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Was Lushan Huiyuan a Pure Land Buddhist? Evidence from His Correspondence with Kumārajīva About *Nianfo* Practice

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Abstract

The Buddhist community in China has traditionally considered Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠 (334-416) to be the first “patriarch” (zu 祖) of the Pure Land school, based almost entirely on his having hosted a meeting of monks and scholars in the year 402 to engage in *nianfo* 念佛 practice and vow rebirth in the Western Paradise of Amitābha. This article examines the extent to which Huiyuan might be considered a “Pure Land Buddhist” by looking at an exchange between him and the great translator Kumārajīva on the topic of Buddha-contemplation, as well as other sources for his life that demonstrate his participation in activities that could be regarded as part of the Pure Land repertoire of ritual and doctrine in the early fifth century.

Keywords:

Lushan Huiyuan, Pure Land, Kumārajīva, *nianfo*, Patriarch.

廬山慧遠是淨土信仰者嗎？ 以慧遠與鳩摩羅什對念佛修行的書信問答為論據

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提要

在中國佛教傳統上視廬山慧遠是淨土宗的初祖，大部分是基於他在西元 402 年所舉辦的法會，其中參與的僧眾及學者專修念佛法門及誓願往生西方阿彌陀佛淨土者。此篇文章藉由考察慧遠與偉大的翻譯家鳩摩羅什對於念佛三昧的交流，以及陳述其生平的其他出處，也就是對慧遠從事被視為第五世紀早期淨土宗儀式與教法的部份，檢視其被視為淨土信仰者的程度。

關鍵字：廬山慧遠、淨土、鳩摩羅什、念佛、初祖

Introduction

Early in the year 406 C.E., the eminent Chinese monk Huiyuan of Mount Lu (Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠 334-416) wrote a letter to the Kuchean monk-translator Kumārajīva (Ch: Jiumoloushi 鳩摩羅什), then residing in the northern capital of Chang'an 長安.¹ Huiyuan had heard that Kumārajīva was considering leaving China to return west, and so he wanted to write to him on “several tens of” doctrinal matters that continued to perplex him². Accordingly, Huiyuan composed a series of questions that he sent to Kumārajīva. After receiving the latter’s response, he sent a further set of questions, and by the end of 407 he received Kumārajīva’s responses to these. With these two exchanges, their correspondence came to an end.³ Later redactors took these letters and rearranged the contents according to eighteen sets of questions and answers, and in this form the letters have been preserved in the Taishō canon under the title *Dasheng da yi zhang* 大乘大義章 (*Topics on the Great Meaning of the Mahāyāna* T 1856).⁴

The value of these letters as a window into the early uptake of Buddhist doctrine in China is beyond question. Despite this, however, there has not yet appeared a comprehensive analysis of the text as a whole in western literature. Instead, scholars have focused on particular aspects of the text while leaving others aside. For example, Erik Zürcher, in his landmark study of early Chinese Buddhism, devoted significant space to the study of this text, but ignored Kumārajīva’s responses to Huiyuan’s questions on the grounds that Kumārajīva did not represent Chinese Buddhist thought and so fell outside the purview of his study (Zürcher 1959, 227). Richard H. Robinson translated only four of the eighteen sections (numbers 12 to 15) of the work in his *Early Madhyamika in India and China*, taking those that were most relevant to the topic of his book.⁵

Having pointed this out, I confess that it is not my intention to provide a full analysis of all the sections here, and so my treatment will also be selective. However, I hope that by calling attention to one aspect of the text, I will help fill in one of the gaps left by previous scholars. Among the eighteen groups of questions and answers, we will look at the eleventh, which has to do with the status of the Buddha-visualization exercise and the status of the Buddha that one sees as a result of this, either while waking or in a dream. According to the heading of this section, it is a question about *nianfo samādhi* 念佛三昧 (T 1856, 134b4).

1 For the dating of this correspondence, see Wagner (1971, 31-34).

2 *Gao seng zhuan* 高僧傳, T 2059, 359c28-360a2. An English version appears in Zürcher (1959, 248).

3 R.G. Wagner argues convincingly from both internal and external evidence that there were two exchanges of letters, rather than the eighteen assumed by other scholars, e.g. Zürcher (1959, 226).

4 This text is also called the *Jiumoloushi fashi da yi* 鳩摩羅什法師大義 (*The Great Meaning of [the Teachings of] the Dharma Master Kumārajīva*).

5 See Robinson (1967, 181-195).

The study will not stop there, however. The completion of this section's translation opened a window for me on a larger issue within the history of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. Huiyuan is widely accepted as the first "patriarch" (*zu* 祖) of the Pure Land teachings, and many modern scholars, especially in Japan, have accepted this ascribed status at face value. On the other hand, many western historians of Chinese Buddhism assume that this is an anachronistic ascription, projected retrospectively onto Huiyuan by a later, more fully-developed tradition. Both assumptions require examination, and so the seemingly provocative title of this article actually represents an honest question. After presenting my translation and analysis of doctrinal and epistemological issues raised by the Huiyuan-Kumārajīva correspondence, I will proceed to other sources to assay the extent to which the retrofitting of a Pure Land identity on Huiyuan fits with the documents that describe his own belief and practice. Doing so will require teasing apart his views from Kumārajīva's in the main translation, and then looking at other sources on Huiyuan.

The Translation

This section, from the middle fascicle, finds Huiyuan asking about the status of the Buddhas seen as a result of meditating in accordance with the procedures given in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* (*Banzhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經 T 418). Are they real, externally-existing Buddhas, or are they visions generated solely within the practitioner's mind?⁶

[134b4] Next, a question about *nianfo samādhi* and the reply:

[134b5] [Hui]yuan asked: With regard to the *nianfo samādhi*, as the sections on *nianfo* in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* explain it, they frequently draw on dreams as a metaphor. [But] dreams are in the domain of unenlightened beings. Whether one is deluded or understands, [dreams are] to be understood as restricted to the self.⁷ But the sūtra says that [by means of the] *nianfo samādhi* one sees the Buddhas. One questions them, then they answer back and thus resolve the snares of doubts.⁸

6 This section appears in T 1856, 134b-135a. The translation was greatly assisted by consulting the critical edition and modern Japanese rendering by Kimura Eiichi in *Eon kenkyū*, 2 vols. (1960-62). His critical edition of the following passage is found in 1:34-36, while his modern Japanese rendition is found in 1:165-169. My own commentary on various passages and critical notes will be found in the footnotes.

7 夢是凡夫之境，惑之與解皆自厓已還理了。This passage is difficult to translate, and my rendering follows Mochizuki Shinkō's paraphrase of this passage into modern Japanese in Mochizuki (1978, 25-26); and especially Kimura's paraphrase in his *Eon Kenkyu*, vol. 1, 165. It comports well with the question that follows. For the meaning of *ya* 厓 (usually "cliff") as "restricted, internal," see Morohashi (1984, 7:2b, definition 3).

8 Huiyuan is not quoting any particular section of the sūtra. The idea that one sees the Buddhas in meditation and asks them questions, and receives answers, is stated in the sūtra at 13:905c25-

[134b8] Now if the Buddhas [so seen] are the same as what is seen in dreams, then they would just be what one sees in one’s own imagination. If one focuses this mental image, one achieves *samādhi*; in *samādhi*, one sees the Buddhas. [But] the Buddhas that one sees do not come in from outside, nor do I go out [to them]. It is a direct matter of the focus on the image and reason coming together, much the same as in a dream.⁹ If I do not go out of myself, and the Buddha does not come in, then how is there elucidation (*jie* 解)?¹⁰ Where¹¹ would this elucidation come from? But if [the Buddha] really does come from without in response [to the meditation], then one should not use dreams as a metaphor. [Rather,] the meeting would be through [the Buddha’s] supernatural power (*shentong* 神通).¹² Because of not being the true characteristic, there could therefore be “going” and “coming.”¹³ “Going” [and “coming”] are thus talked about on the sūtra’s surface and are not the real intent of the *samādhi*. In the end, what makes the connection [between meditator and Buddha]?

[134b14] Again, the *Pratyutpanna* says that having three things, one attains the *samādhi*: first, keeping the precepts and not violating them; second, great merit; and third, the numinous power of the Buddha.¹⁴ I ask about this “numinous power of the

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- c29. Harrison translates this section in this way: “When the forms are clear, everything is clear. If one wishes to see the Buddha then one sees him. If one sees him then one asks questions. If one asks then one is answered. One hears the sūtras and rejoices greatly.” See Harrison (1998, 21).
- 9 In this sentence, Kimura emends *wen* 聞 (“to hear”) as *tong* 同 (“the same”). He also punctuates the last few clauses very differently than the Taishō version, and I follow his usage. See Kimura (1960, 1:34).
- 10 In other words, how could a Buddha created by one’s own mind preach the dharma that goes beyond one’s own pre-existing understanding? Kimura suggests moving the repeated word *huo* (“or perhaps”) down below the word “Buddha” in the next clause to create a parallelism that makes sense, and I follow his advice here. Also, the Japanese paraphrase in Kimura (1960, 1:166), glosses *jie* 解 as *satori*, which normally means “enlightenment.” However, Huiyuan is asking about a visualized Buddha simply answering questions, and so I have used the word “elucidation” instead.
- 11 *An* 安 usually means “peace,” but Morohashi (3:909d) indicates that in some cases it is interchangeable with the general interrogative particle *he* 何.
- 12 I am following Kimura in ascribing the supernatural power to the Buddha upon which the meditator is focused. See Kimura (1960, 1:166).
- 13 Most of the questions that Huiyuan puts to Kumārajīva in these letters have to do with the *dharmakāya* Buddha, or the true dharma-body of the Buddha, which is free from all characteristics, including location in space. The meditation in the sūtra has to do with visualizing a Buddha, which requires that the Buddha have characteristics that one may visualize and be located in space. Under these circumstances, one may speak of the Buddha coming to the meditator or the meditator going out to the Buddha through supernatural power. This is why Huiyuan has to specify that he is not here talking about the “true character” of the *dharmakāya*.
- 14 Again, Huiyuan is not quoting directly, and so it is a little difficult to know exactly which part of

Buddha.”¹⁵ Is this understood to mean a Buddha [visualized] in the state of *samādhi*, or a Buddha that comes from without. If it is the Buddha [seen in the] midst of this *samādhi*, then it is established by my own thoughts, and it emerges from myself. If this Buddha is external to the *samādhi*, then it is a sage (*shengren* 聖人) shown in a dream. However, to have the full meaning of “to meet with,” then it cannot be both “concentrated within” and “getting to hear,” and elucidated [by the metaphor of] a dream.¹⁶ Is the method of *nianfo samādhi* like this or not. It is explained in this way two or three times; what is to be followed?

[134b22] Kumārajīva answers: There are three types of *samādhi* for seeing the Buddhas (*jianfo sanmei* 見佛三昧): (1) A Bodhisattva might attain the divine eye or the divine ear, or perhaps fly throughout the ten directions to where the Buddhas reside, see them, ask questions about their difficulties, and have their snare of doubts cut off. (2) Even without supernatural powers, they contemplate (*nian* 念) Amitābha and all the Buddhas of the present, and with their mind residing in one place, they can attain a vision of the Buddhas and ask about their doubts. (3) They can study and practice *nianfo* with or without having abandoned their desires. Alternatively, they may gaze at a Buddha image, or contemplate his earthly Buddha-body,¹⁷ or see all of the Buddhas of the past, present, and future. All three of these are called “*nianfo samādhi*.”

the sūtra he has in mind. In fascicle one, however, we find the following (T 418, 13:905c16-18): 於三昧中立者，有三事：持佛威神力，持佛三昧力，持本功德力；用是三事故，得見佛。 In Harrison’s translation this is rendered: “[Those] who are established in the meditation have three things: they possess the numinous power of the Buddha, they possess the power of the Buddha’s meditation, and they possess the power of their former merit. Because of these three things they succeed in seeing the Buddha.” (Harrison 1998, 21)

- 15 This brief sentence 問佛威神 does not occur in the Taishō version of the text. Kimura, in a note, explains that he added it to his critical text because it is in all other versions. See Kimura (1960, 1:34 and 1:34n15).
- 16 This is a difficult passage, but after consulting Kimura’s modern Japanese paraphrase (Kimura 1960, 1:166) and Mochizuki’s explanation (Mochizuki 1978, 26), it is apparent that Huiyuan’s difficulty with the dream metaphor can be put thus: If the Buddha seen in the *samādhi* is internally-generated, as a dream would be, then one cannot put questions to him and expect to learn anything new. On the other hand, if an external Buddha comes in from outside, as the sūtra seems to imply when it says one depends upon the Buddhas “numinous power,” then this violates the meaning of *samādhi*, which is a meditation wherein the practitioner is focused internally and external stimuli are shut out. The problem is in trying to square a state of mind described by the words “*samādhi*” and “dream” with the idea that one sees a real being who can give one new teaching.
- 17 *sheng shen* 生身. According to FG2063cff, this is one of the two bodies of a Buddha, opposed to the dharma-body. This refers either to the body in which a Buddha is born, with its 32 marks, etc., or to the body that a Buddha manifests to a practitioner in response to the latter’s capabilities according to the Buddha’s expedient means.

[134b28] In fact, however, they are not alike. The highest [i.e., the first method] is the ability to see all of the Buddhas through one's own supernatural powers. The second, even though it does not give one supernatural powers, still gives the vision of the Buddhas of the ten directions, because it is based on the power of the *pratyutpanna-samādhi*.¹⁸ The rest are lower down. All are called *nianfo samādhi*.¹⁹

[134b29] Next, if one constantly contemplates the world's [134c] repugnant character, one will have difficulty practicing compassion among living beings. For the sake of these Bodhisattvas who have yet to abandon desires, there are many and varied praises for the *pratyutpanna samādhi*. By the power of this *samādhi* one can, even without abandoning [desires], focus the mind in a single place and see all of the Buddhas. Thus, this is the root of seeking the Buddha-way.

[134c4] In addition, one who studies the *pratyutpanna-samādhi* can abandon thoughts and discriminations,²⁰ and is not deluded.²¹ Why is this? Because the sūtras of Shākyamuni²² make clear that the features of Amitābha's body are complete; these are the profound words of the Tathāgata.

[134c7] Again, the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* teaches in various ways that, just as [the practitioner] contemplates the discriminated Amitābha in his Pure Land more than 100,000 Buddha-lands to the west, that Buddha is constantly illuminating all the worlds of the ten directions with his immeasurable light.²³ If the practitioner can see the Buddha in accordance with the sūtra, then there are both root and branch [i.e., a

18 The phrase beginning “The second...” and ending with “...the *pratyutpanna-samādhi*” is missing from the Taishō edition, but appears in Kimura's critical edition from other sources. See Kimura (1960, 1:35).

19 Many of the ideas, and much of the wording, in these two paragraphs reflect a discussion on the “divine eye” (*tianyan* 天眼) and the “divine ear” (*tian'er* 天耳) in fascicle 33 of the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (T 1509), which Kumārajīva was translating during the time of this exchange of letters. In a passage beginning at T 1509, 306a12, the *Da zhidu lun* discusses using supernatural powers to fly among the ten directions and see all the Buddhas, and it even compares this with the *nianfo samādhi* specifically explained in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, saying that those who have abandoned desires can achieve the divine eye and divine ear, while those who have not can see the Buddhas in *samādhi*. As for their not being alike, the *Da zhidu lun* explains that the first is indeed superior and the second inferior. The first is like seeing all the Buddhas in the clear light of day, while the second is like seeing them in the dark by lighting a lamp and seeing them only indistinctly (T 1509, 306a22-23).

20 憶想分別. See *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, accessed January 8, 2008.

21 Other versions have *sui* 雖 (“although”) instead of *li* 離 (“to leave or abandon”) in this sentence. In this case, the meaning would be “...although they [use?] words, recollections, thoughts, and distinctions, they are not deluded.” See Kimura (1960, 1:35n3).

22 According to Ui 474a, Shijiawen 釋迦文 is an older form of Shijiamouni 釋迦牟尼.

23 In fact, the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* does not say this, but the *Da zhidu lun* does. In fascicle 29, we find the following: “As explained in the middle of the *pratyutpanna samādhi*, a Bodhisattva who enters this *samādhi* immediately sees the Buddha Amitābha and asks the Buddha ‘by what

logical system or approach²⁴]; it is not just a matter of following deluded thoughts and discriminations. It is a matter of people not having faith. Without knowing how to practice the method of meditative *samādhi*, and taking this contemplation as not yet an attainment of supernatural powers, [they wonder] how one can see all the Buddhas from afar?²⁵

[134c12] This is why the Buddha used dreams as a metaphor. As people can, through the power of dreams, go and see things that are far distant, so does the Bodhisattva [who practices] the *pratyutpanna-samādhi*. By the power of this *samādhi*, one sees all the distant Buddhas, and no mountain or forest can obstruct one. Because people do believe in dreams, it serves as a metaphor. Moreover, dreams are spontaneous²⁶ occurrences. They are like this without [the practitioner] expending any effort. How then could one expend the effort and not achieve the vision?

[134c17] Again, as for the bodies of all Buddhas having set characteristics, these ought to be [seen as merely] the delusions of thoughts and discriminations. But the sūtras explain that all Buddhas' bodies are produced from the aggregation of conditions, and have no self-nature but are ultimately empty and quiescent, like dreams and magical illusions. If this is so, then the bodies of all the Buddhas seen by practicing in accordance with the explanations should not be merely delusions. If [the vision of the Buddhas] is a delusion, then everything must be a delusion. If it is not a delusion, then nothing else is a delusion either.

karma and cause-and-effect is one born in that land?' The Buddha then answers, saying, 'Good son, by constantly cultivating the *nianfo samādhi* unsparingly, one obtains birth in my land.' Question: What is this *nianfo samādhi* and attaining birth in that land? Answer: *Nianfo* means recalling the Buddha's 32 marks and 80 characteristics and his golden form-body. The body emits a light which illuminates and fills the ten directions." See T 1509, 276a21-a25.

- 24 The text here has *benmo* 本末, literally "root and branch," which Kimura paraphrases as *sujimichi* 筋道, "system or method." See Kimura (1960, 1:167).
- 25 I am translating *chanding* 禪定 as "meditative *samādhi*," and *nian* 念 as "contemplation" because I believe Kumārajīva is talking about two very different practices here. The first refers to a very deep trance meditation, one that might well confer supernatural powers such as the divine eye (*tianyan* 天眼) which would allow the practitioner to see Buddhas from great distances. The other is a reflective contemplation or recollection involving no deep trance and so not conferring supernatural powers but only a settling of the mind. The point, therefore, is that people do not believe that a person who does not know how to perform the first practice and gain the power but only performs the second practice would ever be able to see a Buddha 100,000 Buddha-lands distant. Within the *Da zhidu lun*, meditative *samādhi* is connected with the achievement of the divine eye in fasc. 2 (T 1509, 684a4-5). In fasc. 7, the commentator specifically states that the energetic practice of meditative *samādhi* along with keeping the precepts will lead to the attainment of the divine eye. See T 1509, 112b25-26.
- 26 The Taishō text has *buran* 不然 here, but other editions have *ziran* 自然. See the critical text in Kimura (1960, 1:35).

[134c21] Why is this? Because it leads all sentient beings to reap their own benefits and plant good roots.²⁷ One who attains the vision of the Buddhas in accordance with [the teachings] in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* can produce good roots and become *arhats* or non-returners. By this you should know that the Tathāgata’s body lacks anything that is not real.

[134c24] Again, the thoughts and discriminations sometimes are real. If we follow along with what the sūtra explains, then often in accordance with [our] thoughts and discriminations, [we] can reach the truth. For example, when constantly practicing [the *samādhi* that takes as its objects]²⁸ the light of lamps and candles, sun and moon, then whenever one thinks of a hidden object, then one attains the divine eye and attains the truth.

[134c27] Again, someone at the inferior level (of the three given above) who keeps the precepts purely, and whose faith and reverence are profound and weighty, brings together the Buddha’s spiritual power and (his or her own) power of *samādhi*, knits together the aggregation of conditions, and is able to see the Buddha as a person sees (his or her own) image in a mirror.

[134c29] Again, a worldling who from beginningless time has [at some point] seen [the Buddha²⁹] should abandon desires and attain the divine eye and divine ear, yet he returns to revolve in the five paths. As for the *pratyutpanna-samādhi*, people in the two vehicles have not attained it through beginningless births and deaths; how much less would a worldling? For this reason, one should not regard that which one sees in this *samādhi* as a delusion.

[135a4] Again, all the Bodhisattvas [who] attain this *samādhi* see the Buddhas and then ask their questions and have all their doubts resolved. Upon arising from this *samādhi*, they then reside in their ordinary, defiled minds. Taking deep pleasure in this *samādhi*, they give birth to thoughts of greed and attachment. For this reason, the Buddha taught that the practitioner should form this thought: “That I do not go to that [Buddha], and that the Buddha does not come [to me], and yet I see the Buddha and hear the teaching, is only the mind’s thoughts and discriminations. All the things in the triple world have their being as thoughts and discriminations, or as the karmic results of thoughts in past lives, or as that which thoughts in the present life have produced.” Having heard this teaching, the mind [comes to] reject the triple world, and increases in faith and reverence. Well did the Buddha explain such a subtle and

27 The argument here seems to be that the Buddhas’ bodies are just the same as any other phenomenon: They are quiescent and empty in themselves, while at the same time each mind that perceives them (through the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi*) constructs them according to conditions, so that each attains his or her own proper benefit and puts down distinctive good roots according to their own individual conditions.

28 This is Kimura’s emendation. See Kimura (1960, 1:168).

29 Neither the Taishō text nor Kimura’s critical text specify that such a person has necessarily seen any Buddha; the text at T 1856, 135a ends with *jian* 見. Kimura adds the word “Buddha” in his Japanese paraphrase with no explicit justification. See Kimura (1960, 1:168).

fine principle. The practitioner at this very moment abandons the desires of the triple world, deeply enters into concentration, and attains the *pratyutpanna-samādhi*.

Huiyuan's Difficulty and Kumārajīva's Response

As many scholars have noted, Huiyuan was quite keen on meditation and sought the advice of many masters on the topic, and so it should not surprise us that he goes into the matter here. The question he asks appears quite straightforward, but an analysis of it and Kumārajīva's answer reveal ongoing disjunctions between Chinese and Indian conceptions of mental activity and cognition. Huiyuan wonders why the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi sūtra* often uses dreams as a way of illustrating the method of meditation it promotes, one in which one sees all the Buddhas of the present world, including Amitābha. Having attained the vision, one can ask them questions and have one's doubts and perplexities resolved. However, dreams are entirely self-generated; they are phantasms of the mind and include nothing that comes in from the external world. How then could such a vision tell one anything one did not already know?

Furthermore, the *sūtra* says that this meeting with the Buddhas takes place through the Buddhas' supernatural power. But if the Buddha is merely a visualization produced by one's own mind, then such an image cannot have supernatural power; indeed, there would be no need of such powers, as the Buddha would not be coming in from anywhere, eliminating the need to travel through space and time. On the other hand, if the Buddha so seen is real and does indeed come in from outside through his power, then it is not right to use dreams as a metaphor to explain it.

Huiyuan's questions boil down to one basic issue: is the Buddha seen in the *samādhi* a real Buddha or not? The very concreteness of the question points to a certain naïve realism on Huiyuan's part that scholars have explained in a couple of ways. Walter Liebenthal averred that Huiyuan was incapable of thinking in psychological terms (Liebenthal 1950, 249a). As he explains it, while the Chinese always had some notion of an "inner" and "outer" world, prior to Huiyuan's time they had not thought about psychological states as such. Building on Liebenthal's observation, we may notice, for instance, Indian Buddhist psychology made the mind a sixth sense organ and thus considered mental phenomena sense-objects. Thus, a Buddha visualized in the mind would be an object that the mind perceived and thus would have more reality than the Chinese, who only acknowledged the five senses other than the mind,³⁰ were able to accord it. Accordingly, for Huiyuan, to describe the visualized Buddha as similar to a dream was to deny its objective reality, while to ascribe the visualized image to the Buddha

30 For instance, Xunzi 荀子 (298-238 B.C.), in his essay "On the Rectification of Names," lists only the five sense organs: eye, ear, nose, mouth, and body. Although the list ends with the mind, he makes it clear that the mind does not perceive objects, but engenders feelings as emotional reactions to things and situations. See Chan (1963, 125).

using supernatural power to enter one's mind made the image of a dream inappropriate. In Indian Buddhist psychology, such a problem would not arise.

Richard H. Robinson puts the matter somewhat differently. Instead of psychology, what Huiyuan lacked was epistemology (Robinson 1967, 109). That is to say, Huiyuan assumed a kind of naïve realism or objectivism when considering how the mind knows things in the world. That the mind itself plays a role in the construction of knowledge does not seem to have occurred to him, and thus he had to assume that the Buddha visualized in *nianfo* meditation was either objectively real (i.e., entering in from the outside by the Buddhas' supernatural power), or merely a mentally-generated image (i.e., like a dream). To assert that something dreamed actually has something new to say to the dreamer makes no sense from such an epistemologically naïve perspective.

Robinson's diagnosis of Huiyuan's perplexity might be more useful here because it makes more sense of Kumārajīva's response. Recall that, in the passage beginning at 134c17, Kumārajīva stated, "If this is so, then the bodies of all the Buddhas seen by practicing in accordance with the explanations should not be merely delusions. If [the vision of the Buddhas] is a delusion, then everything must be a delusion. If it is not a delusion, then nothing else is a delusion either." The presupposition behind this statement is that an image visualized in the mind is really no different from any other image that appears in the mind. That is to say, the Buddha that one visualizes in *samādhi* is not different in kind from the image of a rock or a tree that appears in the mind when one looks at it. All perceptions of things involve mental construction, and thus the visualization of a Buddha is an experience of the same kind as actually seeing a Buddha standing before one.

This explains a disjunction that appears between Huiyuan's question and Kumārajīva's answer. Huiyuan assumes that a dream-image is already unreal, a mental construction that relates to nothing in the world; that is why the statement in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi sūtra* that one can question the Buddha seen in *samādhi* and receive answers puzzles him. Kumārajīva, on the other hand, assumes the *samādhi* connects one with a real Buddha, and thus he asserts that the real danger is that practitioners will become too enamored of the ability conferred by the meditation to converse with a Buddha at will. For him, then, the sūtra's comparison of the image visualized to a dream serves to denigrate the visualization in order to break a potential source of attachment. While Huiyuan takes the dream-metaphor at face value and thus begins with the assumption that the visualized image is unreal, Kumārajīva begins with the opposite assumption, namely that the image is *too* real, and that a description that lessens its reality is needed to avert unwholesome attachment to the *samādhi*.

Was Huiyuan a Pure Land Master?

My interest in translating the passage above was based on the widely-held notion that Lushan Huiyuan was, in some sense at least, a seminal figure in the development of Pure Land Buddhism in China. Not only does the Chinese tradition itself esteem Huiyuan as the first “patriarch” (*zu* 祖)³¹ but many scholars accept the idea that he was an early devotee of the cult of Amitābha and aspired to rebirth in the western Pure Land.³² Since this part of the correspondence dealt with the practice of *nianfo* 念佛, it seemed reasonable that it would display this devotional aspect of Huiyuan’s interests. After studying the passage, however, I could find no real evidence of interest in anything resembling Pure Land practice as it developed later: there is no mention of rebirth in Sukhāvātī, no hint of a need for the Buddha’s power to help one achieve the goal of liberation (except perhaps the hint that the Buddha might, by his “numinous power,” enter into one’s visualization), and no specific mention of the Buddha Amitābha, except in Kumārajīva’s response in the passage beginning at 134c7.³³ Strictly speaking, the portion of this passage written by Huiyuan himself merely raises a question about the practice of *buddhānusmṛti*; it is a technical question about meditation, nothing more.

This casts some doubt on Huiyuan’s status as a founding master of Pure Land Buddhism. Other scholars have also noticed this, and questioned the ascription of Amitābha devotionism to Huiyuan. Zürcher, for instance, claims that Huiyuan was more interested in “Hīnayānistic” meditations and allowed the practice of devotion to Amitābha as a concession to the needs of his lay followers (Zürcher 1959, 222-223). Kenneth Ch’en echoes this doubt (Ch’en 1964, 108). From the work of previous scholars, then, two possibilities emerge: either Huiyuan was an active participant in the cult of Amitābha and in practices directed at rebirth in the Pure Land, or he was essentially uninterested in this and merely allowed such practices for the sake of his lay followers. In order to determine which of these (if either) is correct, one must go back to other literary evidence for Huiyuan’s religious activities.

On the face of it, it might appear from various passages in the Taishō canon that the second hypothesis is correct. As we have already seen, Huiyuan’s correspondence with Kumārajīva regarding the practice of *nianfo* is really directed at the achievement of *nianfo samādhi* (*nianfo*

31 See Ch’en (1964, 107). A concrete manifestation of this ascription is found in the monastic breviary *Essential Recitations of the Buddha-gate* (*Fomen bibei kesong ben* 佛門必備課誦本), widely used in monasteries in Taiwan. In its liturgies for a seven-day Buddha-recollection retreat (*fo qi* 佛七), there is a ceremony for praising the list of patriarchs, listing Lushan Huiyuan first. See *Fomen bibei kesong ben* (1994, 118).

32 See, for example, Robinson (1967, 88 and 90); Liebenthal (1955, 71).

33 The possibility that Kumārajīva would have more in the way of interest in and devotion to Amitābha and seek rebirth in the Pure Land would not be surprising at all. He translated the *Smaller Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sūtra* while residing in Chang’an, and, as Gregory Schopen demonstrated convincingly, rebirth in Sukhāvātī had become a normal goal for Mahāyāna Buddhists in North India by Kumārajīva’s lifetime. See Schopen 2005.

sanmei 念佛三昧), and has nothing to do with devotion to Amitābha or to rebirth. Three other passages from two additional sources also bear on the question, so let us examine them in turn.

First and most importantly, Huiyuan's reputation as the founder of the Pure Land movement is based on his biographical notice as contained in the *Gao seng zhuan* 高僧傳 (T 2059). This is the *locus classicus* for the story wherein he assembled 123 of his followers and took a collective vow in front of an image of Amitābha to seek rebirth in Sukhāvātī late in the year 402 (T 2059, 357-361³⁴). The wording indicates that Huiyuan took the initiative, as he “organized a fast and established a vow together to strive for the Western Region.”³⁵ So it appears that Huiyuan was indeed the instigator of this gathering. However, a lay follower named Liu Yimin 劉遺民 (or Liu Chengzhi 劉程之, 354-410), composed the text of the vow at Huiyuan's request. This leads one to suspect that it may indeed have been done for the sake of lay followers, though in itself it does not establish a disinterest in the practice on Huiyuan's part either. The evidence from this passage remains ambiguous.

The next passage to consider is Huiyuan's preface to a collection of poems praising the practice of *nianfo* composed by Liu Yimin, the same follower who provided the text of the vow as noted above. The anthology itself, called “Collected Poems on the *Nianfo Samādhi*” (*Nianfo sanmei shi ji* 念佛三昧詩集 is no longer extant, but Huiyuan's preface has been preserved in the *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集, T 2103, 351b10-351c7. The impression one gets from this preface is similar to that conveyed by the questions to Kumārajīva translated above. That is, it is primarily about *samādhi*, not about anything one might recognize as Pure Land practice. The term *nianfo* occurs only once (at 52:351b21), but is not elaborated. For the most part, Huiyuan praises the practice of *samādhi* for its benefits in “focusing and stilling thoughts” (*Zhuan si ji xiang* 專思寂想 52:351b12), thus calming and clarifying the mind. This text, therefore, provides no more support for Huiyuan as a Pure Land master than does the passage from his letters to Kumārajīva. Also, as in the passage from the *Gao seng zhuan*, it appears that Huiyuan took up even the peripheral topic of the *nianfo samādhi* in response to a lay follower's interest.

The last passage, however, might cause us to question both of the possibilities raised so far. Also from the *Gao seng zhuan*, this is a brief biography of one of Huiyuan's monastic disciples, Sengji 僧濟.³⁶ Here is a somewhat abridged translation of the passage:

34 Zürcher provides an English translation of the text in Zürcher (1959, 240-53).

35 建齋立誓共期西方。(T 2059, 358c21-22) Zürcher's translation has “Hui-yüan (and these lay devotees) held a fasting (ceremony) and made the vow together to strive for (rebirth in) the Western Region.” (p. 244) I have translated it differently because the sentence structure clearly indicates that it was Huiyuan who held the fast and established the vow. The subsequent statement, as Zürcher translates correctly, indicates that Huiyuan ordered Liu to compose the vow. If read in the way that I have translated it, then this passage provides less support for Zürcher's downplaying of Huiyuan's interest in the affair.

36 *Gao seng zhuan* 高僧傳 T 2059, 362b12-27.

Afterward, [Sengji] stopped at the mountain [i.e., Lushan] for a short while, when he suddenly felt critically ill. Therefore, he wanted sincerely [to seek] the Western Country (*xi guo* 西國) and visualized an image of the Buddha Amitāyus. Huiyuan presented Sengji a candle and said “By setting your mind on [the land of] peace and sustenance [*anyang* 安養 i.e., Sukhāvātī] struggle against the outflows for a while.” Grasping the candle as a support, Sengji stilled his thoughts and was unperturbed, and he asked the monks to assemble during the night in order to rotate [in reciting] the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sūtra*. In the fifth watch, Sengji with his candle received his fellow students, and asked them to practice [the sūtra?] among the monks. Thus, he lay down for a while. In a dream he saw himself with the candle riding in space to see the Buddha Amitāyus...awakening, he told the attendant at his sickbed about it. ... He stood up, and his eyes looked out into space as if he saw something. The next moment he lay down again with a look of delight. He turned on his right side, and his breath left him. He was 45 years old.³⁷

Two features of this passage are of interest for our inquiry. First, the subject of the story is *not* a lay follower, but one of Huiyuan’s monastic followers, and, to judge from the text preceding the death narrative, a highly respected one. This would seem to cast doubt on Ch’en’s and Zürcher’s contention that Huiyuan’s Pure Land practice was primarily for the benefit of lay followers, and leads us to consider it an integral component of the life of his monastic community.

Second, unlike all of the other passages, we see a fully-developed Pure Land theology at work here. The story itself follows the pattern of countless deathbed rebirth stories found in the literature. More than that, it displays all the features normally associated with Pure Land practice: it centers on the Buddha Amitābha (though under his other name Amitāyus); the monk seeks rebirth in the Pure Land; the scriptural focus is on the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sūtra*; most importantly, the goal of the night vigil is to help the monk attain his stated goal of rebirth in Sukhāvātī, described as being in the west. Also of significance for our purposes, Huiyuan himself is there to sanction Sengji’s desire and assist him in achieving it.

37 Another version of this story, along with an extended commentary on it, appears in fascicle 26 of the *Fozu tong ji* 佛祖統紀 T 2035, 269a27-269c13. For this article, I accessed the document at the CBETA website: http://cbeta.org/result/normal/T_49/2035_026.htm. Another, somewhat different version of the story is found in the *Biographies of Eighteen High Sages of the Donglin [Temples]* (*Donglin shiba gaoxian zhuan* 東林十八高賢傳), *Wanzi xu zang jing* 卍續藏經, vol. 135, 1-31. For this paper, I located the version found on CBETA at: http://cbeta.org/result/normal/X78/1543_001.htm. On this webpage, the story is found between lines X78n1543_p0119b09 and X78n1543_p0119b1. Both web pages were accessed January 13, 2008.

Concluding Analysis

In this article, we have done two things. First, we examined a translation of the section of the *Dasheng da yi zhang* that most directly reflects a part of what could be connected with Chinese Pure Land thought and practice. Based on our conclusion that the section dealt with a question pertaining to a specialized form of meditation, and that the main issue at stake was Huiyuan's and Kumārajīva's very different epistemological understandings of the status of a visualized Buddha, we broached the second set of questions: Is Huiyuan's election as first Chinese patriarch of Pure Land by the later tradition warranted? If not, should scholars dismiss his connection with Pure Land *tout court* as an anachronistic projection? To answer these questions, we looked at other sources on Huiyuan whose contents bear on his attitude toward Pure Land practice as understood by those later figures who christened him their patriarch.

While Zürcher's harsh assessment of Pure Land Buddhism may be extreme and his judgement of Huiyuan as "Hīnayānic" questionable in light of the evidence presented above,³⁸ his evaluation of Huiyuan's place in the history of Chinese Buddhism appears to describe our case well: Zürcher identifies a "well-defined devotional creed" as part of the achievement of Huiyuan's community on Mt. Lu, since it was part of his overall absorption of Buddhism (which Zürcher opposes to the "piecemeal" uptake of earlier Chinese, especially among the gentry) (Zürcher 1959, 205). Portraying Huiyuan exclusively, or even primarily, as the first patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism in China creates a false impression. However, seeing him as the great synthesizer of Buddhism who incorporated many aspects of the tradition into his community's life and practice, Pure Land (or at least proto-Pure Land) included, is reasonable. Thus, we can conclude that his instructions to his disciples embraced both the more stringent *nianfo samādhi* practice and the more devotional form of the cult of Amitābha with its goal of seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. These would have been two components of a long life devoted to helping Buddhism take root in China along with all his other activities and interests such as understanding Buddhist philosophy, defending the sangha against political encroachment, and encouraging translation of texts. Not all passages in his works that contain the multivalent term *nianfo* will necessarily point to Pure Land practice as developed later in the fifth century and beyond. In the correspondence with Kumārajīva, it clearly means visualization of a Buddha in accordance with the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, while in the stories of the gathering on Mt. Lu in 402 and the death of Sengji, a more devotional practice aimed at rebirth in Sukhāvātī appears.³⁹

The important revision that we must make to our view of Huiyuan is to stop thinking of his Pure Land activities as a concession to the devotional needs of his lay followers. Assuming the veracity of the story of Sengji's death, we can think that he was indeed an active propagator of Pure Land devotionalism when he saw that it might be of benefit to his followers, monastic as

38 He calls it belief in a "fairyland". (Zürcher 1959, 222)

39 For a study of the many possible meanings of the term *nianfo*, see Jones (2001).

well as lay. With the understanding that there was more than just this practice to his career and instruction, his ascriptive status as the first Pure Land patriarch is defensible.

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