

Some Remarks on Amida and his Pure Land

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Does the Pure Land of Amida really exist in the west far away from our world, or is it our own minds? Furthermore, might it not be a mere myth or a symbol? This kind of question presently agitates the community of those concerned by this tradition, on both an academic and a religious level, including the various forums on the Internet. This is not a novelty though. During the Edo period, a dispute called “the squabbel of the Jōō era” (*Jōō no gekishō* 承應の鬭騷) developed within the Honganji around the same topics. Saigin 西吟 (1605-1663), chief of studies (*nōke* 能化) at Honganji's College (*Gakuryō* 學寮), was accused by his fellow student Gekkan 月感 (1600-1674) of mixing the Jōdo-Shinshū doctrine with interpretations from the Zen tradition. But discussions about the exact nature of Amida and his land go back further in the past, and can be traced to the 5th century in China. Accordingly, it is necessary to begin by looking at this development.

First of all, the notion of “buddha field” (*buddhakṣetra*) or “buddha realm” (佛國土) is not exclusively Mahāyāna. The Pāli literature distinguishes three of them: the Field of life (*jāttikketa*) of a buddha, which quaked at the time of the main events of his life and extends to ten thousand universes like our own; the Field of authority (*ānākketa*) of his words, which extends to ten billion universes; and the Field of scope (*visayakketa*) of his knowledge, which is boundless (Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, XIII-31). The entire Buddhist tradition acknowledges also

there can be only one buddha in one universe at any one time. Moreover there have been many buddhas in our universe in the past, the last one being Śākyamuni, and there will be many buddhas in our universe in the future, the next one being Maitreya (pāli : Metteya).

But one of the main Mahāyāna specificities is to add that, although our own Saha universe is presently devoid of any buddha, many buddhas do presently teach within their own fields, where it is possible to go to be born at the end of this life in order to hear directly a living buddha. This development could well be considered a natural answer to the disappearance of Śākyamuni from our world, while seeing a buddha and listening to his teaching are of utmost importance in the process towards buddhahood. The bet on the existence of present buddhas all around our universe appears clearly in the *Treatise on the Great Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (大智度論) attributed to Nāgārjuna and translated by Kumārajīva in 404-406 AD :

If the Buddhas in the ten directions (十方佛) exist (有) and you say they don't exist (無), you get a misdeed-without-delay. If the Buddhas in the ten directions do not exist and I say they exist, I am producing the ideation of infinite Buddhas and I get the merits of respecting them. (...) Although a human being can not know them at all by his eyes of flesh, if through mental faith alone (信心) he says they exist, his merits are infinite.

(*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (T. 25, 1509, p. 126b)
Accordingly the existence of Amida was never denied. The questions evolved around the exact nature of this buddha and his land.

The Pure Land sūtras adopt quite a realistic stand, such as the *Amida-kyō*, translated by Kumārajīva in 402 AD :

Westward from here (從是西方), beyond one thousand billion buddha lands, exists (有) a universe called "Utmost-Happiness". In that

land exists (有) a buddha called "Amida". At present he dwells there and preaches the Law.

(T. 12, 366, p. 346c / *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* 真宗聖教全書 (SSZ) 1, p. 67)

The Pure Land is thus far away in another direction (他方), outside of our own universe. The point is that this kind of cosmography clashes head-on with the Mādhyamika philosophy of universal voidness. According to the *Treatise on the Great Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, the great voidness (大空) of Mahāyāna is the voidness of the ten directions (十方空) :

Within the Mahāyāna doctrine, it is due to the relative truth (世俗諦) that the directions exist (有). But in absolute truth (第一義諦), the things (*dharmā*) as a whole are ungraspable, how much more the directions ! (...) What is metaphorically called 'direction' is the distinction between *here* (此間) and *there* (彼間) within the assembly of the four elements. (T. 25, p. 288a)

No wonder then that scriptures used by the Mādhyamika take a different stand from the Pure Land sūtras. Thus the *Sūtra of Vimalakīrī*, also translated by Kumārajīva in 406 AD, says :

It is in compliance with his [the bodhisattva's] purity of mind that a buddha land is pure (隨其心淨即佛土淨). (T. 14, 475, p. 538c)

This famous assertion was enforced by Kumārajīva's direct disciples, who are the fountainhead of the Chinese Mādhyamika school (三論宗). Thus Sengzhao 僧肇 (374-414) states :

A pure land built by a *tathāgata* has no-direction as substance (無方爲體). However due to their diversity of practices, the beings look at it likewise (同視) but see it differently (異見). It is due to the differences of their seeing that purity and blemish are produced. (...) The buddha land is the reverberation (影響) of the beings.

(T. 38, 1775, p. 334b, c)

And Daosheng 道生 (360-434) adds :

The enlightenment of Great Vehicle is fundamentally not to abandon births-and-deaths that would be *near* (近) to aspire to *further* (遠). (T. 38, 1775, p. 392a)

This last statement was - so to said - answered by the *Sūtra of the Con-templations of Infinite-Life* (觀無量壽經), translated towards 430 AD. Like the two other Pure Land *Sūtras*, it says that the buddha field of Amida is in the west, but it adds that "the Buddha Amida is *not far* from here" 阿彌陀佛去此不遠 (T. 12, 365, p. 341c). Still Daosheng takes the Mādhyamika logic further:

A [buddha] realm is a territory delimited by beings. When there is no blemish in it, it said to be pure. Without blemish, it is *non-existent* (無); delimited, it is *existent* (有). (T. 38, 1775, p. 334c)

A deep connoisseur of the Mādhyamika, the Pure Land master Tanluan 曇鸞 (476-542) says about Amida's realm :

It transcends existence (出有), and still it exists (而有). *It transcends existence* means that it transcends the three existences (三有) [with- in the World of Desire, the World of Form and the World of non-form], *still it exists* is the Pure Land's existence (淨土有). (T. 40, 1819, p. 830a / SSZ 1, p. 293)

Shrewdly enough, Tanluan also quotes the above-mentioned passage from the *Sūtra of Vimalakīrti* only to apply it to the cause of the Pure Land itself : that is the Pure Land is pure because when the future Amida produced his vows his mind was pure (T. 40, 1819, p. 829a / SSZ 1, p. 289).

Nevertheless, the Mādhyamika inspired the Chan/Zen tradition, whose 4th patriarch Daoxin 道信 (580-651) states :

If one knows that the mind originally neither arises nor perishes but is ultimately pure, then it is the pure buddha realm (即是淨佛國土), and one doesn't have to turn towards the western direction (不須向西方). The Buddha makes the beings of obtuse faculties turn towards the western direction, but he doesn't preach that to men of sharp faculties. (T. 85, 2837, p. 1287c)

The refutation by the Pure Land school came from Daochuo 道綽 (562-645). He had been a Chan practitioner but he was also the first to develop a distinctive and self-conscious Pure Land school (宗) by establishing its own set of Scriptures (經) that "encourage to leave *here* and search over *there*" (捨此徬彼), its own Masters' lineage (師承) and its own classification of teachings (判教). In his refutation, Daochuo states :

In [our continent] Jambudvīpa, where the sun rises is called "birth" and where it sets is called "death". (...) For this reason, the Bodhisattva Dharma-Treasure who became buddha through his vows dwells in the west to compassionately receive the beings. (...) If they were saints (聖人) and able to master levitation, they would not discriminate between the localizations of the directions (不辨方所). But due to their human psycho-physical characteristics, if ordinary beings (凡夫) turn to other directions, their going to the west would inevitably be difficult. (T. 47, 1958, p. 18a / SSZ 1, p. 426-427)

Daochuo also elaborates on the philosophical level :

If the conditioneds (緣) are embraced in compliance with their source (本), then there is nothing outside this mind (是心外無法). But if the meaning is explained by the division into two truths (二諦)

[relative and absolute], then there is no hindrance to the Pure Land being something outside this mind (是心外法).

(T. 47, 1958, p. 9a / SSZ 1, p. 394)

He then goes on to show how ordinary beings can be born in the Pure Land by relying on marks (相), although marklessness (無相) is the true mark of all things (諸法實相) according to Mādhyamika. This is due to the fact that the Pure Land's marks are not binding ties (執縛) but deliverance (解脫) itself, because they are marks without contamination (無漏相) as they have been produced by the Buddha Amida.⁽⁴⁾

But the Chan critics went further with the 6th patriarch Huineng 慧能 (638-713), who not only referred to the above-quoted *Sūtra of Vimalakīrti*, but also used the Pure Land scriptures themselves, as related in the *Platform Sūtra*:

While dwelling at Śrāvastī [according to the *Amida*kyō] the World-honoured One expounded [that the Pure Land is] "in the western direction" (西方), in order to attract and edify the beings. But the text of the *Sūtra* [of the *Contemplations*] explains clearly that [the Buddha Amida] is "not far from here" (去此不遠). It is only for people of inferior faculties that the Buddha expounds its farness. And when he expounds its nearness, it is only for those of superior wisdom. (...) The deluded man commemorates the Buddha (念佛) and will be born over there (生於彼), while the awakened one purifies his mind by himself. That is what the Buddha says [in the *Sūtra* of *Vimalakīrti*]: "It is in compliance with his purity of mind that a buddha land is pure". (...)

If only your mind is without impurity, the western direction is "not far from here". But if your mind produces impure thoughts, going to be born [in the Pure Land] through the commemoration of the

Buddha (念佛往生) will be difficult to reach.⁽⁵⁾

This was rebuked in turn by Shandao 善導 (613-681):

Do not believe others who say: "If only you purify your mind, this world is completely purified"! If they mean that this world would be the same as the Buddhas' realms, why would there be such births-and-deaths within the six destinies?

(T. 47, 1981, p. 452b / SSZ 1, p. 707)

Shandao also refuted the interpretation of Amida as the elementary body (*dharma*kyō) of mere consciousness (唯識法身) that was then developed by the Chinese school of the Vijñānavāda (法相宗). Congruant with his teacher Daochuo, he also admits that the Buddha can manifest their reflections without being bound to any direction (影現無方), but he insists that the *Sūtra of the Contemplations* points to one direction and establishes marks (指方立相)⁽⁶⁾ because ordinary beings would be unable to meditate on the markless.

However, the Daochuo-Shandao tradition did not survive long in China and new idealist interpretations of the Pure Land developed during the Song Dynasty. Such an eclectic master as Lingzhi Yuanzhao 靈芝元照 (1048-1116), for example, says:

That Pure Land, that is my own mind (彼淨土即我自心), it is not in another direction (非他方).
(T. 37, 1754, p. 280a)

In Japan, the immanentist interpretation of Amida was first developed by esoteric Buddhism,⁽⁷⁾ as summarized by Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212):

According to Shingon teaching (真言教), Amida is the *taihōgata* in our own mind (己心如來) and one should not seek him outside (不可覓外). According to Pure Land teaching (淨土教), the Buddha Amida

became buddha in accomplishment of the vows produced by the *bhikṣu* Dharma-Treasure and he dwells in the western direction (在西方). This is a big difference (大異).

Eventually, Chinese Pure Land idealism reached Japan by the time of Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1263), who inherited Shandao's interpretation through Hōnen. In his *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran laments:

Clerics and laymen of the Declining Age and masters of recent times are plunged in [the doctrine of Amida and his Pure Land as] one's own nature and mind only (自性唯心) and they degrade the true realization of the Pure Land. (Vol. III, Preface)

Shinran does not quote the names of those "masters of recent times" (近世宗師), but it may be an allusion to Shunjō 俊苒 (1166-1227) of Sennyūji 泉涌寺, who brought back to Japan the teachings of Lingzhi Yuanzhao after a long stay in China. Later within the Jōdo-Shinshū, Zonkaku 存覺 (1290-1373) was also to refute the Tendai 天台 interpretation of "Amida as my own mind" (己心の阿彌陀) and he insisted on the phrase "to go to be born" (おぼへ 往生) which stresses that the Pure Land is outside our own world.

During the 17th century, the syncretic interpretation of Zen and Pure Land by Chinese masters of the Ming dynasty – such as Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏 (1535-1615) – also reached Japan, to the point that some scholars of Honganji converted to the Rinzaï school of Zen, like Sessō Sōsai 雪窓宗叡 (1589-1649). Tetsugen Dōkō 鉄眼道光 (1630-1683) and Jitsuden Dōkin 實傳道鈞 of Kōtokuji 光徳寺.

At the time of the Squabble of the Jōō era (1653-1655), Gekkan accused Saigin of favouring the Zen interpretation of the Pure Land, that is to contemplate it in one's mind (觀心釋). In his defence, Saigin explains that whenever he used Zen interpretation it was in order to prepare his

students not to be misled if they encounter such ideas in other schools' commentaries; as for his own teaching, he insisted that Jōdo-Shinshū resorts to the interpretation by objectification of the marks (事相釋) from the Shandao tradition, which amounts to establish marks over markless (無相之上建相). Referring to the famous *Sūtra of the heart of Prajñāpāramitā*, Saigin says that Zen takes the standpoint of "voidness, that is form" (空即是色), and Pure Land the standpoint of "form, that is voidness" (色即是空).

Gekkan also accused Saigin of using allegorical interpretation (表事釋). For example, Queen Vaidehī would represent one's own original nature (自己の本性), and her son Ajātasatru the ignorance of the muddled consciousness (妄識の無明). Saigin answers by a complicated explanation referring to the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*; he also recalls how Genshin 源信 (942-1017) already used allegorical interpretations in his *Commentary on the Amida-kyō*.⁽⁹⁾ But the real answer of Saigin lies in the definition of his method which is a syncretical approach of the facts and the meaning (事理融即):

Sometimes I state the terminology according to the text (文), and sometimes I provide its allegorical interpretation on the basis of its meaning (義), in the hope of clarifying the meaning of the topic in order to lead our students into the wisdom of faith (信智) within the insurance (安心) of our doctrine.⁽¹⁰⁾

In so doing, Saigin freely appropriated one of the most classical rules of Buddhist hermeneutics, which is to rely on the meaning (依義) and not on words (不依語), as stated in the *Treatise on the Great Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*,⁽¹¹⁾ also quoted by Shinran in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* (VI-71).

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Let us now turn to the interpretation of Amida by Shinran himself as it

appears in his *Ichinen-tammen mon'i* :

From this precious ocean of unique suchness (一如) was manifested *form*, assuming the *name* of "Bodhisattva Dharma-Treasure". With the production of his unobstructed vow (無礙のちかひ) as seed, he became the Buddha Amida, and this is why he is said "one-who-came-from-suchness as reward body" (報身如來). He is called "Buddha Unobstructed-Light filling-the-ten-directions" (盡十方無礙光佛).

(...)

This one-who-came-from-suchness is also said "dharma-body in adapted means." (方便法身). "Adapted means" means to manifest a *form* and reveal a *name* as to make itself known to the beings. This is the Buddha Amida. This one-who-came-from-suchness is light. Light is wisdom. Wisdom is the form of light. Wisdom is also formless (...). (T. 83, 2657, p. 698a / SSZ I, p. 616)

The main focus here is *name* and *form*, because name-and-form is the classic Buddhist definition of a person (*nāmarūpa*). Accordingly, Dharma-Treasure/Amida is the *personification* of the absolute. It should be stressed that he is not a transformation of the absolute, but a modal personification of the absolute without any ontological change. The Buddha Amida is not subordinated to the absolute, but the personified absolute itself, which explains why Shinran calls him "*dharma-body* in adapted means". This unique definition provides an important clue for interreligious dialogue with Christian theologians, as the topic of the "person" is central in their philosophical criticisms of Pure Land amounting to doctism or - worse - monism.

As far as the name of Amida is concerned, Shinran particularly favours the translation "Unobstructed-Light" (無礙光), as it bears a special meaning, as explained by Tanluan : "*Unobstructed* is knowing that births-and-

deaths are *nirvāna*" (知生死即是涅槃); Daochuo also applies to the reward body (報身) the phrase "unobstruction of globality" (圓通無礙). In short, if we were to use today's vocabulary, the Buddha Amida - with his unobstructed wisdom manifested as light and acting through his vows - functions somewhat like an interface between the absolute truth and the relative truth.

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How are we then to consider the "story" of the Bodhisattva Dharma-Treasure becoming the Buddha Amida ?

To use such expressions as "story" or "narrative" is rather neutral, while "legend", "tale" or "fable" would influence the interpretation of the very nature of this "story" (the Japanese is also ambiguous : *hanashi* 話, *setsuwa* 説話, *monogatari* 物語). How much more the terms "symbol" (*shōhō* 象徴), or "myth" which is translated into Japanese as *shinwa* 神話 : "gods' tale", unless it is merely transcribed as *missu* ミッス. "Myth" in particular is now defined in very different ways by specialists, be it in anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, religious studies, folklore and so on. To use the term "myth" presupposes spending enough time to explain very precisely what kind of definition of a myth one is referring to. Another point is that applying such a Western concept as "myth" to Amida's "story" is an exogenous method that can throw a culturally self-centred light on our topic. It is therefore worth exploring first the endogenous method.

The most convenient Buddhist word seems to be "relation" (*innen* 因縁, skr. *nidāna*). In the twelvefold classification of texts (十二部經), it is used to relate the circumstances surrounding the origin of the Buddha's teachings (諸佛法本起因縁). Applied to Dharma-Treasure/Amida, the relation in the *Sūtra of Infinite-Life* shows how the bodhisattva originally produced his vows, accomplished his practices and built his Pure Land

in the West up to the moment when, as a consequence, he realized perfect enlightenment. The *Commentary* by Tanluan has two interesting passages related to *innen* 因緣, that can be read in various ways, the first reading being :

The way of easy practice is only aspiring to be born in his Pure Land *with faith in the relation of the Buddha* [Amida] (信佛因緣). (...) Ordinary beings of the lowest grade *who have faith in the relation of the Buddha* (信佛因緣) will all be born in the Pure Land, so long as they don't slander the correct Law.

(T. 40, p. 826b and 834a / SSZ 1, p. 279 and 308)

This first reading parallels Shinran's definition of "hearing" (聞), which, in many respects, is the core of his teaching :

Beings hear the genesis (生起) and full process (本末) of the Buddha's vow without having the mind of doubt. This is "hearing".

(*Kyōgyōshinshō*, III-65)

But the word *innen* 因緣 means also "causality" (the relationship between cause and circumstances), in which case Tanluan's quotations would read :

The way of easy practice is only aspiring to be born in the Pure Land *through the causality of faith in the Buddha*. (...) Ordinary beings of the lowest grade will all be born in the Pure Land *through the causality of faith in the Buddha*, so long as they don't slander the correct Law.

Accordingly, the amphibology of Tanluan's text would confirm the relevance of the word *relation* in designating Amida's "story".

Methodologically speaking, it would be awkward to apply the myth's

concept to the relation of Amida alone: it should also be applied to other similar Buddhist topics, such as Śākyamuni's previous lives (*Jātaka*). Eventually it should be applied to the whole Buddhist cosmology as well, which would lead one to address in addition such notions as *dharma**dhātu*. Already, during the 19th century, a great debate around the reality of Mount Sumeru (須彌山説) agitated Japan after the introduction of Western sciences.⁽¹⁸⁾

Moreover, the myth is related to the notion of *historicity* : did it really happen or exist in the past ? Historical criticism is one of the two main criteria of the classic Catholic apologetics, the other one being philosophical analysis. The great Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), for example, wrote :

What is their story of the Vow of Amitabha ? And what is this Amida himself ? What is this phantasmagoria of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in which he figures ? What, finally is all this great machinery, half mythological, half metaphysical, of the Mahayana ? He who adheres to the Christian mystery does not have either, it is true, direct evidence. His adhesion is an act of faith. At least he trusts to precise, dated, explicit testimonies, whose value he is enabled to appreciate. But here, what shadow of a guarantee do we find ?⁽¹⁹⁾

Historicity, however, is not relevant to Buddhism, because of its own hermeneutic rules which privilege direct experience (現證, *pratyakṣa*). Here, maybe, lies the biggest gap with the Western and/or modern mind. This irrelevancy leaves plenty of room to address the other side of our topic, which appears as *the* indispensable prerequisite, that is to answer this question : what does "to really exist" mean in the light of Buddhist philosophy ? One wonders whether attempting to answer this question would not contribute to filling the gap.

Notes:

- * My heartfelt thanks to Prof. Helen Loveday for checking my English.
- (1) See my *Terré Pure, Zen et autorité* (Collège de France, Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Japonaises), Paris, De Boccard, 2007. A large bulk of documents related to this quarrel has recently been published under the direction of Hirata Atsushi 平田厚志 in the *Igisōron* : 『菩提非浄土 真宗異義相論, 「承応の閻魔」を発端とする本願寺・興正寺一件史料』 (Kyōto, Hōzōkan, 2008); see my review in *Nihon shūkyō bunkashi kenkyū* 日本宗教文化史研究, 13-1 (2009), p. 79-84.
- (2) Fujita Kōtatsu 藤田宏達 uses the English phrase "world of another dimension" (他方世界) and shows that it should not be merely confused with the other-world (他界). See his "The Origin of the Pure Land", *Eastern Buddhist*, N. S. 29-1 (Spring 1996), p. 33-52; and his *Jado-sambukyō no kenkyū* 浄土三部経の研究 (Iwanami shoten, 2007), p. 391-395.
- (3) T. 47, 1958, p. 13c, 14b, 19a / SSZ 1, p. 410, 413, 430.
- (4) T. 47, 1958, p. 8c-9a, 18c / SSZ 1, p. 392-394, 429. See David Chappell : «Chinese Interpretations of the Pure Lands» (*Buddhist and Taoist Studies*, I; Honolulu, University Press of Hawaii, 1977), p. 41-43.
- (5) Dunhuang ms. : Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 16.
- (6) T. 37, 1753, p. 267a, b / SSZ 1, p. 518, 519.
- (7) For example : Kakuban 覺鑊 (1095-1143), *Amida hisshaku* 阿彌陀秘釋 (T. 79, 2522, p. 48ac). See Inagaki Hisao 稲垣久雄 : "The Esoteric Meaning of 'Amida' by Kakuban", *Kōgyō Daishi Kakuban kenkyū* 興教大師覚鑊研究 (Tōkyō, Shunjūsha, 1992), p. 15-32.
- (8) *Kurodani Shōnin gotōroku* 黒谷上人語燈錄 : T. 83, 2612, p. 242a / SSZ 4, p. 699.
- (9) See Mark Blum : *The Origins and Development of Pure Land Buddhism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 111, 189-190, 376; and my review in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 29-2 (University of Washington, 2003), p. 393-397.
- (10) Zonkaku, *Hokke mondō* 法華問答 : SSZ 3, p. 305-306.
- (11) Saigū, *Mana tōshō* 眞名答書 : *Shinshū zensho* 真宗全書 (Szs.), 50, p.

64a, 64b.

- (12) *Mana tōshō* : Szs. 50, p. 67ab and p. 64a.
- (13) *Mana tōshō* : Szs. 50, p. 62ab.
- (14) T. 25, p. 125a. More in Etienne Lamotte : "The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism", *Buddhist Studies Review*, Vol. 2, Nr. 1-2 (1985), p. 4-24.
- (15) Tanluan : T. 40, p. 843c / SSZ 1, p. 346; Daochuo : T. 47, p. 7b / SSZ 1, p. 389.
- (16) More in my *Shinran* (Gollion, Infolio éditions, 2008), p. 104-111, 188-191.
- (17) *Treatise on the Great Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* : T. 25, p. 307b.
- (18) See Okada Masahiko 岡田正彦 : *Visions and Reality, Buddhist Cosmographic Discourses in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, Ph.D. Stanford University, 1997.
- (19) Lubac, *Amida* (Paris, Seuil, 1955), p. 252-253 (English translation by Amita Bhakal). See my article : "Les écrits d'Henri de Lubac sur le bouddhisme", *Les cahiers bouddhiques*, Nr. 5 (Paris, Université Bouddhique Européenne, 2007), p. 81-110.

FESTSCHRIFT IN COMMEMORATION OF
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