

The Buddha-land as Presented in the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra

By Most Ven. Prof. Tue Sy

I. THE NOTION OF A BUDDHA-LAND

Rarely does the Genesis have significance in the teachings of the Buddha, although it was challenged more than once by His disciples. Buddha refused to reveal the problem since it is of no use for leading to the ultimate aim, and partly because of the shortness of human knowledge unable to cover the infinity of time and space. Nevertheless, whenever the question of the origin of castes and social inequity arose, the revelation of Buddha is unambiguous. The variety of the world is caused by the very deeds of sentient beings. Human life is but a stage in the endless evolutions and revolutions of living. Up to a definite point of time, individuals come to recognize the presence of others not only in their physical existence but also with their emotions and thoughts. This gives rise to the consciousness of rivalry. Struggle for life took place among members of the primordial community who accidentally lived together in a limited geographic area sharing a common identity, facing the scarcity of external materials on which the satisfaction of their wants and needs depended. People were then aware of the fact that one man's gain is the loss of others. Fight for gathering natural resources was getting more and more intense as the population was growing thicker and thicker. Social conflict had to be dealt with and the primitive government was constituted under the arbitration of a Mahāsammato. Land was then distributed by hypothetical social contract or taken by force. New classes gradually emerged firstly with land-owners or k atriya and eventually with the oppressed ones.

Conflict within and without communities in the struggle for life, in fighting for the possession of land, is the premise of the notion of nation. Conventionally the term *nation* denotes a large community of people, usually sharing a common history, culture and language, and living in a particular territory under a single sovereign government. Substantially it also implies the notion of social harmony which developed into the idea of a prosperous Kingdom ruled over by a Cakkavattin in which people live accordance with dhamma and ten categories of good deeds are universally practiced.

Overall, the highest ideal nation is the one that is presided by an Enlightened One not as a Monarch who is the absolute sovereign ruling over and served by its people but as a Supreme Leader who leads people to lofty aspirations for wisdom and liberation. The notion of a Buddhak estra, or Buddha-land, was thus conceived.

It is, however, with this conception, Buddha-land can be by no means visualized in common sense. That means it is unessential to suggest that the notion of Buddha-land should imply the principles of territory, people, and government, in spite of the fact that such a land is generally believed

by Buddhist followers to be reigned by a Buddha. According to traditions in Buddhism, especially in its later development, there have been existing numerous Buddha-lands in infinite space. This gives rise the idea that a Buddha-land must be confined in a boundary so as to be differentiated from the others.

It is much arguable over the fact that Buddha very often refused to reply the question whether the world is finite or infinite. Yet, in their philosophical treatments of the Buddha's teachings, Buddhist scholars did not hesitate to work it out as a speculative manipulation to discard the only universe that was ever created and reigned by a Supreme God or Absolute Brahma. In the infinity of time and space there existed, will exist and is existing a countless number of the Enlightened Ones. Notwithstanding that there would be never the appearance of two Buddhas in the world, i.e. in the same space at the same time.

What is, then, the formation of the world implied in the conception of the Buddha-land?

The Sanskrit/ Pali equivalent of the word *world* is *loka* which in Buddhist cosmology signifies both the world of living beings (Skt. *sattvaloka*) and the receptacle-world (*bhājanaloka*), or a sphere comprised of air, sun, moon, stars, oceans, continents, and so on, in brief, a system of world, in which sentient beings are born, grown up, dissolved and reborn, in accordance with levels of consciousness and karmic retributions. A thousand worlds as such form a small chiliocosm; and a thousand small chiliocosms form a medium chiliocosm; and a thousand medium chiliocosms form a great chiliocosm or trisahasra-mahāsahasra-lokadhātu, which thus consists of 1,000,000,000 small worlds or systems of world. A great chiliocosm is a Buddha-world in which the physical world is governed by a universal law and sentient beings can be led to wisdom and liberation under a universal doctrine of a Buddha. Each Buddha-world has its own principles of origination and operation. In our present world namely Sahā-lokadhātu enlightened by Buddha Śākyamuni, for instance, all of his teachings have been spread and practiced by means of sound; whereas in the Buddha-world of Fragrance as taught in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* the way of spreading Buddha Gandhottamakū a's teachings is by fragrance. Moreover, all sentient beings in the Sahā-lokadhātu live on four kinds of food, of which the first one is digested in stomach; but fragrance is the only "food" for sentient beings in the Fragrance-world.

In this connection, a Buddha-world should be considered to be a land with its own attributes in regard to physical conditions, even a territory with its boundaries, forms of beings, various states of suffering and happiness, and so on.

II. THE CONSTITUTION OF A BUDDHA-LAND

In its earlier development when Buddhism was essentially impressed with the monastic life, the Buddhist ideal world was embodied in the image of a vast Kingdom, reigned over by the Cakkavattin, extending from end to end of the earth, conquered not by sword but

by righteousness. Latterly as the Mahāyāna developed, the Cakkavattin's Kingdom was replaced by the ideal of Buddha-land. The replacement can be conceived as the transition from the ideal of a good monarchism to a democracy at a time when lay Buddhists claimed their attainment of the highest goal in their very worldly life. The term democracy used in this context should not be understood to mean a form of government ruled by people. In its broadest sense, it implies a non-state nation, a Buddha-land, presided but not ruled by a Buddha, the Enlightened One, in the sense that every sentient beings, or more substantially, all its citizens, are blessed with favorable conditions to practice the Way that leads to the final deliverance, and endowed with the possibility of attaining enlightenment.

However, Buddha-land is not taken for granted as an act of providence or a wonderful world wrought out by the grace of Buddha. It is the perfection of the great resolute vows devoting oneself to the happiness and welfare of others, after a long process through myriads of aeons of the purification of mind.

1. Purification of Sentient Beings and Their Environment

As stated in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*, when entreated by Ratnākara to elucidate the constitution of a Buddha-land, the Buddha is supposed to give a definitive answer that "The sentient beings' world is the Buddha-land of a Bodhisattva." (Skt. *sattvak etra kulaputra bodhisattvasya*.) As has been said, a world is treated by Buddhist scholars to be composed of two spheres: *sattvaloka* and *bhājanaloka* or the world of living beings and their environment. It is from this view that commentators on the Sūtra have presented the significance of a Buddha-land.

In his commentary K'uei-chi, a Chinese scholar, describes two types of Buddha-lands: (a) Secular Land, consisting of *sattvas* and *bhājanaloka*; and (b) Sacred Land, consisting of Bodhisattvas and their Prodigious Realm. In his words, "No separated land exists apart from sentient beings. As sentient beings come into existence their environment is present. As sentient beings become Bodhisattvas, their land is transformed into a Prodigious Realm. A bodhisattva's original vow is to lead sentient beings to the transcendental world. It is not that the receptacle-world is directly converted into the pure land." (*Taishō* 38n1782, p.1023b1.)

Thus, a bodhisattva's pure land is in its essence the very land of sentient beings. Yet, whether the land is pure or impure depends totally on the characteristics of sentient beings living in it. As a corollary, the object of a realization is the concrete world consisting of sentient beings and their environment. For the sake of their welfare a bodhisattva needs to purify their environment. That is to say, he must try his best to provide them with any possible conditions for practicing Buddha-dharma and developing their good qualities (*kuśala-mūla*) into a firm foundation of true happiness. In reality, unless a Bodhisattva can help sentient beings purify their minds, he fails to purify their environment; and unless he improves their living

conditions, he cannot help them purify their minds. This mutual relation is essentially beyond the reach of thinking. For *this* cannot exist without *that*, and vice-versa.

In order to help sentient beings transform their minds such that they can attain to a pure Buddha-land, a Bodhisattva carries out his vow in two ways, based upon the development and benefit of sentient beings, and the arising of their pure qualities. In a Chinese translation of the Sūtra by Hsuan-tsang these ways are determined; but they are combined into one in Kumārajīva's translation: "The Buddha-land that a Bodhisattva vows to establish depends on the type of sentient beings instructed." (*Taishō* 38n1782, p.1023b7.)

In order to improve sentient beings' environment, a Bodhisattva establishes a Buddha-land according to three standards: (1) land suitable for sentient beings to control themselves, that is, training their minds easily; (2) land suitable for them to penetrate Buddha-wisdom; (3) land suitable for them either to develop their Bodhisattva qualities, as in Kumārajīva's translation, or to perform their noble conducts, as in Hsuan-tsang's translation.

2. Qualities of a Buddha-land

Compassion and wisdom, vows and practices are the virtues of a Bodhisattva in the course of cultivating and spreading his ideal. With wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) he can penetrate into the essential of Being, source of suffering and happiness, so that he can easily sympathize with sentient beings' various states of mind. With compassion (*karu ā*) he makes his greatest efforts to bring about the benefit and happiness for sentient beings. Accordingly, his resolute vow (*pra idhāna*) is to set forth a form of Buddha-land suitable for various capabilities and tendencies of different types of sentient beings. And from this very vow he plans out his conducts (*caryā*) elaborately. Thus, vows and conducts may be regarded as causal conditions, taken to be the guiding principle of a Bodhisattva's noble mission.

In Kumārajīva's translation the seventeen conducts a Bodhisattva should perform are three minds (*citta*), six perfections (*pāramitās*), four boundless states of mind (*apramā a-citta*), and four principles of harmonization (*sa graha-vastu*). In Hsuan-tsang's translation there are eighteen conducts. The difference is in that the three minds mentioned in the former translation are replaced by the four categories of land.

A. Three Minds and Four categories of land

Regarding the three minds Kumārajīva's translation says, "(1) 'Righteous mind' is a Bodhisattva's pure land. When a Bodhisattva gets perfectly enlightened, those sentient beings who have abandoned flattery will be born there. (2) 'Profound mind' is a Bodhisattva's pure land. When a Bodhisattva gets perfectly enlightened, those beings who are possessed of virtues will be born there. (3) Bodhi-mind is a Bodhisattva's pure land. When a Bodhisattva gets perfectly enlightened, those beings that are practicing Mahāyāna teaching will be born there."

The implications and mutual relations of these minds are explained by Ji-zang as follows: “Sentient beings are attached to being (*bhava*); Śrāvakayāna and Pratyekabuddhayāna incline towards non-being (*abhava*). All of their minds are ‘crooked’. Bodhisattvas, who concentrate their mind on right insight, are called ‘righteous’ ... To arouse (bodhi-)mind is the starting-point; that is, beginning with right insight. When right insight becomes much more penetrating, it is called ‘profound mind’; that is to say, it is too deep and firm to be moved. ... In order to set foot on a large way it is necessary for a Bodhisattva to keep his mind righteous. Then he can carry out his conducts. Once he is capable of performing his conducts perfectly, he can move everything towards the site of enlightenment, which is the very meaning of Bodhi-mind.” (*Taishō* 38n1781, p.928b19)

In Hsuan-tsang’s translation the minds just cited are presented in terms of the four lands: (1) Land of Bodhi-mind: the one in which all beings arouse the mind towards enlightenment. (2) Land of Noble intention: the one formed by the pure noble intention of a Bodhisattva. When he realized the perfect enlightenment, those beings that are honest and innocent will be born in this land. This corresponds with ‘Righteous mind’ above. (3) Land of Good Application: the one formed due to the efforts to cultivate good qualities that have never been known or possessed before. (This is not mentioned in the former translation.) (4) Land of Transcendent Intention: corresponding with “Profound mind” mentioned above. When a Bodhisattva gets perfectly awakened, sentient beings possessed of good virtues will be born there.

B. Six Perfections (*Pāramitās*): charity or generosity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), endurance (*k āntī*), energy (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), wisdom (*prajñā*). According to K’uei-chi the function of all the six *pāramitās* is to help a Bodhisattva develop his “dwelling in tranquility” or calming the mind (*śamatha*), and abandon all hindrances to attain to perfection.

C. Four Boundless States of Mind (*apramā citta*): boundless loving-kindness (*maitrī*), boundless compassion (*karu ā*), boundless joy (*muditā*), boundless equanimity (*upek ā*).

D. Four Principles of harmonization (*sa graha-vastu*): (1) *dāna* or generosity; (2) *prīyavādita* or kindly speech; (3) *arthacaryā* or conduct for the benefit of others; (4) *samānārthatā*, equality with himself or impartiality.

E. Other Conducts: skillful means (*upāya*), thirty-seven members leading to the attainment of enlightenment (*bodhipāk ika-dharma*), four boundless states of mind, and four principles of harmonization, all belong to by the same category called “the statement of starting points.” (According to K’uei-chi’s commentary)

F. Three Conducts: preaching the release from eight unfavorable conditions in which it is difficult to practice the Buddha-dharma (*a āv ak a ā*), observing disciplinary rules, and the ten good deeds (*daśa-kuśalakarmapatha*), all belong to the category called “Tranquility.” (Also by K’uei-chi)

It should be noticed that all the conducts mentioned in Hsuan-tsang's translation point to varied forms of Buddha-land established by the above-mentioned conducts of a Bodhisattva, not to those in the ordinary sense of the term.

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Most Ven. Prof. Tue Sy, former editor of *Thought*, a renowned Buddhist magazine published by Van Hanh University, now known as Vietnam Buddhist University. He is a Buddhist philosopher, the most well-known among Vietnamese community worldwide. He has translated *The Agamas* into Vietnamese and authored more than 20 scholarly books on Mahayana philosophy and Vinaya.