūramgama-samādhi sūtra* (first translated into Chinese in 184 CE by Lokakṣema) and the *prajñā* sutras that contain *dhāraṇīs*. Thus, even the UDAB verses were composed earlier than the two early Mahāyāna sutras.

²⁴ T0251.08.0848.

²⁵ Nattier, "The Heart Sūtra," 189-194.

²⁶ T0361.12.

²⁷ Harrison suggests that the translation of the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra* attributed to Lokakṣema in fact should be attributed to Zhi Qian, and the one attributed to Zhi Qian belongs to Lokakṣema. See Harrison, "Celestial Bodhisattvas," 172.

²⁸ T0371.12.

in the Pure Land).²⁹ The sutra was translated during the Western Jin period (266-316 CE). It describes A.'s past life as a boy who starved to death after his stepmother left him and his brother on an island.

6. *Da fang guang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 (Mahā-vaipulya Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra, The Great Vaipulya Sutra of the Buddha's Flower Garland), translated by Buddhahadra 佛馱跋陀羅 (Fotuobatuoluo, 359-429 CE).³⁰ The sutra does not have information on the origin of A., but it describes his abode as Potalaka in the middle of stormy waters.

7. *Beihua jing* 悲華經 (Karūṇāpuṇḍarīka-sūtra, The White Lotus of Compassion Sutra), translated by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (Tanwuchen, 385-433 CE).³¹ According to the sutra, A. is the oldest prince of a universal monarch, who is the Amitābha-to-be; Buddha-to-be is Amitābha-to-be's house priest.

As can be seen, even in the early A.-related texts, there is a clear inconsistency regarding his origin and identity. It appears that different people in different places at different times were involved in the creation and re-creation of A. as an object of worship. Such inconsistency also shows that by solely relying on the A.-related "Mahāyāna" texts it is impossible to determine his place of origin.

Theories on A.'s origin

Scholarly theories on A.'s origin can be categorized into three schools. One school suggests that A. is based on Persian or Greek gods. For example, Mallmann argues that A. is a solar deity derived from Iranian Zoroastrian sources, which was originally similar to Apollo, Mithra, and Heli-

²⁹ X0012.01.

³⁰ T0278.09.

³¹ T0157.03.

os.³² Some argue that A. was developed from the Persian water goddess Anahita.³³

The second school argues that A. was developed from Hindu gods. Chandra suggests that A.'s prototype was Brahmā; his later image was a syncretism of Śiva and Viṣṇu.³⁴ Specifically, in the beginning, Buddha was attended by Indra and Brahmā; “with the rise of transcendental tendencies in Buddhism, Śākyamuni the Man was replaced by Amitābha...Brahmā became Avalokita-svara and Śakra became Mahāsthāmaprāpta.”³⁵ Chandra further argues that “just as Brahmā is Caturānana or Caturmukha (four-faced) so is Avalokita-svara;” “Brahmā is born of the lotus...Avalokita-svara prominently sports the lotus in his hand;” “Brahmā holds a water-gourd...Avalokita-svara with a vase...It is clear that Brahmā was transcreated into Avalokita-svara.”³⁶ Williams also believes that there is a historical connection between A. and Śiva because their images look alike.³⁷ Chamberlayne suggests that A. “originated as an Indo-Tibetan divinity, which was introduced into China about the 5th century.”³⁸ Li argues that A. originated from a mythic horse that saved sailors and merchants.³⁹

The third school argues that A. is founded within Buddhism. Divakaran argues that A. is a deity created by the Mahāyāna Buddhists as one of the “active emanations” of the buddhas.⁴⁰ Banerjee suggests that

³² Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, 13.

³³ Li, “The Origin of Avalokiteśvara,” 47.

³⁴ Chandra, “The Origin of Avalokita-svara/Avalokit-Eśvara,” 198-199.

³⁵ Chandra, “The Origin of Avalokita-svara /Avalokit-Eśvara,” 195-197.

³⁶ Chandra, “The Origin of Avalokita-svara /Avalokit-Eśvara,” 198.

³⁷ Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 57.

³⁸ Chamberlayne, “Development of Kuan Yin,” 46-47.

³⁹ Li, “The Origin of Avalokiteśvara,” 56.

⁴⁰ Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 145.

A. is a composite character of Buddhist and Hindu ideas. He argues that A. embodies the Buddha's compassion, and that he has "absorbed many of the traits of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Indra, though his base remained Buddhistic."⁴¹ Lienhard suggests that A. is the deity in the *Siṃhalāvadāna*, a famous Buddhist rebirth legend.⁴² Venerable Yinshun suggests that A. is a personification of the Buddha's compassion to save sentient beings. He argues that Potalaka, the abode of A., is the name of the mythical place where the Buddha's ancient ancestors governed.⁴³ Holt suggests that the rich symbolism of light and white in two *Avalokita sutras*, such as "the light of the world" and "lighting up the world as the sun lights up the sky," indicate that A. is the Buddha.⁴⁴

As can be seen, there is little agreement on the origin of A. Each of the above theories has serious problems. The theories that A. originated from Greek or Persian gods fail to explain why the Buddhists who "created" A. worshipped non-Buddhist objects. It is known that when Buddhists vow to take refuge in the Three Jewels, they should not go for refuge to gods. The theories that A. is a syncretic combination of Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu also fail to explain why the early Mahāyānists based within the early schools worshipped gods. The Buddha explicitly stated that Brahmā was not an object worthy of worship.⁴⁵ In an EA sutra, one of the Buddha's top disciples also said that the "one-thousand-eyed

⁴¹ Banerjee, *Ashtamahabodhisattva*, 1-8.

⁴² Lienhard, "Avalokiteśvara in the Wick," 93-104.

⁴³ Yinshun, *Early Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 483-490.

⁴⁴ Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*, 32-33.

⁴⁵ See a sutra in the MA, in which the Buddha says, "the Great Brahmā is reckoned supreme...Yet even in the Great Brahmā there is still aberration, there is change. Seeing this, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with that. Being disenchanted with that, he becomes dispassionate toward what is supreme, and even more so toward what is inferior." (T0026.01.0799c14) Similar teaching can be found in the MA *Fantian qing fo jing* 梵天請佛經 (*Sūtra of Brahmā asking the Buddha*), T0026.01.0547a09.

Brahmā could not see his own clothes because he does not have the supreme eye of wisdom.”⁴⁶ Chandra’s theory that when “Śākyamuni the Man was replaced by Amitābha... [his acolyte] Brahmā became Avalokiteśvara,” seems plausible because Brahmā and A. indeed share a compelling degree of iconographic similarity, but research shows that Amitābha appeared later than A.⁴⁷ In fact, in some Gandhāra triads, the preaching Buddha, who is believed to be Amitābha, is seated between Maitreya and A. while Indra and Brahmā appear in the background.⁴⁸

The theories that A. originated from within Buddhism appear to be valid, but the evidence they use is very circumstantial. They also fail to explain why A. sometimes presents in the image of a Hindu god.

A.’s iconography and quality

The exact time when the stone image of A. was first created is not clear. Some suggest that it first appeared in Gandhāra and Mathura around the second century CE, but others question it.⁴⁹ Some suggest that early A. images have a number of distinct iconographic descriptions that separated him from the Buddha, Maitreya, and Bodhisattva Siddhārtha.⁵⁰ But some argue that the same characteristics are found in other images as well.⁵¹ By the fifth to sixth century CE, however, A. images were found

⁴⁶ T0125.02.0581a08.

⁴⁷ Fujita, *Three Pure Land Sutras*, cited from Li, “The Origin of Avalokiteśvara,” 50.

⁴⁸ Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 148.

⁴⁹ For example, Boucher (2008) argues that the identification of early images of A. in the Greco-Buddhist art in Greater-Gandhāra is “highly doubtful,” 319. Also see Boucher, “Review,” 307.

⁵⁰ Miyaji, “Iconography,” 125.

⁵¹ For example, Rhi observes that the small buddha in A.’s headdress also appears in Maitreya and Siddhārtha’s images, which makes the identification of A. problematic. Cited from Boucher, “Gandhāran Source,” 314-315.

everywhere in India and were easily documentable.⁵² As such, the following review of studies on A.'s iconography consists of two sections: Probable A. images before the fifth century CE, and definite A. images since the fifth century CE.

1. Probable early A. images

In his earliest form, A. is depicted as a princely looking young male. Sometimes he is dressed in princely garb and wears a be-jeweled turban.⁵³ He has a moustache.⁵⁴ Later, a lotus flower was added to his image,⁵⁵ which became a distinctive attribute of A. in later Indian art.⁵⁶ The type of bodhisattva image in Gandhāra that wears a turban, and holds a wreath or a lotus is usually identified as A.⁵⁷ As such, he is called *Padmapani*, or “Bearer of the Lotus.” But not all of his images hold a lotus flower.⁵⁸ A very early image dated to the Kushan era shows him holding a lotus in his left hand.⁵⁹ In some images, he has a lotus flower in both hands.⁶⁰ Sometimes he holds a bunch of short-stemmed lotuses.⁶¹ The color of the lotus blossom is believed to be blue.⁶² Further, later on a small image of a buddha was added to his headdress,⁶³ which becomes a

⁵² Schopen, “Inscription on the Kuṣān Image,” 119.

⁵³ Boucher questions attempts to identify the turbaned figures with a small buddha in the headdress as A. He contends that there is little evidence for the Mahāyāna in the material record in Gandhāran. Boucher, “Gandhāran Source,” 312.

⁵⁴ Huntington and Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, 139.

⁵⁵ Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography*, 36.

⁵⁶ Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography*, 36.

⁵⁷ Rhi, “Early Mahāyāna,” 165.

⁵⁸ Hegewald, “The Lotus Pool.”

⁵⁹ Huntington and Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, 204.

⁶⁰ Miyaji, “Iconography,” 136-138.

⁶¹ Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 152.

⁶² Coomaraswamy, “Origin of the Buddha Image,” 290.

⁶³ Fussman and Quagliotti, *Early Iconography*, 36.

constant, though not exclusive, element of A.'s iconography.⁶⁴ For example, on the head of an A. sculpture dated in the beginning of the Kanishka era, a bejeweled turban has a seated buddha in its crest.⁶⁵ A Gandhāra A. relief has a small buddha seated in the knot of the headdress.⁶⁶ The seated buddha image in the turban occurs on a well-known detached head in the Field Museum, Chicago, as well as on a freestanding A. in the Peshawar Museum. The latter holds a floral ornament in his left hand.⁶⁷ Mallmann identifies some Gandhāran head sculptures that have buddhas in the turban as portrayals of A.⁶⁸ Brough suggests that the image in an inscribed sculpture found in Taxila “must be Avalokiteśvara” from the lotus he holds and the high crest on his headdress, which “must contain the small Buddha figure that is typical of this Bodhisattva.”⁶⁹ Scholars disagree on the meaning of the buddha in the headdress. Some suggest that they are *dhyani* buddhas.⁷⁰ Some argue that they might be portrayals of lay personages expressing their allegiance to the Buddha.⁷¹ In addition to the symbols, a recurring early Gandhāra A. image is the “pensive bodhisattva,” namely a seated bodhisattva in pensive attitude, sometimes with one pendent leg.⁷² The princely-looking pensive A. often does not bear the typical *lakṣaṇas* (characteristic features), such as the lotus or the small buddha in the headdress.⁷³

⁶⁴ Bautze-Picron, “A Neglected Aspect,” 3. Coomaraswamy, in “Origin of the Buddha Image,” 290, suggests that Mañjuśrī also has a buddha in his crown.

⁶⁵ Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 151-152.

⁶⁶ Tissot, “Remarks,” 398.

⁶⁷ Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 150.

⁶⁸ Cited from Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 152.

⁶⁹ Brough, “Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara,” 65.

⁷⁰ Coomaraswamy, “Origin of the Buddha Image,” 290.

⁷¹ Rowland, “Bodhisattvas or Deified Kings,” 6-12.

⁷² Miyaji, “Iconography,” 135. Quagliotti argues that the gesture is not exclusive to A. images. See Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography*, 47.

⁷³ Fussman and Quagliotti, *The Early Iconography*, 47.

At the end of the fifth century CE, A.'s princely headdress gave way to the matted hair.⁷⁴ A figure of A. in the Lucknow Museum, for example, shows that the turban is replaced by the matted hair. The figure holds a water-jar, which, according to Divakaran, was hitherto an exclusive attribute of Maitreya. The changes were interpreted as an attempt to give A. an ascetic/brahmanical character.⁷⁵ But the water jar might have been added to A.'s image at an earlier date. A third-century CE bronze statue identified as A. shows him as a prince with a bejeweled turban. His left hand holds a water jar (Figure 1).⁷⁶

2. Definite A. images

Since the fifth to sixth century CE, A. images became easily identifiable. In his *Xiyu ji* 西域記 (Records from the Western Regions) Xuanzang documented nearly a dozen freestanding A. images. On two occasions, he mentioned the symbols that appeared in early A. images: “a standing figure of Kwan-tsz'-tsai (Avalokiteśvara) Bodhisattva. Sometimes he is seen holding a vessel of perfume;”⁷⁷ “In its [A. image's] hand it holds a lotus flower. On its head is a figure of Buddha.”⁷⁸ These observations to an extent validate the identification of early A. images by today's scholars.

It was during this period that A. images became increasingly like those of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, or Śiva, represented by his multiple heads and arms, which may range from four, six, eight to even one thousand. As

⁷⁴ Divakaran argues that “It is only at the end of the 5th century, at Ajanta, Kanheri and also Sarnath, that the princely headdress [of A., added by author] gives way to the matted hair of the brahmanical ascetic.” Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 152.

⁷⁵ Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 152.

⁷⁶ The Guimet Museum, MA 12128.

⁷⁷ Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki*, 172.

⁷⁸ Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki*, 183.

was mentioned earlier, A.'s similarity to Hindu gods led some researchers to believe that he was transcreated from Brahmā.⁷⁹ The famous eleven-headed and four-armed A. image in Kanheri, which is dated to the sixth century CE, represents a fully developed A. image characterized by most of the symbols identified earlier. The image holds a lotus-bud in his left hand. Another left hand holds a jar.⁸⁰ A ninth-century CE stele of A. found in Surajkund, Nalanda, Bihar (See Figure 4) is another example of the fully developed A. image. Almost all of the key symbols are present. What is particularly noteworthy is that two apsaras (female cloud and water spirits) lift a crown off A.'s head, revealing his matted hair. The symbolism will be discussed in the findings section.

In addition to the Hindu god images, the ascetic A. image very often wears a deerskin,⁸¹ which is usually over one of his shoulders.⁸² An A. image in the Ellora Caves has a small deerskin over his left shoulder.⁸³ The deerskin is found in numerous A. images from Nepal to Tibet.⁸⁴ In later ages it became a part of visualizing A.'s image in meditation.⁸⁵ Interpretation of the deerskin varies. Some suggest that it represents harmlessness, compassion, and love.⁸⁶ Some argue that it symbolizes convergence of A. and Harihara, the fused form of Śiva and Viṣṇu.⁸⁷

In summary, archeological studies have established the following images of A. ranging from the second to third centuries CE through

⁷⁹ See Chandra, *Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara*, 9.

⁸⁰ Gokhale, "Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara," 371.

⁸¹ Bautze-Picron, "A Neglected Aspect," 2.

⁸² Harle, *Art and Architecture*, 132.

⁸³ Burgess and Bühler. *Report on the Ellora Cave Temples*, 6.

⁸⁴ See Pal, *Art of Nepal*, 68. Weber and Landaw, *Image of Enlightenment*, 54.

⁸⁵ See Dewar, *Trainings in Compassion*, 66: "His [A.'s] left breast is covered by the yellow skin of the Krishnasari deer."

⁸⁶ Trungpa, *The Collected Works*, 450. Beer, *Handbook*, 63.

⁸⁷ Chandra, *Thousand Armed Avalokiteśvara*, 232.

the sixth to ninth centuries CE in India: In his earliest form, he is a young male, and probably a prince; he may or may not hold a lotus flower; there is usually a buddha image in his turban, although he is not the only figure that bears the symbol; he is sometimes depicted with pensive gesture. Later, the prince image was replaced by an ascetic image with matted hair, who usually wears a deerskin; he holds a lotus flower and a water jar. Since the end of the fifth century CE, he starts to look like Hindu gods Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu, featured with multiple heads and arms.

In terms of his qualities, A. is the most compassionate of all the bodhisattvas. In Williams's words, "Avalokiteśvara comes to be seen as the most wonderful compassionate saviour of the universe, constantly and tirelessly acting with all the powers of a tenth-level Bodhisattva for the benefit of all sentient beings without discrimination."⁸⁸

Method, Texts, and their Validity and Reliability

1. Method

This research uses the method of intertextual analysis. As a theory, *intertextuality* argues that works of literature are built from systems, codes, and traditions established by previous works. To interpret a text and discover its meanings is to trace those relations.⁸⁹ As a method, intertextual analysis examines the explicit and implicit relations that a text has to prior, contemporary, and potential future texts.⁹⁰ A text can be anything that we make meaning from, such as a written text or a stone image.⁹¹ The current study uses the analysis procedures developed by Bazerman: 1. Creating a list of instances of intertextuality; 2. Listing how the in-

⁸⁸ Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 221.

⁸⁹ Graham, *Intertextuality*, 1.

⁹⁰ Bazerman, "Intertextuality," 86.

⁹¹ McKee, *Textual Analysis*, 4.

stance is expressed; 3. Identifying whether it is attributed to some person or source; and 4. Interpreting the intertextuality.⁹²

2. Texts

Three bodies of text are compared. The first are the Chinese *Āgamas*, including: 1. *Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經 (*The Saṃyukt-Āgama*, SA),⁹³ translated by Gunabhadra (Qiunabatuoluo 求那跋陀羅, 394–468 CE). 2. *Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經 (*The Madhyama-Āgama*, MA),⁹⁴ first translated by Dharmanandi (Tanmonanti 曇摩難提) in 384 CE and was retranslated by Sanghadeva (Sengqietibo 僧伽提婆) in 398 CE; 3. *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經 (*The Dīrgha-Āgama*, DA),⁹⁵ translated by Buddhayaśas (Fotuoyeshe 佛陀耶舍, c.406–413 CE) in 413 CE; and 4. *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經 (*The Ekottara-Āgama*, EA),⁹⁶ first translated by Dharmanandi in 384 CE and was retranslated by Sanghadeva in 398 CE. The second body of “text” is A.’s iconography reviewed earlier. The third body of text includes the “Mahāyāna” sutras that were reviewed above. They depicted A.’s compassionate quality. Mahāyāna texts derived from the relevant *Āgamas* are also analyzed.

3. Validity and Reliability of Method and Texts⁹⁷

Intertextual analysis has been proved to be effective in establishing relationships between religious texts.⁹⁸ The current case is a two-thousand-

⁹² Bazerman, “Intertextuality,” 88–89.

⁹³ T0099.02.

⁹⁴ T0026.01.

⁹⁵ T0001.01.

⁹⁶ T0125.02.

⁹⁷ In the case of qualitative research, reliability and validity refer to trustworthiness, credibility and dependability of the data and method. See Lincoln and Guba, “But Is It Rigorous?”

⁹⁸ Childs, “Critique.” Also see Hays, Alkier, et al., *Reading the Bible Intertextually*.

year-old mystery. Without a credible first-hand account by the “creators” of A. as to where he came from, any individual examples of evidence could be circumstantial. Through intertextual analysis, however, a chain of evidence may be established, which may together point to a plausible origin of A. In terms of Buddhism, Mahāyāna texts, along with some of its objects of worship, were undeniably inspired by the early Tripiṭakas. As was mentioned earlier, Williams noted that in its early development, Mahāyāna was a development within the *saṃgha*, and the followers of the Bodhisattva Path belonged to the early schools.⁹⁹ Thus, rich intertextuality should exist between early Mahāyāna texts and the EBTs.

As a version of the EBTs, the northern (Chinese) *Āgamas* preserved major portions of the Tripiṭakas of several Buddhist schools. At the same time, they are known to have some Mahāyāna influence, or in Lamotte’s words, “Mahāyānist interpolations.”¹⁰⁰ Such “interpolations” are primarily found in the EA. For example, the EA’s preface contains the terms of “Mahāyāna” and the “Six Bhūmis.”¹⁰¹ Some sutras in it used the term “the Bodhisattva Path.”¹⁰²

Lastly, Buddhist art in general is based on the sutras, and the production of such artworks were often conditioned by stylistic and textual traditions in history.¹⁰³ Therefore, A.’s iconography established through archaeological findings is a valid “text” from which to trace their origins in the sutras.

⁹⁹ Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 222.

¹⁰⁰ Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 156.

¹⁰¹ T0125.02.0550a13.

¹⁰² See Mizuno, *Research on Buddhist Texts*, 536.

¹⁰³ See examples on how text dictates Buddhist image creation in Malandra, “Māra’s Army.”

Intertextual analysis between A.'s iconography-quality and the northern *Āgamas*

1. Probable prototype of A.

Analysis shows that the image of a young Brahmin in two EA sutras largely matches the fully developed A. image appearing from the late fifth century CE. The stories are two versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story. One is elaborated and the other is short. This research only examines the elaborated version.¹⁰⁴ In the sutra, the Buddha tells a story about the Dīpaṃkara Buddha and a young Brahmin (one of Śākyamuni Buddha's past lives). In the following analysis, insignificant text is paraphrased in brackets while symbols related to A.'s image are underlined.

The Dīpaṃkara Buddha story in the EA

[In former times, the Dīpaṃkara Buddha appeared in the world. At the time, there was a Brahmin living at the foot of the Snow Mountains, teaching five hundred students.]

The Brahmin had a student named Yunlei 雲雷 (Sumedha or Megha;¹⁰⁵ “Sumedha” is used here to be consistent with the name in the *Jātaka-nidāna*), who had black hair and was extremely good looking (The short version of the EA story says that “His image is like that of Brahmā's”¹⁰⁶). He was very talented and learned.

¹⁰⁴ T0125.02.0597-599.

¹⁰⁵ The young man's name is Mi'le 彌勒 in the short version of the EA story in the Tai-sho and Korea Tripiṭakas, which is the Chinese translation of the Maitreya Bodhisattva. It is an obvious error because in the story the young man was prophesied to become Śākyamuni Buddha. His name in the Chinese Song, Yuan, and Ming Tripiṭakas is Miqu 彌佉, obviously the translation of Megha (Sumedha). His name in the Qisha Tripiṭakas (*Qisha zang* 磧砂藏) of the Chinese Song Dynasty is also Miqu 彌佉 (Q038.018a20).

¹⁰⁶ T0125.02.0758a14.

[One day, Sumedha wanted to repay his master and leave, but he was poor and had nothing to offer. He decided to go to Padma to find some offerings. The master did not want his favorite student to leave. He told Sumedha that there was something he had not learned. Sumedha asked what it was. The master told him that it was the Verse of Five Hundred Lines. Sumedha wanted to learn it. The master made up the verse in the hope to keep Sumedha from leaving. But Sumedha learned the verse in a few days. He told his teacher that he was leaving. The teacher agreed.]

[In a place not far from Padma's capital, many Brahmins gathered for a big ceremony.]

As the ceremony was almost over, the Brahmins donated five hundred silver coins, a gold cane, a gold water jar, and a thousand oxen to the senior elder.

[Sumedha reckoned that perhaps he could go to the ceremony to debate with the Brahmins so he could win some offerings there. So he went to the ceremony.]

The moment the Brahmins saw Sumedha, they thought their piety had moved Lord Brahmā. They shouted loudly, "Wonderful! Good lord. We are blessed. Lord Brahmā himself has descended from above!" All of the Brahmins stood up and unanimously shouted, "Lord Maha-Brahmā! We welcome you!"

Sumedha thought to himself, "These Brahmins called me Lord Brahmā; but I am not even Lord Brahmā." So he said to the Brahmins, "Stop. Stop. Gentlemen. Please do not call me Lord Brahmā."

[Sumedha introduced himself. He then challenged the senior elder to debate. The elder recited the Brahmānic canons without an error. Sumedha asked him to recite the Verse of Five Hundred Lines. The elder had never

heard of it. Sumedha recited it with great fluency. The Brahmins were amazed. They elected Sumedha to be the top elder.]

The donor of the ceremony offered Sumedha five hundred silver coins, a gold cane, a gold water jar, one thousand oxen, and a beautiful woman. Sumedha said to him, “I accept the five hundred silver coins and the gold water jar. I will offer them to my master.”

[Carrying the gold cane and the water jar, Sumedha went toward Padma. It happened that the king was going to make offerings to the Dīpamkara Buddha. He banned the sale of flowers because he wanted to buy them all for the Buddha.]

Sumedha knew it was extremely rare to see a Tathāgata. He decided to buy flowers for the Buddha, but he could not find any flowers. Upset, he stood by the city gate.]

At that moment, he saw a Brahmin girl carrying a water jar and five flowers.

Sumedha said to the girl, “Little sister, I am now in great need of the flowers. Please sell your flowers to me.”

The Brahmin girl said, “Since when did I become your sister? Do you even know my parents?”

[Sumedha knew the girl was teasing him] He said, “Madam, I will pay you whatever price you want. I do need these flowers.”

[The girl asked him why he wanted the flowers. Sumedha explained to the girl who the Dīpamkara Buddha was and what his wishes were with the Buddha.]

The girl said, “If you promise that you and I will become husband and wife in future lives, I will give you the flowers.”

Sumedha said, “But with what I am practicing, I am not supposed to have sensual desires.”

The girl said, “I am not asking to become your wife in this life. I just want to become your wife in the future lives.”

Sumedha said, “A bodhisattva is willing to renounce everything. But if you become my wife, it would ruin my resolve.”

The girl said, “I won’t ruin your heart of giving. It is just as if my body is given to a person, my heart of giving won’t be ruined.”

Sumedha then bought the five flowers. The two vowed their pledges and departed.

[Carrying the flowers, Sumedha walked toward the Dīpamkara Buddha. Sumedha said to the Buddha, “Please accept my offerings. I would rather die here if you do not make prophecy that I would become a buddha.” The Buddha told him that he should not offer flowers to a buddha.]

Sumedha said, “I wish the Buddha could tell me what a bodhisattva should do.”

The Dīpamkara Buddha told him, “A bodhisattva should renounce everything.”

Sumedha then said in a stanza:

I dare not renounce my parents/Nor dare I renounce the buddhas, the holy men, and the elders/The sun and the moon move around the world/which I cannot renounce/But with everything else, I would renounce without hesitation

The Dīpamkara Buddha responded with a stanza:

The renunciation that you just said/is not what I meant/[Instead] you shall be able to endure eons of suffering/and renounce your head, body, ears, and eyes/wives, children, countries, treasures/chariots, horses, and servants/Should you be able to do that/I would now make a prophecy

Sumedha answered with a stanza:

Even if a mountain as heated as fire/is placed on top of me/I would endure the suffering for eons/And it won't change my resolve/Please now make your prophecy

The Buddha became silent. Sumedha knelt down on his right knee and spread the five flowers onto the Dīpaṃkara Buddha, vowing that he wished to become enlightened.

Sumedha then spread his hair on the mud, thinking, “If the Buddha is to make a prophecy, he would walk on my hair.”

The Dīpaṃkara Buddha knew Sumedha's intention. He told Sumedha, “In the future world, you will become the Śākyamuni Buddha and a Tathāgata.”

[Concluding the story, the (Śākyamuni) Buddha said that Sumedha was a past life of his; and the elder Brahmin was Devadatta-to-be, etc.]

As can be seen, some of A.'s fundamental iconographic characteristics since the late fifth century CE find their matches in the EA story, including 1) a young man, 2) the flower, 3) the water jar, 4) the Buddha, 5) likeness to Brahmā, and 6) a bodhisattva's compassion. Sumedha is a good looking young ascetic who looks like a Hindu god. He carries a water jar and holds flowers on his way to see the Dīpaṃkara Buddha. Although the symbol “Dīpaṃkara Buddha” appears many times, the prophecy that Sumedha would become the Śākyamuni Buddha most likely represents the buddha image in A.'s headdress, because a seated buddha is

found in Gandhāran images of Maitreya and Siddhārtha, both of whom were prophesied to become buddhas (See fn. 51). Finally, Sumedha calls himself a “bodhisattva.” The three stanzas represent the entire compassionate ideal of early Mahāyāna Buddhism: to become a fully enlightened buddha through renunciation and ordeals. These are exactly the qualities of A., the most compassionate Bodhisattva. Thus, we can tentatively conclude that Sumedha might be A.’s prototype.

2. Blue lotus flowers, matted hair of an ascetic, and the deerskin

Although A.’s image since the late fifth century CE appears to match that of Sumedha’s in the EA story, more questions are raised: There is no mention of the flowers being “blue lotus flowers,” which is the case for A. images (See fn. 62). Sumedha has long hair, but the story did not say it was matted. Nor did it mention the deerskin that often appears in A.’s stone images.

The answers lie in the non-*Āgama* versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story. First, at least six different versions of the story say the flowers were “blue lotus flowers.” The following are some examples: 1. “A royal maid passed by, holding a water jar with seven blue lotus flowers in it;”¹⁰⁷ 2. “Soon a woman named Gopika appeared, holding a water jar that contained seven flowers. The flowers were called utpala (blue lotus flower);”¹⁰⁸ 3. “a maid in blue clothes...with seven blue lotus flowers

¹⁰⁷ T0185.03.0472c29. *Foshuo taizi ruiying benqi jing* 佛說太子瑞應本起經 (Arthavargīya-sūtra, The Buddha Speaks of Stories of the Prince’s Previous Incarnations with Auspicious Omens Sutra), translated by Zhi Qian 支謙 (222–228 CE).

¹⁰⁸ T0188.03.0617b25. *Yichu pusa benqi jing* 異出菩薩本起經 (Abhiniṣkramaṇa, Sutra of the Former Events of the Bodhisattva), translated by Nie Daozhen 聶道真 (280–313 CE).

in a jar;”¹⁰⁹ 4. “there came a woman, holding seven blue lotus flowers,”¹¹⁰ 5. “He saw a young girl, holding seven blue lotus flowers,”¹¹¹ 6. “She hid seven blue lotus flowers in a jar.”¹¹²

Second, one version of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story states that Sumedha has “matted hair of an ascetic (xian ren ji 仙人髻).”¹¹³ Another version says that he “let loose his twelve-year-old golden hair bun (fa ji 髮髻)” when he saw the Dīpaṃkara Buddha.¹¹⁴

Third, two sutras translated respectively by Zhi Qian (222–228 CE) and Nie Daozhen (280–313 CE) depicted Sumedha as an ascetic who wears a deerskin. In Zhi Qian’s translation, Sumedha “wears a deerskin, ready to go to the (Padma) kingdom.” When the Brahmin girl saw him, she wondered, “What kind of ascetic is this, wearing a deerskin?”¹¹⁵ In Nie Daozhen’s translation of the same story: “When the Buddha was a bodhisattva, he was named Māṇavaka [Sumedha], living in the moun-

¹⁰⁹ T0190.03.0666c14. *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經 (Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra, Sutra of the Collection of the Past Activities of the Buddha), translated by Jñānagupta (Shenajueduo 闍那崛多, 587–591 CE).

¹¹⁰ T0310.11.0318b04. *Pusa zang hui* 菩薩藏會 (Bodhisattva Piṭaka) in *Da baoji jing* 大寶積經 (Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra, The Great Treasures Collection Sutra), translated by Xuanzang 玄奘, between 645–664 CE.

¹¹¹ T0316.11.0883a21. *Foshuo dasheng pusa zang zhengfa jing* 佛說大乘菩薩藏正法經 (The Buddha Speaks of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva-Piṭaka Right Dharma Sutra), translated by Dharmapāla 法護 (Fahu, eleventh century CE) and others.

¹¹² T0189.03.0621c25. *Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing* 過去現在因果經 (Sutra on Past and Present Causes and Effects), translated by Guṇabhadra 求那跋陀羅 (Qiunabatuoluo, fifth century CE).

¹¹³ T0189.03.0622b21. *zuo xianren ji* 作仙人髻 (sports a matted hair of an ascetic). *Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing* 過去現在因果經.

¹¹⁴ T0310.11.0318c22. 解十二年金色髮髻以布于地 (let loose his twelve-year-old golden hair bun and spread the hair on the ground)

¹¹⁵ T0185.03.0473a07. *Foshuo taizi ruiying benqi jing*, translated by Zhi Qian, 222–228 CE.

tains and wearing a deerskin.”¹¹⁶ Another sutra, translated in the fifth century CE, depicts Sumedha as “wearing his deerskin, holding a water bottle and an umbrella” when he left for Padma.¹¹⁷ In the *Mahāratnakūṭa sūtra*, Sumedha thought to himself: “Now I do not have very nice clothes, except for this shabby deerskin on my body.”¹¹⁸ In *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*: “the Bodhisattva offered seven blue lotus flowers to the Dīpaṅkara Buddha, laid a deerskin and spread his hair to cover the mud.”¹¹⁹ In *Abhiniṣkramaṇa sūtra*: “I only had a deerskin on my body. I laid it on the ground.”¹²⁰ The deerskin becomes a symbol that appears throughout the Buddha’s bodhisattva journey. For example, Syama, one of the Buddha’s past lives, “wears a deerskin.”¹²¹ Prince Siddhārtha also wore a deerskin when he became an ascetic.¹²² In Xuanzang’s *Xiyu ji*: “This is the place where the prince [Siddhārtha] exchanged his precious robe for one made of deerskin.”¹²³

¹¹⁶ T0188.03.0617b20, *Yichu pusa benqi jing* translated by Nie Daozhen, 280–313 CE. The texts were translated into Chinese approximately one century earlier than the EA version of the story. In addition, their narratives were less elaborated and less dramatic, indicating that they were likely composed in India earlier than the EA story.

¹¹⁷ T0189.03.0621c03. *Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing* 過去現在因果經.

¹¹⁸ T0310.11.0318c05, *Pusa zang hui* 菩薩藏會 (Bodhisattva Piṭaka) in *Da baoji jing* 大寶積經 (*Mahāratnakūṭa-sūtra*).

¹¹⁹ T1509.25.0087a15. *Dazhi dulun* 大智度論 (*Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom), translated by Kumārajīva.

¹²⁰ T0190.03.0667b28. *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經.

¹²¹ T0175.03.0442b24. *Foshuo shanzi jing* 佛說睽子經 (*Śyāmakajātaka-sūtra*, The Buddha speaks of Syama Sutra), translated by Sheng Jian 聖堅, Western Jin period (265–316 CE).

¹²² T0754.17.0575c25. *Foshuo wei ceng you yinyuan jing* 佛說未曾有因緣經 (*Adbhuta-hetu-sūtra*, The Buddha Speaks of Unprecedented Causes and Conditions Sutra), translated by Tan Jing 曇景, fifth century CE.

¹²³ Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki*, 30.

3. The turbaned prince and the pensive bodhisattva

Yet we have one more question: Sumedha in the EA and the non-*Āgama* versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story cited above is not a prince, nor does he have any princely “pensive gesture.” How is he related to that turban-wearing prince in Gandhāra art identified as an A. image? Furthermore, the Gandhāra prince image may not hold a flower and water jar, nor does he look like Brahmā.

Again, the answer lies in the different versions of the story. One of the earliest available versions of the story is found in the *Jātaka-nidāna* of the Pali texts, which began with the “Sumedha story.” It describes Sumedha as a prince: “Here lived a Brahmin called Sumedha, of noble birth on both sides.” When his parents died, the official in charge of his wealth brought the accounts-book and declared, “Prince, so much belonged to your mother, so much to your father.”¹²⁴

The *Jātaka-nidāna* uses extensive passages to describe how the prince, before he left for the Himalayas, “seated cross-legged” in the splendid upper story of his mansion, “reflected” upon life, death, and the ways to *nirvāṇa*.¹²⁵ The keyword, “reflected”, appeared six times and “thought” three times near the beginning of the story. This should be the basis of the pensive A. image.

The *Jātaka-nidāna* story is very different from the EA story. It does not have most of the key symbols and the narrative elements of the latter, such as the lotus flower, the water jar, the Brahmin girl, or likeness to Brahmā. But it explains why some of the earliest A. images show him as a prince, who sometimes is in pensive gesture, and why some of the key symbols are absent in these early images. The lotus flower or the

¹²⁴ Jayawickrama, *The Story of Gotama Buddha*, 3.

¹²⁵ Jayawickrama, *The Story of Gotama Buddha*, 5.

lack of it is an indication that new versions of the story emerged as old ones persisted.¹²⁶ Sutras, translated into Chinese, on the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story corroborate the observation that at a later stage A.'s image was transformed from a turban-wearing prince into an ascetic.¹²⁷ None of these sutras mentioned that he was once a prince. It seems that the Mahāyānists had “de-royalized” him to highlight their ideal that everyone could become a buddha. In fact, a stele of A. found in Surajkund, Nalanda, Bihar shows two *apsaras* lifting a crown off his head, signifying the transformation from a prince to an ascetic (See figure 4). Crowns represent secular power. In the *Āgamas*, the Buddha reproached a monk who wished to be reborn as a universal ruler.¹²⁸ As such, the *apsaras* are not putting the crown on A.'s head.

¹²⁶ See Matsumura Junko's (2011) comparative study on the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story. Her research focused on comparing the plot of the stories, instead of the symbols in the stories.

¹²⁷ Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 152.

¹²⁸ T0026.01.0510a19. In the MA sutra, the Buddha said to a monk, “You ignorant man! You shall experience another death before seeking nirvana. Why? Because you had such a thought (to be reborn as a universal ruler).” (汝愚癡人。應更一死而求再終。所以者何。謂汝作是念。)

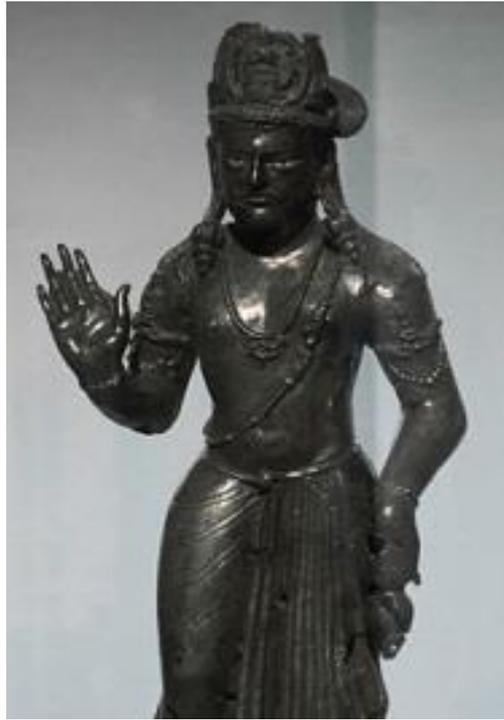


Figure 1: ca. third century, A. is likely based on the earliest version of the Dīpaṅkara Buddha story. The bejewelled turban and the water jar are meant to indicate that he was a prince who became an ascetic. (The Guimet Museum, MA 12128)



Figure 2: ca. third century, is a pensive A. The *Jātaka-nidāna* extensively describes how the prince, “seated cross-legged” in his mansion, reflected upon life, death, and the ways to Nirvāṇa (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University).



Figure 3: ca. second century, Sumedha offers flowers to the Dīpaṅkara Buddha. He holds a jar. The two figures on the left are the same Brahmin girl. In front of the Buddha, Sumedha spreads his hair. The figure in the air is Sumedha elevated by the Buddha after he made the prophecy. (The Metropolitan Museum, 1998. 491)



Figure 4: ca. ninth century, A. is likely based on the EA version of the *Dīpaṅkara Buddha* story. He is a barely clothed ascetic. He has matted hair, with a Buddha image in it. Two apsaras lift a crown off his head, signifying the transformation from a prince to an ascetic. He holds a flower and a water jar. Like *Brahmā*, he has four arms. The stele was found in Surajkund, Nalanda, Bihar, India.

4. The compassionate Sumedha

As can be seen, there is strong parallelism between the changes in A.'s iconography in Buddhist art and the changes to the Sumedha story. What has not changed, however, is Sumedha's compassion. In *Jātaka-*

nidāna, Sumedha thought to himself when he lay in the mire in front of the Dīpaṅkara Buddha:

What use have I of realizing the Dhamma here now, as a man unknown? I will attain Omniscience and become a Buddha for the sake of the multitude with its deities; What use have I of crossing over all by myself, being fully resolute? I will attain Omniscience and become a Buddha for the sake of the multitude with its deities.¹²⁹

Such compassion to “become a Buddha for the sake of the multitude with its deities” is exactly what differentiated the Mahāyānists from what they called the “Hīnayānists.” Sumedha’s reflection is the manifesto of the Bodhisattva Path. In the story translated by Zhi Qian, the Buddha said that he sought to attain Buddhahood “to save sentient beings from sufferings in the spirit of the past buddhas.”¹³⁰ The stanzas in the EA story represent the entire Mahāyāna ideal. They are consistent with the “contributory conditions to enlightenment” in *Jātaka-nidāna*, in which Sumedha made his resolve to give “everything in charity...holding back nothing, without regard to wealth or fame or wife and child or one limb or the other of the body.”¹³¹

In summary, throughout the northern *Āgamas*, other than Sumedha, there is not a second figure that is remotely similar to A. in terms of iconography, quality, and significance. Sumedha in the different versions of the story answers almost all of the questions with regard to A.’s iconography and quality, including why he is a young man (either as a prince or an ascetic); why he is depicted with pensive gesture; why he holds a water jar and a flower (or not); why he has Hindu god images;

¹²⁹ Jayawickrama, *The Story of Gotama Buddha*, 17-18.

¹³⁰ T0185.03.0472c16. *Foshuo taizi ruiying benqi jing* 佛說太子瑞應本起經.

¹³¹ Jayawickrama, *The Story of Gotama Buddha*, 25.

why he wears a deerskin; why he has matted hair; why he has a buddha in his headdress; why his worship is accepted by the *saṃgha* in Faxian's record; and more importantly, why he is worshiped by the Mahāyānists: Sumedha represents the genesis of the Śākyamuni Buddha's Buddhism; He was the first bodhisattva in the Śākyamuni Buddha's Buddhist universe, who has great compassion and mercy, and endured eons of ordeals to become fully awakened. Thus, he is the most ideal bodhisattva—after all, for the followers the Bodhisattva Path that originated from within the *saṃgha*, who could be a more ideal bodhisattva than the Buddha-to-be? In fact, given that in the EBTs “Bodhisattva” refers to the Buddha-to-be, the so-called Bodhisattva Path should be “the Buddha-to-be's Path,” which starts from Sumedha. (See Table 1 for the match of A. and Sumedha's iconographic characteristics)

Having concluded this part of the analysis, it is necessary to revisit the issue of the validity and reliability of the texts. The footnote of the *Taishō Tripiṭaka* notes that the EA version of the Dīpaṅkara Buddha story is similar to the one found in the *Divyāvadāna*,¹³² which may be dated to the second century CE. But this does not mean that the story is a later addition, because different versions of it also appear in many Pāli texts (*Sumedhakathā*).¹³³ As Matsumura Junko notes, there are at least eleven versions of the story in the Pāli Literature, some of which have close links to the Northern texts.¹³⁴ The Pāli versions are generally believed not to include the motif of honoring Dīpaṅkara Buddha with lotus flowers, but the version in the *Apadāna* does feature it.¹³⁵

Admittedly, some of the iconographic characteristics identified in the Sumedha story, such as the water jar, matted hair, lotus flower, ad

¹³² T0125.02.0597a22, cf. *Divyāvadāna*, pp. 246-254.

¹³³ Matsumura, “The Sumedhakathā,” 102.

¹³⁴ Matsumura, “The Sumedhakathā,” 102.

¹³⁵ Matsumura, “The Sumedhakathā,” 112-143.

Hindu god image, may be found in other images in ancient India. In fact, quite a number of the symbols can be found in Brahmā's image, which makes Chandra believe that Brahmā is A.'s prototype.¹³⁶ This being said, Sumedha remains the only explanation for A.'s prototype on the following grounds. First, in the EBTs and early Mahāyāna texts, other than Sumedha, there are no other characters who demonstrate the entire range of the iconographic characteristics synchronically in a single story or diachronically in the evolution of the different versions of the story. Second, in terms of iconography, Brahmā may be close to A., but as a theory to explain A.'s origin, as the literature review shows, it is invalid. It cannot properly explain issues beyond iconographic similarity. Third, there is evidence that the compilers of the EA constructed Sumedha's image based on Brahmā's image, probably in an attempt to appeal to the brahmins. In the two versions of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha story in the EA, Sumedha is depicted as being like Brahmā. The EA also contains narratives in which the Buddha says that he was reborn as Brahmā and Indra.¹³⁷ A sutra translated into Chinese in the 6th century CE described Sumedha's voice as "clear and pure, like that of Brahmā's."¹³⁸ These well explain why A. appears similar to the Hindu gods. Lastly, as the following analysis will show, Sumedha as an explanation for A.'s origin is inherently consistent with the meaning of the title "Avalokiteśvara" and the symbolism of the eleven-headed A., while all other explanations are not.

¹³⁶ See Chandra, "The Origin of Avalokita-svara/Avalokit-Eśvara," 198.

¹³⁷ T0125.02.0773a04. "或作梵天...又復三十七變為釋提桓因" ("or reborn as Brahmā...and was also reborn as Śakra thirty-seven times.")

¹³⁸ T0190.03.0665a23. *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經 (Sutra of the Legends of the Buddha), translated by Jñānagupta.

A.'s title and the eleven-headed A.

1. The meaning of A.'s title

The meaning of “Avalokiteśvara” has long been an issue. Scholars generally agree that the first part of the title, either as *Avalokita*, *Avaloka*, or *Avalokite*, means “looking down,” “survey,”¹³⁹ “look upon,” “view,” or “behold.”¹⁴⁰ But there is hardly an agreement on the second part of the title. In early A.-related texts translated into Chinese, it was translated as *yin* 音 (sound), but later some monks and scholars disputed it. Some translated it into “lord” or “god.” This makes the compound “Avalokiteśvara” extremely confusing. Scholars have engaged in extensive discussions of its meaning.¹⁴¹ Interpretations range from “Lord who looks down,” “Lord who shines down from above,”¹⁴² “Lord of what we see,” “Lord who is seen (from on high),” “Lord who sees (from on high),” “Lord who surveys,”¹⁴³ among others. The title’s translation is also confusing in the Chinese language context. Historically it was translated as *Guang shi yin* 光世音, *Guan shi yin* 觀世音, or *Guan shi zizai* 觀世自在. But none of them makes clear sense because their literal translations are respectively “light world sound,” “see world sound,” or “see world self-existent.” Xuanzang corrected the translation into *Guan zizai* 觀自在, but his literal translation, “see self-existent,” is confusing in the Chinese context. Many interpreted *zizai* 自在 as “the (self-existent) sentient beings.” They assume that the second part of the title is an object of the verb “look” in

¹³⁹ Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*, 31.

¹⁴⁰ Boucher, “Gandhāran Source,” 301.

¹⁴¹ See extensive discussions on the title in Boucher, “Gandhāran Source,” 298-305; Nat-tier, “Avalokiteśvara,” 187-195; Chandra, “Origin of Avalokiteśvara,” 189-193.

¹⁴² Divakaran, “Avalokiteśvara,” 146.

¹⁴³ Cited from Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*, 31.

light of Chinese grammar, without realizing that in Indic languages it could be a modifier of the verb.

Xuanzang studied at the Nalanda Monastery-University for five years and taught there for one year.¹⁴⁴ He translated the six-hundred-volume *Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra* after he returned to China. There is every reason to believe that his translation is correct. In fact, Xuanying 玄應, a contemporary of Xuanzang, corroborated Xuanzang's translation as being correct, based on the "palm leaf sutras found in India."¹⁴⁵

In *Xiyu ji*, Xuanzang recorded seeing A. statues almost a dozen times, showing that he was very interested in the bodhisattva.¹⁴⁶ When he saw a statue of A. near the town of Mungali, Xuanzang added a note:

¹⁴⁴ T2053.50.0239b29, *fan jing wu sui* 凡經五歲 ("in total [Xuanzang] spent for five years [at Nalanda]"); T2053.50.0244b27, 戒賢論師遣法師為眾講攝大乘論 (Śīlabhadra let the Dharma Master [Xuanzang] teach the assembly the *Mahāyāna-samgraha*.) *Datang daci'en-si sanzhan fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 (A Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Cī'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty), Huili 慧立, seventh century CE.

¹⁴⁵ T2131.54.1062a01, in *Fanyi mingyi ji* 翻譯名義集 (Collection of Meanings and Terms in Translation), compiled by Fa Yun 法雲 (1088-1158 CE): "Dharma Master Xuanying [Ying fashi 應法師] said that ...The old forms of translation as *Guan shi yin* 觀世音 (see world sound) or *Guang shi yin* 光世音 (light world sound) are both erroneous. Palm-leaf sutras found in India all used *she po luo* 舍婆羅, which is translated as *zizai* 自在. Texts from the Snow Mountains all said it was *suo po luo* 娑婆羅, which is translated as *yin* 音 (sound). This has to be due to the similarity of the pronunciation between *she* 舍 and *suo* 娑 and as a result the error occurred."

¹⁴⁶ All of the following references are to Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki*: "above a great mountain pass, there is a figure of Kwan-tsz'-tsai Bodhisattva" (60); "We arrive at Vihāra, in which is a figure of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva" (131); "to the south of the saṅghārāma is a little saṅghārāma in which is a standing figure of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva" (160); "on the banks of the Ganges there is a statue of Avalokiteśvara bodhisattva" (212); "On this southern side is a standing figure of Kwan-tsz'-tsai (Avalokiteśvara) Bodhisattva" (172); "to the north 100 paces or so, is a vihāra in which is a figure of Kwan-tsz'-tsai Bodhisattva" (173); "In the exact middle of the vihāra is a figure of Kwan-tsz'-tsai Bodhi-

[Avalokiteśvara] in Chinese means *Guan zizai* 觀自在. [The Chinese title is] a compound and is pronounced together as is the Sanskrit word. [When the compound is] broken down and pronounced separately, it becomes *A fu lu zhi duo* 阿縛盧枳多, translated as *guan* 觀, and *Yi shi fa lu* 伊濕伐羅, translated as *zizai* 自在. The old forms of translation, such as *Guang shi yin* 光世音, *Guan shi yin* 觀世音, or *Guan shi zi zai* 觀世自在 are all erroneous.¹⁴⁷

In his English translation of Xuanzang's travelogue, Samuel Beal (1825-1889) added a footnote to explain Xuanzang's note. He back translated *zizai* 自在 into *Íśvara*, which he transliterated into "self-existent" and interpreted its meaning as "god." This obviously influenced many later interpretations of the title. Beal said:

Avalokiteśvara, in Chinese the phonetic symbols are 'O-fo-lu-che-to-i-shi-fa-luo. There is a note in the text explaining the meaning of this name to be "the looking (*kwan*) or beholding god" (*Íśvara*, Chn. Tsz' tsai, "self-existent"). The note adds that the old forms of translation, viz., *Kwong-shai-yin*, "luminous voice," *Kwan-shai-yin*, "beholding or regarding voice," *Kwan-shai-tsz'-tsai*, "beholding the world god," are all erroneous. There is a good reason for believing that the form *Kwan-shai-yin*, "beholding or attending the voice of men," arose from a confusion of the "looking-down god" with a quality attributed to a similar deity of "hearing prayers."¹⁴⁸

sattva" (206); "Not far from this there is a vihāra in which is a statue of Kwan-tsz'-tsai Bodhisattva" (195); "Not far to the south of the city is a saṅghārāma in which is a stone image of Kwan-tsz'-tsai Bodhisattva" (257).

¹⁴⁷ T2087.51.0883b22. Samuel Beal paraphrased the note in his English translation of *Xiyu ji* instead of directly translating it. Here I translated the original Chinese text.

¹⁴⁸ Xuanzang, *Si-yu-ki*, 127-128.

In the Chinese Āgamas, however, *zizai* 自在 has a very different meaning. In some cases, it means “sovereignty” or “at one’s free will,” which often depicts a *cakravartin*’s power.¹⁴⁹ When it is associated with Buddhist monks or the Buddha, however, it invariably means “freedom,” “emancipation,” and “the other shore.”¹⁵⁰ It never means “god.” To name a few examples: *yu sichan er de zizai* 於四禪而得自在 (“gaining freedom through the fourth meditation”);¹⁵¹ *de shentong li, xin de zizai* 得神通力, 心得自在 (“through gaining supernormal power, the mind becomes liberated”).¹⁵² In the MA *Upāli sūtra*, *zizai* 自在 is used to depict the Buddha reaching “the other shore” and gaining “emancipation”: *dasheng xiuxi yi* 大聖修習已 (“Of the noble one who has accomplished the cultivation”); *de de shuo zizai* 得德說自在 (“who has attained the virtues worth attaining and expounded on emancipation”); *budong chang zizai* 不動常自在 (“who is not perturbed and has gained permanent freedom”).¹⁵³ In *Vimuttimaggā*, which was composed between the first and second century CE and translated into Chinese in the sixth century CE, *zizai* 自在 invariably means “free,” “freedom,” and “emancipation.” For example, *shizun chengjiu dao zizai bi’an* 世尊成就到自在彼岸 means “the Blessed One has reached the other shore of freedom.”¹⁵⁴ The above examples also show that *zizai* 自在 can be an adjective or a noun.

¹⁴⁹ For example, see T0026.01.0494b28, *youji zizai* 由己自在.

¹⁵⁰ In modern Chinese *zizai* still has the meaning of freedom; for example, *ziyou zizai* 自由自在, a reduplicative set phrase, means freedom.

¹⁵¹ T012502.0659c25.

¹⁵² T0099.02.0128c24.

¹⁵³ T0026.01.0632b09.

¹⁵⁴ See T1648.32.0427c01, *Jie tuo dao lun* 解脫道論 (*Vimuttimaggā*, Treatise on the Path to Liberation), translated into Chinese by Sengqiepoluo 僧伽婆羅 (Savghapāla, 460-524 CE). English translation by N. R. M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera, *The Path of Freedom*, 145, 147.

As such, it is time to question whether the back translation of *I shi fa luo* 伊濕伐羅 into *Ísvāra* is correct.¹⁵⁵ Based on the similarity of pronunciation, the meaning, and the context, the earliest form of *I shi fa luo* is most likely *aiśvārya*, which is translated as “sovereignty” and “freedom” in *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*.¹⁵⁶ In some cases it was translated as “freedom directly through mastery,”¹⁵⁷ “a state of command and freedom,”¹⁵⁸ or “self-governing” and “autonomous.”¹⁵⁹ As such, A.’s original title should be “Avalokitaśvārya,” and “aiśvārya” is a modifier of the verb “Avalokit”. The title means “(He who) sees freely”, “(He who) sees with freedom”, or “(He who) sees from the other shore.”

If the prototype of A. is Sumedha, then “He who sees with freedom” has to be the Buddha. In fact, throughout the *Āgamas*, there is a meta-narrative within which the Buddha recounted how he “sees” the world with the eye of an Awakened One. The narrative appears verbatim twenty-two times in the MA, twelve times in the EA, four times in the AA, and two times in the DA. When the Buddha became fully enlightened, he hesitated over whether or not to teach the Dharma to the sentient beings. Then Brahmā Sahampati appeared. He requested the Buddha to teach the Dharma. The Buddha recounted:

¹⁵⁵ In fact, A.’s title was spelled as Avalokita-svara and Avalokiteśvara, as were respectively documented by Otani Kozui and Betorofusky. “Avalokita-svara” is older than “Avalokiteśvara.” Goto argues that it became “Avalokiteśvara” probably due to the influence of the Brahmanic god *Ísvāra*. Goto, *Avalokiteśvara*, 240-241.

¹⁵⁶ Dhammajoti translated *aiśvārya* as “freedom” in *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, 664. The context in which *aiśvārya* is used shows that it means “freedom:” “Being feeble in their intrinsic natures, they have no sovereignty (*aiśvārya*). They are dependent on others, they are without their own activity and are unable to do as they wish,” 188.

¹⁵⁷ Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration*, 33.

¹⁵⁸ Malinar, “Following One’s Desire,” 757-782.

¹⁵⁹ Page, “Affirmation of Eternal Self,” 48.

Then, having understood Brahmā's invitation, out of compassion for beings, I surveyed the world with the eye of an Awakened One. As I did so, I saw beings with little dust in their eyes and those with much, those with keen faculties and those with dull, those with good attributes and those with bad, those easy to teach and those hard, some of them seeing disgrace and danger in the other world.¹⁶⁰

Then, the Buddha responded to Brahmā's request with a stanza:

Brahmā Sahampati has now come

To persuade the Tathāgata to open the door of the Dharma

For those who listen to it shall have solid faith in it

And they would understand the deep meaning of it

Just as one standing on the top of a high mountain might see people all around below

I now ascend the palace fashioned of Dharma, with all-around vision.¹⁶¹

With this recounting, the Buddha vividly narrated the moment he became a fully Awakened One, who stood "on the top of a high mountain," "with all-around vision," "out of compassion for beings," and "surveyed the world." This should be the origin of A.'s title. It represents the fulfillment of Mahāyāna's highest ideal: to become a fully enlightened Buddha through the Bodhisattva Path that Sumedha took, instead of becoming an *arhat*.

¹⁶⁰ T0125.02.0666c03.

¹⁶¹ T0125.02.0666c03.

When Xuanzang visited the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha became enlightened, he saw two very old statues of A., “both looking eastward:”

In the middle of the enclosure surrounding the Bodhi-tree is the diamond throne (Vajrasana)... After the Nirvāṇa of Buddha, the rulers of the different countries having learned by tradition the measurement of the diamond throne, decided the limits from north to south by two figures of Kwan-tsz'-tsai (Avalokiteśvara) Bodhisattva, there seated and looking eastward. The old people say that as soon as the figures of this Bodhisattva sink in the ground and disappear, the law of Buddha will come to an end. The figure at the south angle is now buried up to its breast.¹⁶²

When the Buddha became enlightened, he looked eastward at the morning star. It would be very unusual if the two eastward-looking A. statues, erected right on the spot where the Buddha became enlightened, were not his Bodhisattva images. That “as soon as the figures of this Bodhisattva sink in the ground and disappear, the law of Buddha will come to an end” only indicates that the statues represent the Buddha-to-be. In addition, if the statues were indeed erected “after the *nirvāṇa* of Buddha” by the “rulers of the different countries,” the time had to be before King Ashoka united the Subcontinent.

In fact, Xuanzang’s depiction and the *Āgamas*’ meta-narrative are perfectly consistent with the narratives in two *Avalokita* sutras of the Lokottaravāda Mahāsāṃghika *Mahāvastu*. As John C. Holt noted, the first sutra depicted the Buddha as follows: “from this shore surveys the shore beyond;” In the second sutra, a monk said to the Buddha “Let the Exalted One disclose what he saw, when as a bodhisattva, he had come to the bo-

¹⁶² Xuanzang, *Si-Yu-Ki*, 116.

dhi tree and stood on the bodhi throne and for the benefit and welfare of the whole world, made his survey.” The translator of the sutra, Jones, noted that the use of the term *avalokitam* was subsequently incorporated into the name of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.¹⁶³

In short, the meaning of “Avalokiteśvara,” the meta-narrative in the *Āgamas*, Xuanzang’s record, and the *Avalokita sutras* all indicate that the title of A. is based on the narrative that the Buddha used to recount the moment when he surveyed the world upon awakening.

2. The eleven-headed A. and its probable Āgama origin

One of the most unusual A. images is the eleven-headed A. The earliest and the only existing eleven-headed A. is the relief in Cave LXVI in Kanheri, India dated to the sixth century CE. The image has four hands and eleven faces.¹⁶⁴ The eleven-headed A. was popular in Central Asia and China proper during the seventh and eighth centuries CE.¹⁶⁵

There are many theories on why A. has eleven faces, including the eleven violent gods of the Vedic age;¹⁶⁶ the eleven *bhūmis*; the ten *pāramitās* and the *Tathāgata*; the twelve links of *pratīyasamutpāda* (chain of causation); the eleven faces of *upāya* (skillful means) and one face being that of Absolute Truth; the eleven *avidyā* (ignorances) of sentient beings; the ten vital breaths, with the heart as the eleventh; the ten directions of the Buddhist universe, plus the bodhisattva’s own face.¹⁶⁷ However, none of the above explanations is satisfactory, because they fail to

¹⁶³ Holt, *Buddha in the Crown*, 32-33.

¹⁶⁴ Gokhale, “Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara,” 371-372.

¹⁶⁵ Lee and Wai-kam, “A Colossal Eleven-Faced Kuan-yin,” 3.

¹⁶⁶ Lee and Wai-kam, “A Colossal Eleven-Faced Kuan-yin,” 3.

¹⁶⁷ Neville, “Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara,” 11-13.

explain how and why these characteristics have to do with A. Some explanations do not even add up to eleven with self-consistency.

This research argues that A.'s eleven heads have to do with his fundamental quality, namely loving-kindness and compassion, which are a short-hand for the *brahmavihāras* (divine abidings). In the *Āgamas*, both the *benefits* of and the *ways* to practice the *brahmavihāras* are linked to the number eleven. The Buddha speaks of the eleven benefits of practicing *brahmavihāras* as such:

If a sentient being practices loving-kindness and widely spreads its meanings, he will be rewarded with eleven benefits. Which eleven benefits? Sleeping in comfort; waking in comfort; dreaming no evil dreams; deities guard him; dear to human being; poison, weapon, fire, water, and robbers do not affect him. He appears in Brahmā's world if he dies.¹⁶⁸

The ways to practice the *brahmavihāras* also have to do with the number eleven. In an MA sutra, for example, the Buddha referred to ten external directions when he provided instruction on how to practice the *brahmavihāras*:

There is the case where a monk keeps pervading the first direction [to the east] with an awareness imbued with loving kindness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. Thus, the four space diagonals, above and below, everywhere, in its entirety, he keeps pervading the all-encompassing cosmos with an awareness imbued with loving kindness.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ T0125.02.0806a20.

¹⁶⁹ T0026.01.0439b02.

In *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa explains that in addition to the ten external directions in practicing the *brahmavihāras*, “[F]irst of all it should be developed only towards oneself,”¹⁷⁰ then he “[D]wells pervading (intent upon) one direction with his heart imbued with lovingkindness, likewise the second direction, likewise the third direction...”¹⁷¹ Thus, in total, there are eleven directions.

The *brahmavihāras* are greatly highlighted in the Āgamas.¹⁷² Some texts even indicate that the Buddha attained enlightenment through the *brahmavihāras*. In the Buddha’s words: “It was with the armor of loving-kindness that I conquered Māra and his associates under the Bodhi tree and became enlightened. Therefore, I know that loving-kindness is the paramount Dharma.”¹⁷³ The text on how to practice the *brahmavihāras*, namely “[He] Dwells pervading (intent upon) one direction with his heart imbued with lovingkindness...,” appeared verbatim thirty-two times in the MA and sixteen times in the EA. At least four suttas in the SA are about the advantages of compassion and loving-kindness. As such, the *brahmavihāras* are the most important practices for the Bodhisattva Path that Sumedha took. They are the most plausible basis for the eleven-headed A.

¹⁷⁰ Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, 322.

¹⁷¹ Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, 333-334.

¹⁷² Here are some examples: “The Tathāgata always practices loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity” (T0125.02.0646b05). “In the Tathāgata’s Dharma, there are four gardens...the garden of loving-kindness, the garden of compassion, the garden of sympathetic joy, and the garden of equanimity” (T0125.02.0669a22). “Mindfulness of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, emptiness, formlessness, and conviction are the most important qualities in the Desire Realm” (T0125.02.0664b02).

¹⁷³ T0125.02.0773b13.

Discussion and Conclusion

Having concluded the analysis on A.'s iconography and title, along with the eleven-headed A., we can now draw the following conclusion: A. is a composite character representing the entire Bodhisattva aspect of the Buddha. His iconography is based on Sumedha; his title is based on the narrative with which the Buddha recounted how he surveyed the world upon awakening. They respectively represent the starting point and the ending point of the Bodhisattva Path. The *brahmavihāras*, in the form of the eleven-headed A., represents the most important practices of the Bodhisattva Path. Such a conclusion best explains why A. was worshipped by the followers of the Bodhisattva Path, or the early Mahāyānists. The reason is obvious: The early Mahāyānists believed that a fully enlightened buddha is superior to an *arhat* or a *pacceka-buddha*. As such, they wished to repeat the journey that the Buddha-to-be had taken. That journey started from Sumedha and was consummated at the moment when the Buddha became fully awakened.

If A. is the Buddha-to-be, then how was he transformed into a different "god"? There might never be a satisfying answer. Through more than two thousand years of history, people of different cultures, languages, and religious sects have contributed to the creation and re-creation of A. In this process, it is not surprising that miscommunication occurred, as is evidenced by the fact that the Indian male A. was transformed into the female Guanyin in East Asia, and that the Sumedha in the Chinese Tripiṭakas was copied into the Maitreya Bodhisattva in the Japanese and Korean Tripiṭakas (See fn.105).

Most likely, however, A.'s metamorphosis first took place when the Amitābha cult emerged in the second to third century CE. Scholars have convincingly demonstrated that the Amitābha cult emerged under

the heavy influence of the Indo-Iranian Mithra cult.¹⁷⁴ The cult absorbed into its belief system the A. devotionism that had long been associated with proto-Mahāyāna Buddhists within the early schools. It composed sutras, such as, for example, the *Sukhāvativyūha sūtra*, in which the Buddha says that A. is an acolyte of Amitābha, which very likely caused the initial dissociation of A. from the Buddha-to-be. The Amitābha cult originated in northwestern Indian, while A. worship likely originated in Central India. Thus, there is a strong likelihood that the cult did not have a clear understanding of A.

When the UDAB was included as a chapter of the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra* (See fn. 23), which shows clear influence of, if not solely compiled by the Amitābha cult,¹⁷⁵ the composers created a setting

¹⁷⁴ See Machida, "Life and Light." Machida argues that archeological evidence shows that the cult of Mithra prevailed in northwest India during the second century CE. It is the period when Amida obtained another name, Amitābha, or Infinite Light, as is shown in the development of the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Sukhāvativyūha sūtra*. He further argues that there are parallel characteristics between Pure Land Buddhism and Zoroastrianism: "Zurvan Akaranak, the god of fate in later Zoroastrianism, and Amida Buddha both signify infinite time and space. The Zoroastrians believed in a heaven of boundless light presided over by Ahura Mazda, just as the Pure Land Buddhists believe in *Sukhāvati*, the luminous land of bliss where Amitābha resides." Machida argues that it is not difficult to imagine the influence of Iranian mythology on Pure Land Buddhism, 26-28. See similar conclusions in Yinshun, *The Origin and Development of Early Mahayana Buddhism*, 480-482; Eitel and Takahawa, *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism*, 8.

¹⁷⁵ The chapter on A. (XXIV) in the *Lotus Sutra* translated by H. Kern from a Sanskrit text found in Kashgar contains a verse for Amitābha: "30. In the west, where the pure world Sukhākara is situated, there the Chief Amitābha, the tamer of men, has his fixed abode. ... 32. And the Chief Amitābha himself is seated on a throne in the pure and nice cup of a lotus, and shines as the Sāla-king," 417-418. However, the version used by Kumārajīva in his Chinese translation does not have the verse. This is an indication that there was a different understanding of the relationship between A. and Amitābha at a very early time. Yang, Fu-xue argues that the Kashgar text was a version earlier than the one used by Kumārajīva.

in which the Buddha and A. were present at the same time. This further caused the split of A.'s identity. The *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka sūtra*, an Amitābha cult text, further reinforced such dissociation through a far-fetched narrative that A. is Amitābha-to-be's eldest son and that Buddha-to-be is Amitābha-to-be's house priest. The later schools, such as the Tantrayāna and the Tathāgatagarbha, composed sutras in which A. became a follower of Śākyamuni Buddha.¹⁷⁶ By then, A. had become a convenient but completely metamorphosed object of worship.

Interestingly, Faxian and Xuanzang never mentioned Amitābha in their travelogues,¹⁷⁷ as if the buddha whose power and brightness, according to the *Sukhāvativyūhaḥ-sūtra*, “exceeded those of all buddhas in the ten directions,”¹⁷⁸ had never existed in Indian history. Amitābha was not worshipped by the Mahāyānists in Faxian's record. Nor were the voluminous *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra* and the *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka sūtra*. In fact, the composers of the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka sūtra* were rejected by the *saṃgha*, and they were accused of plagiarism.¹⁷⁹ There is evidence show-

¹⁷⁶ For example, see the Tantrayāna sutra *Qianyan qianbi guanshiyin pusa tuoluoni shen-zhou jing* 千眼千臂觀世音菩薩陀羅尼神咒經 (Nilakaṇṭha-sūtra, The Sutra of The Divine Dharani Spell Of The Thousand-eyed and Thousand-armed Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, T1057A.20.0083b04), translated by Zhi Tong 智通 between 627-649 CE. Also see the Tathāgatagarbha text *Da foding shoulenyan jing* 大佛頂首楞嚴經 (Śūraṅgama-sūtra, Sutra of the Foremost Shurangama at the Great Buddha's Summit, T0945.19.0106b03), translated by Meghaśikhara 彌迦釋迦 (Mijiashijia, seventh to eighth century CE). In both sutras, A. is follower of the Buddha.

¹⁷⁷ Eitel and Takahuwa, *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism*, 8. Xuanzang translated a sutra on Amitābha, *Chengzan jingtu fo sheshou jing* 稱讚淨土佛攝受經 (Sukhāvativyūhaḥ-sūtra, Sutra in Praise of the Pure Land Buddha, T0367.12.0348b23), but it was “translated at the imperial command” (*fengzhao yi*, 奉詔譯).

¹⁷⁸ T0360.12.0270a23.

¹⁷⁹ See Kern Lotus Sutra (XXII), 259-262: “We will suffer, patiently endure, O Lord, the injuries, threats, blows and threats with sticks at the hands of foolish men...The Tīrthikas, themselves bent on profit and honour, will say of us that we are so, and-

ing friction and contestation between the devotionism toward Śākya-muni Buddha and Amitābha, and in ancient India a movement had arisen to defend the former against the latter.¹⁸⁰ Xuanzang reported seeing A. statues nearly a dozen times. A. was not mentioned as an acolyte of Amitābha. In China, Buddhists during the Tang Dynasty engaged in a heated debate over which of the heavens, namely Maitreya's Tuṣita Heaven or Amitābha's Pure Land, they should be reborn into.¹⁸¹ Xuanzang avidly promoted Maitreya's Heaven and vowed to be reborn there.¹⁸²

The Amitābha cult originated in the Kushan empire and flourished only outside of India. Ironically, due to geographic proximity, it is among the earliest waves of "Buddhism" that first reached East Asia during the second to third century CE, where it became firmly rooted. Its texts and narratives have since affected the practices and understandings of "Mahāyāna Buddhism" beyond the Subcontinent. When Buddhism completely disappeared in India, the Amitābha cult's texts became part of the earliest available "Mahāyāna" sutras. But as the current study shows, it is not the early Mahāyāna Buddhism that originated in India proper. It is time to dissociate A. from the narratives created by the Amitābha cult. As Schopen noted with great insight two decades ago, "if we are to make any progress in our understanding we may have to finally and fully realize that the history of Mahāyāna literature and the histo-

shame on such monks! - they will preach their own fictions... in the midst of the assembly, accuse us of plagiarism. They will speak evil of us and propagate the Tīrthadocctrine.... One will have to bear frowning looks, repeated disavowal (or concealment), expulsion from the monasteries, many and manifold abuses. Yet mindful of the command of the Lord of the world we will in the last period undauntedly proclaim this Sūtra in the midst of the congregation."

¹⁸⁰ Amstutz, "The Politics of Pure Land Buddhism in India," 77.

¹⁸¹ Wang Jiuan, "The Maitreya Faith," 203-212.

¹⁸² Wang Jiuan, "The Maitreya Faith," 195-201.

ry of the religious movement that bears the same name are not necessarily the same thing.”¹⁸³

As a last note, this research proposes that Mañjuśrī, who was worshipped along with A. by the Mahāyānists in Faxian’s record, might be a historical figure. His teaching on *prajñāpāramitā* (the perfection of wisdom), along with the practice of the *brahmavihāras* (compassion), constitute the two origins of early Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Notes: The author would like to thank Dr. Daniel Boucher for his comments on the literature review and Dr. Matsumura Junko for providing a valuable text. The researcher is also indebted to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

¹⁸³ Schopen, “Inscription on the Kuṣān Image,” 125.

Appendix 1: “A.’s iconography, quality, title and their sources in Chinese texts and the *Jātaka-nidāna*”

A.’s iconography, quality, and title	Symbols related to Sumedha in different versions of the Dīpankara Buddha story and the Chinese texts; Origin of A.’s title in the <i>Āgamas</i>		Reference in the Taishō Tripiṭaka
Blue lotus flowers	持七枚青蓮華。	《太子瑞應本起經》	T0185.03.0472c29
	有華七枚。華名優鉢。	《異出菩薩本起經》	T0188.03.0617b25
	密將七莖優鉢羅華。內於瓶中。	《佛本行集經》	T0190.03.0666c14
	齋持七莖殫鉢羅花。	《大寶積經菩薩藏會》	T0310.11.0318b04
	手持七枝優鉢羅華。	《大乘菩薩藏正法經》	T0316.11.0883a21
	密持七莖青蓮花過。	《過去現在因果經》	T0189.03.0621c25
Likeness to Brahmā	顏貌端政。眾中獨出。像如梵天。	《增壹阿含經》	T0125.02.0758a14
	其聲清淨。如梵天音。	《佛本行集經》	T0190.03.0665a23
	今獲大利。乃使梵天躬自下降。		T0125.02.0598a13
	善來。大梵神天。 時。超術梵志便生此念。此諸梵志謂呼吾是梵天。然復吾亦非梵天。是時。超術梵志語諸婆羅門曰。止。止。諸賢。勿呼吾是梵天也。	《增壹阿含經》	T0125.02.0598a16 T0125.02.0598a17
Water Jar	手執水瓶及杖繖蓋。行入城邑。	《過去現在因果經》	T0189.03.0621c03
	超術梵志受此金杖澡罐已。便往詣鉢摩大國。	《增壹阿含經》	T0125.02.0598b15
Matted hair	作仙人髻。披鹿皮衣。	《過去現在因果經》	T0189.03.0622b21
	乃解髮布地。	《太子瑞應本起經》	T0185.03.0473a27
	即布髮令佛足蹈之。	《異出菩薩本起經》	T0188.03.0617c24
	仍又解髮。亦以覆之。	《過去現在因果經》	T0189.03.0622b25
	解十二年金色髮髻以布于地。	《大寶積經菩薩藏會》	T0310.11.0318c22
	披鹿皮衣。手執水瓶及杖繖蓋。行入城邑。		T0189.03.0621c03
	披鹿皮衣。纒蔽形體。	《過去現在因果經》	T0185.03.0473a07
	猶見善慧。作仙人髻。披鹿皮衣。		T0189.03.0622b21
	披鹿皮衣。行欲入國。此何道士。披鹿皮衣。	《太子瑞應本起經》	T0185.03.0472c22
	佛為菩薩時。名摩納。居山中。衣鹿皮衣。	《異出菩薩本起經》	T0188.03.0617b20

Deerskin	我今雖無上妙衣服。唯有所著弊鹿皮衣。	《大寶積經菩薩藏會》	T0310.11.0318c05
	取鹿皮衣敷置其上。此弊鹿皮衣。		T0310.11.0318c10
	便以足趾踏鹿皮衣。		T0310.11.0318c13
	披鹿皮衣。留住山中。	《佛說菩薩投身餓虎起塔因緣經》	T0172.03.0426b10
	唯有所著弊鹿皮衣。	《大寶積經第五十四》	T0310.11.0318c06
Princely image	我身上唯一鹿皮。我將鹿皮布於地上。	《佛本行集經》	T0190.03.0667b28
	我時即鋪所有鹿皮。解髮布散。		T0190.03.0667c08
Pensive gesture	Here lived a Brahmin called Sumedha, of noble birth on both sides (p.3) Prince, so much belonged to your mother, so much to your father (p. 3)	<i>Jātaka-nidāna</i> (Jayawickrama, The Story of Gotama Buddha)	
	Then one day, the Wise Sumedha was remaining in solitude in the splendid upper storey of his mansion, and began to reflect seated cross legged (p.5) He further thought... (p. 5) He further reflected... (p. 6) He further reflected...(p. 6) The Wise Sumedha, having thus, with diverse similes, reflected on this subject (p. 7)	<i>Jātaka-nidāna</i>	
Buddha in head-dress	汝當作佛。名釋迦文。菩薩已得記。	《太子瑞應本起經》	T0185.03.0473a22
	汝當為釋迦文佛。	《異出菩薩本起經》	T0188.03.0617c23
	汝以是行。過無量阿僧祇劫。當得成佛。	《過去現在因果經》	T0189.03.0622b13
	當得作佛。號釋迦牟尼。	《大寶積經菩薩藏會》	T0310.11.0316c14
	於未來世。過僧祇劫。當得作佛。號釋迦牟尼十號	《佛本行集經》	T0190.03.0670a27

	具足。		
Compassion	捐己布施。仁活天下。悲窮傷厄。慰沃憂感。育養眾生。救濟苦人。	《太子瑞應本起經》	T0185.03.0472c15
	感傷群生耽惑愛欲。沈流苦海。起慈悲心。欲拔濟之。	《過去現在因果經》	T0189.03.0621a04
	汝能發起如是弘願，汝一切捨所有之物…即白佛言：『世尊！我能。』	《佛本行集經》	T0190.03.0668a12
	“What use have I of realizing the Dhamma here now, as a man unknown? I will attain Omniscience and become a Buddha for the sake of the multitude with its deities;” “What use have I of crossing over all by myself, being fully resolute? I will attain Omniscience and become a Buddha for the sake of the multitude with its deities (p.17-18)	<i>Jātaka-nidāna</i>	
The title of Avalokiteśvara	梵天今來勸。如來開法門聞者得篤信。分別深法要猶在高山頂。普觀眾生類	《增壹阿含經》	T0125.02.0593b17-19
	我復以天眼觀眾生類。生者死者。善色惡色。善趣惡趣。若好若醜。隨行善惡。皆悉分別。	《增壹阿含經》	T0125.02.0666c03

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