

DOCTRINAL DISPUTE IN THE EARLIEST PHASE  
OF CHINESE BUDDHISM – ANTI-MAHĀYĀNA POLEMICS  
IN THE *SCRIPTURE ON THE FIFTY CONTEMPLATIONS*

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**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Only a tiny fraction of the surviving textual sources from the earliest phase of Chinese Buddhism directly reflect the ideas, understanding, or concerns of Chinese Buddhists themselves. Most such sources are *translations* of material originally written in Indian languages, and as Erik Zürcher memorably put it, for such materials we cannot easily “separate the dead weight from the payload;” we cannot know which parts of these texts aroused the interest and imagination of the Chinese audience and which were ignored, if they were even read at all.<sup>2</sup> Scholars considering Chinese Buddhism during what Zürcher called its “embryonic” stage (the period up until roughly the end of the Three Kingdoms period in 280 CE)<sup>3</sup> have, accordingly, largely relied on extrinsic sources: scattered

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference “Chinese Buddhism and the Scholarship of Erik Zürcher” held at the University of Leiden in February of 2014. I want to thank the organizers (especially Jonathan Silk) for inviting me to participate and also to the many others at that conference who offered their comments. Jan Nattier, Stefano Zacchetti, Robert Sharf, and Antonello Palumbo in particular have provided many helpful corrections and suggestions. Two anonymous reviewers for JIABS also provided useful feedback which I have tried to incorporate. The remaining errors, oversights, and weaknesses of argument are, of course, entirely my own.

<sup>2</sup> Zürcher 1995: 172–173 (reprinted in Silk 2014: 468–470). That Indian Buddhist texts were translated at all, and in such great numbers, is itself a historical fact of considerable importance, and it attests, among other things, to the willingness of Chinese patrons to support such activity. But as Zürcher here cautions, the *content* of the translated texts does not in itself reveal what elements of Buddhism were of interest to the Chinese, as we almost never know what factors motivated the choice of texts to be translated.

<sup>3</sup> Zürcher saw the late Western Jin dynasty (265–317 CE) as a decisive moment because it was only from this time (he believed) that Buddhism in China became “an organized religious system with a body of regularly ordained Chinese monks” (Zürcher

references to Buddhism in secular Chinese historical records, certain reliable-sounding reports in later Chinese Buddhist literature, the increasing body of archaeological or art-historical data (which though compelling have often been of uncertain or contested interpretation),<sup>4</sup> or, finally, certain other less obvious but potentially rewarding sources such as the linguistic features of early Buddhist translations.<sup>5</sup>

By calling such sources ‘extrinsic’ I do not mean to diminish their significance – indeed, they are what allow us to reconstruct key historical facts such as where in China Buddhism was initially active, what Buddhists were actually doing, and what segments of the Chinese populace were first drawn to this foreign religion. However such data give us only the vaguest picture of how Chinese Buddhists (however loosely and non-exclusively we understand this designation) understood the activities they were engaging with and what they themselves actually thought and believed or simply wanted others to think and believe (which is surely no less important).

Glimpses into the thought-world of pre-280 CE Chinese Buddhism have, however, become possible in recent years as scholars have given renewed attention to the small number of Chinese-authored Buddhist compositions reliably dated to this period<sup>6</sup> and have further even discovered at least one ‘new’ Chinese composition from this period that had long masqueraded as a translation of an Indian text.<sup>7</sup> Given their scarcity, any Chinese-authored Buddhist text dating to this time has the potential to contribute significantly to our understanding of the very early history of Chinese Buddhism.

1990: 182; reprinted in Silk 2014: 376), and also because it is only from this time that we begin to accumulate, or even have evidence there once existed, a substantial body of *Chinese* writings on Buddhism as opposed to Chinese texts translated from Indian languages (Zürcher 1972: 71–72).

<sup>4</sup> On the early material evidence, as well as its limitations, see Abe 2002: 11–102.

<sup>5</sup> This latter approach was pioneered by Zürcher (1977; 1991; reprinted in Silk 2014: 27–61; 419–445).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Zacchetti 2010. Zacchetti 2004b also examines a long neglected text that may record oral teachings delivered in China by a foreign Buddhist master (most likely An Shigao). The most famous Chinese-authored Buddhist text traditionally taken to be from this period is the pro-Buddhist polemic *Mouzi li huo lun* 牟子理惑論. Its true dating is controversial, however, with some scholars placing it as late as the fifth century (Zürcher 1972: 13–14).

<sup>7</sup> Zacchetti 2008.

Below, I will present what I argue should be considered another such text: the *Scripture on the Fifty Contemplations* (*Wushi jiaoji jing* 五十校計經; *Fifty Contemplations* hereafter). Despite taking the form of an Indian Buddhist sutra, this text is almost certainly of Chinese authorship, and most likely dates to the third if not late second century. The *Fifty Contemplations* might, therefore, be one of the earliest Chinese Buddhist ‘apocryphal’ scriptures.

Remarkably, the *Fifty Contemplations* proves to be a surprisingly astute criticism of certain aspects of Mahāyāna Buddhist soteriology. That Chinese Buddhists of this period would compose such a text is somewhat unexpected. Above all the *Fifty Contemplations* reveals, as I will suggest, a level of doctrinal acumen rather greater than has typically been assumed possible for Chinese Buddhists of this period, who have often been thought of as struggling to make sense of basic Buddhist concepts and as interested only in those parts of Buddhism they could successfully assimilate with Daoism or other native thought systems. The *Fifty Contemplations* gives us, in short, one of our earliest glimpses of well-informed, intellectually adept Chinese Buddhists making serious efforts to come to grips with their newfound tradition.

### The Scripture on the *Fifty Contemplations*

The *Fifty Contemplations* is listed in our earliest bibliographic source as a translation of An Shigao 安世高 (fl. 148–168 CE), the first known translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese.<sup>8</sup> Despite this pedigree, the *Fifty Contemplations* has only occasionally been discussed by modern scholars, no doubt in part because of its general lack of renown in later Chinese Buddhism,<sup>9</sup> but also because it has sometimes been regarded as lost,<sup>10</sup> an error easily made because the modern Taishō edition of the

<sup>8</sup> *Chu san zang ji ji* 出三藏記集, T.2145:55.6a14, nominally reproducing Daoan’s 道安 *Zong li zhong jing mu lu* 總理眾經目錄 of 374 CE. The alternate title *Ming du wushi jiaoji jing* 明度五十校計經 is given in a note, and this is the title found on the extant copies of the text.

<sup>9</sup> I know of only a few later citations of the *Fifty Contemplations*, within the works of (or attributed to) Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597); see *Mohe zhi guan* 摩訶止觀, T.1911:46.62b24–27; *Jin guang ming jing wen ju* 金光明經文句, T.1785:39.60b11–12 and 62b18–19.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Ui 1971: 22.

Chinese Buddhist canon hides the *Fifty Contemplations* away, with a different title, within the voluminous *Da fang deng da ji jing* 大方等大集經 collection.<sup>11</sup> Even those scholars well aware of the text's existence have sometimes doubted its connection to An Shigao (and hence its potentially early date) because it discusses Mahāyāna ideas, something absent from his other known translations.<sup>12</sup>

Jan Nattier's recent analysis of the *Fifty Contemplations* has put suspicion about its provenance on firmer footing. Based on her studies of the linguistic features of pre-280 CE Chinese Buddhist translations, Nattier shows that while the language of the *Fifty Contemplations* is indeed archaic, it cannot be a translation of An Shigao (though it had come to be considered so by the middle of the fourth century).<sup>13</sup> Nattier notes, among other points, grammatical forms such as the pronoun *ru* 汝 and the pronominal plural marker *cao* 曹, which though absent from An Shigao's authentic translations are, conversely, regularly used in the texts produced by the other prolific Han-dynasty translator, Lokakṣema 支婁迦讖,<sup>14</sup> who worked a generation later.<sup>15</sup> More general stylistic considerations also point away from An Shigao, such as the presence of certain transcriptions – such as *pili* 薜荔 (*preta*) or *nili* 泥犁 (*niraya*) – that do not appear elsewhere in his corpus, where these words, and indeed

<sup>11</sup> The text was (erroneously) included under the title *Shi fang pusa pin* 十方菩薩品 as fascicles 58 and 59 of this collection in the late seventh century (Deleanu 1993: 44, n. 100). The text was also preserved as an independent work in all known wood-block-printed editions of the Chinese Buddhist canon, even in the second carving of the Koryō canon. The Taishō editors, however, did not include the stand-alone version, perhaps because they realized it already appeared elsewhere.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Sakaino 1935: 66–68, who suggests Zhi Qian as the true translator (though Sakaino seems to have changed his mind about this text; in Sakaino 1927–1929, 1: 33–34, he had expressed the view that the *Fifty Contemplations* is entirely 'Hīnayāna' in character). Other scholars have suggested, conversely, that the existence of this text must mean that An Shigao was not, after all, a translator (or adherent) of exclusively 'Hīnayāna' texts as has been presumed (Wang 1997; Ue 1971: 22).

<sup>13</sup> Nattier 2008: 55–59 (see also Vetter 2013: 295–296, who endorses Nattier's conclusions).

<sup>14</sup> The reconstruction *Lokakṣema* remains hypothetical, but is widely used by modern scholars.

<sup>15</sup> According to his earliest biography, Lokakṣema arrived in the Chinese capital of Luoyang toward the end of the reign of Emperor Huan 桓 (r. 147–167 CE), and began translating texts between 178 and 188 (*Chu san zang ji ji*, T.2145:55.95c25).

most Buddhist technical terms, are translated rather than phonetically transcribed.<sup>16</sup>

Nattier also notes that whoever produced the *Fifty Contemplations* was seemingly familiar with the idiom of Lokakṣema's translations (and hence could not have been An Shigao). The text opens, for example, without any recognizable translation of “thus have I heard” (*evaṃ mayā śrutam*), an unusual absence that is, however, characteristic of Lokakṣema's oeuvre.<sup>17</sup> Some parts of the opening passage even bear a suspicious similarity to the opening lines of the *Dousha jing* 兜沙經 (T.280), which Nattier classifies as a “second-tier” Lokakṣema translation.<sup>18</sup> All of this suggests, as Nattier then concludes, the working hypothesis that the *Fifty Contemplations* was “produced in a community whose members considered themselves to be disciples ... of An Shigao, but who also had access to the translations produced by Lokakṣema's community.”<sup>19</sup>

With this as our starting point, I will argue that the *Fifty Contemplations* was not simply produced by a community such as Nattier describes, but actually composed by it. The mutual influence that she has detected from what we might loosely call the ‘An Shigao’ and ‘Lokakṣema’ streams of early Chinese Buddhist translations thus marks not simply the idiom of this text's translation from an Indian language, but the intellectual context of its composition. This context was, as we shall see, one in which some Chinese readers of Buddhist texts had begun to detect and debate certain perceived doctrinal differences between the vision of Buddhist soteriology advocated in the texts associated with An Shigao,

<sup>16</sup> An Shigao's texts display an overwhelming preference for the translation, rather than phonetic transcription, of technical Buddhist vocabulary (Zürcher 1991: 283; reprinted in Silk 2014: 427–428; Nattier 2008: 44). Within his corpus only a few technical terms are regularly transcribed. These include Indian proper names, the titles of certain kinds of people (such as *bhikṣu* 比丘, *śramaṇa* 沙門, or *brāhmaṇa* 婆羅門), and a very few other words such as *chan* 禪 (*dhyāna*).

<sup>17</sup> Nattier 2008: 58. Nattier also notes translations of various stereotyped responses of the Buddha's audience that match how these formulas were rendered by Lokakṣema.

<sup>18</sup> Nattier refers to as “second-tier” those texts that, though not ascribed to Lokakṣema in our earliest bibliographic sources, resemble Lokakṣema's ‘core’ translations in both style and (especially) technical terminology (Nattier 2008: 83). The possible connection between the *Dousha jing* and the *Fifty Contemplations* was first noted by Shizutani Masao 静谷正雄 (1974: 234).

<sup>19</sup> Nattier 2008: 59.

largely if not entirely of the ‘mainstream’ Buddhist variety, and that found in the texts associated with Lokakṣema, without exception Mahāyāna sutras.

### “Bodhisattva” practice in the *Fifty Contemplations*

Before turning to its origins, it will be useful to first examine just what the *Fifty Contemplations* has to say, as its contents, in particular its criticisms of the bodhisattva path as normally understood, are potentially unique within Buddhist literature as a whole.

The *Fifty Contemplations* opens with brief narrative frame, vaguely but not decisively in the style of a Mahāyāna sūtra,<sup>20</sup> which quickly gives way to an extended dialog between the Buddha and “various bodhisattvas” (諸菩薩) who begin by asking the Buddha about the differing abilities and attainments of bodhisattvas:

Why is it that some bodhisattvas are foolish, some are wise, some are sagacious, some are able to fly, some are able to sit in meditation, some have supernatural vision, some are unable to fly, and some are unable to concentrate their thoughts for long and are thus are unable to sit in meditation?<sup>21</sup>

Such differences, the Buddha replies, depend on their depth (厚) or shallowness (薄) of practice. True bodhisattvas, the Buddha continues, must “contemplate the six sense organs” (校計六情) so as to thereby “attain the wisdom of the buddhas of the ten directions” (得十方佛智慧). Much of the remainder of the *Fifty Contemplations* is devoted to explaining how one should “contemplate the six sense organs.” A basic outline of what is intended is given in the following initial explanation:

A bodhisattva [must] constantly guard his mind, will, and consciousness so that they do not move, so that they return to extinction,<sup>22</sup> [and in this

<sup>20</sup> T.397:13.394b9–10. As mentioned above, it is within this opening section that we find parallels to T.280.

<sup>21</sup> 菩薩何因緣有癡者，有點者，有慧者，有能飛者，有能坐行三昧禪者，有能徹視者，有不能飛者，有不能坐行禪行三昧得定意不能久者。(T.397:13.394b11–14).

<sup>22</sup> Translation tentative. The expression *gui mie jin* 歸滅盡, “return to extinction” (or “return and become extinct”) is unusual, and does not seem to appear in any (other) known Buddhist texts from the Han or Three Kingdoms period.

manner] he plants the sprouts of the Way.<sup>23</sup> If a bodhisattva can guard his eyes so that visible forms do not appear<sup>24</sup> ... guard his ears so that sounds do not appear ... guard his nose so that scents do not appear ... guard his mouth so that tastes do not appear ... guard his body so that bodily sensations do not appear, so that they return to extinction, [he in his manner] plants the sprouts of the Way. If a bodhisattva can in this manner guard his six senses such that they are not stirred by either pleasant or unpleasant things, such that they are constantly maintained in a state of extinction, then this is to resolutely follow the Way in its profundity.<sup>25</sup>

This practice of “guarding the six sense organs” (守六情) – clearly indebted to the traditional Buddhist meditation practice of “guarding the sense doors” (discussed in many of An Shigao’s translations) – is elaborated over the course of the fifty “contemplations” (校計)<sup>26</sup> that the Buddha then goes on to explain and from which the text derives its name. The first dozen or so of these, taking up the majority of the text, are

<sup>23</sup> Vetter suggests that “sprouts of the Way” (道栽) might here represent *kuśalamūla* (Vetter 2013: 292, n. 8). As I discuss below, this unusual expression occurs in two other early, probably Chinese-authored texts associated with An Shigao (see below n. 82).

<sup>24</sup> The character 著 can mean both “adhere to” (*zhuó*) but also “appear” (*zhù*). Following normative Buddhist doctrine, we might wish to read “adhere to” (meaning that the mind is to remain unattached to sensory objects), not “appear” (which might imply that sensory perception is to be stopped entirely). We should note, however, that “appear” makes a pleasing parallel with the repeating word *mie* 滅, “disappear” (translated here as “extinction”) and also that the goal of extinguishing sensory perception is in fact embraced in more than a few Chinese Buddhist translations and compositions from the Han and Three Kingdoms period (Greene 2016).

<sup>25</sup> 菩薩常守心意識令不動，歸滅盡，種道栽。謂菩薩能守眼令色不著 ... 謂菩薩能守耳令聲不著 ... 謂菩薩能守鼻令香不著 ... 謂菩薩能守口令味不著 ... 謂菩薩能守身令細滑不著，歸滅盡，種道栽。菩薩如是能守六情，得好惡不動，常守滅盡，是為厚隨道深。(T.397:13.394b24–c2)

<sup>26</sup> The word *jiaoji* 校計 is often used in non-Buddhist texts to mean “calculation” or “counting” (*Han yu da ci dian* 4.1001b). Vetter, in his discussion of this text and in comparison with examples from the known corpus of An Shigao’s translations, suggests “examination” (Vetter 2013: 291, n. 5). However in early Chinese Buddhist translations, *jiaoji* also seems to refer to meditative thinking or reflection of some kind (Hu 2002: 29; see also Zacchetti 2014: 901–902 and Dong 2013: 167–175, who notes various other seemingly interchangeable forms). In the *Anban shou yi jing*, for example, the word is strongly associated with various meditation practices, including those carried out by the Buddha at the moment of his awakening (T.602:15.163c16–18; see also 165c12–17; 166a27–b1; 168b1; 168c17; 171a21). A more detailed study of the precise implications of this term and its use in early Chinese Buddhist texts is a desideratum, but in the meantime I render it loosely as “contemplation.”

described as the observation of various classes of mental defilements, each numbering 108, that are said to arise within the operation of each of the six senses: the 108 “delusions” (癡), the 108 “attachments” (愛), the 108 “doubts” (疑), the 108 “perversions” (顛倒), the 108 “depravities” (墮), the 108 “sprouts” (栽), the 108 “[types of] sinful consciousness” (罪識) and various others.<sup>27</sup>

Although many of these terms are straightforward, others – such as “sprouts” – are quite obscure and are never fully explained. Precisely what distinguishes any of these defilements from the others is also never discussed. The overall message, however, is clear enough – one’s goal should be to eliminate all such defilements completely,<sup>28</sup> as only then will it be possible to “cut off future rebirth” (斷當來生死).<sup>29</sup> Throughout the text the Buddha repeatedly states that his interlocutors, “the bodhisattvas,” having not yet come to “despise the suffering of rebirth” (不厭生死苦),<sup>30</sup> have so far failed to do this.

That the Buddha thus criticizes “bodhisattvas” for failing to turn away from and cut off rebirth (a typically ‘mainstream’ Buddhist understanding of the ultimate goal of Buddhism) is what led Shizutani Masao to see the *Fifty Contemplations* as an “anti-Mahāyāna” text affiliated with whatever school of Indian Buddhism An Shigao’s other texts derived from.<sup>31</sup> There are, however, a number of problems with this way of stating things. Firstly is that what the Buddha claims to teach is still referred to as the bodhisattva path,<sup>32</sup> and that those following these teachings will become

<sup>27</sup> The titles of all fifty “contemplations” are listed at T.397.13:394c18–395b3. Beginning from number 17 (from p. 403b8), the 108 “purities” (淨), their titles refer not to defilements to be eliminated but to positive mental factors to be cultivated.

<sup>28</sup> “If you bodhisattvas do not eliminate [these 108 ‘doubts’ 疑], you are not fit to be called bodhisattvas” (T.397:13.396a20); “When bodhisattvas practicing the way become aware of these 108 ‘sins of attachment and depravity’ (愛墮罪), they must feel shame, they must sever [them], they must separate [from them], they must extinguish [them]. In this way, with craving severed, they are fit to be called bodhisattvas.” (T.397:13.398b4–6); “Only when one removes the [108] ‘sprouts’ 栽 will one be in accord with the practice of a bodhisattva” (T.397:13.398b8–9).

<sup>29</sup> “One must cut off future rebirth; only then is one truly a bodhisattva” (要當斷當來生死乃應菩薩; T.397:13.401b3).

<sup>30</sup> T.397:13.406b20.

<sup>31</sup> Shizutani 1974: 234–237. The anti-Mahāyāna character of the *Fifty Contemplations* is also mentioned by Deleanu 1993: 43, n. 99–100, who approvingly cites Shizutani.

<sup>32</sup> T.397:13.397b19.



“fit to be called bodhisattvas.”<sup>33</sup> Not only that, but at various points the Buddha invokes typically Mahāyāna goals such as attaining “the wisdom of the buddhas of the ten directions,”<sup>34</sup> alludes without criticism to standard Mahāyāna doctrinal positions such as the present existence of such buddhas,<sup>35</sup> and most significantly of all, actively encourages practitioners (in this case, the “bodhisattvas”) to “attain buddhahood” (取佛).<sup>36</sup>

It is therefore problematic to classify the *Fifty Contemplations* as “anti-Mahāyāna” in any obvious way. Nevertheless when we look closely at those sections of the text where the Buddha criticizes his interlocutors, we find that while the *Fifty Contemplations* does use the words “bodhisattva path” and “attain buddhahood” to describe the goals it advocates, these terms do not carry their normal meaning. The *Fifty Contemplations* does not use these terms to refer to a path that forgoes immediate escape from rebirth in favor of a multi-lifetime quest for the superior accomplishment of becoming a perfect “buddha” complete with the thirty-two marks. Indeed, the *Fifty Contemplations* criticizes such a goal as delusional and incompatible with the basic Buddhist teaching that *all* rebirth is bad. What true practitioners must rather do, we are told, is cut off all rebirth as quickly as possible. In short, what is ultimately advocated here is, conceptually, an entirely mainstream Buddhist soteriology, and is furthermore pointedly contrasted with, and argued to be superior to, something that looks very much like the bodhisattva path as it is normally discussed in Mahāyāna scriptures.

### Becoming a buddha right away

The *Fifth Contemplations* presents these arguments most clearly in a series of short interludes between the successive explanations of the various contemplations of the different sets of defilements. In these passages, the Buddha explains why and how his interlocutors, the

<sup>33</sup> T.397:13.398c15; the phrase “will be fit [to be called] bodhisattvas” (應為菩薩) is repeated frequently.

<sup>34</sup> T.397:13.394b18–19.

<sup>35</sup> T.397:13.406a23–24.

<sup>36</sup> Nattier 2008: 65, n. 103 notes this point in particular as a reason for questioning Shizutani’s interpretation. Vetter too has argued that we should consider it a Mahāyāna text on the grounds that it endorses the goal of buddhahood (2013: 296).

“bodhisattvas,” still possess the defilements in question, and the back-and-forth dialog that results articulates the text’s vision of what Buddhist practice should and should not aim for.

The first notable passage in this regard follows the discussion of the 108 “desires” (欲欲).<sup>37</sup> Here the bodhisattvas explain that while they are still subject to rebirth, this is only because they “desire to save living beings by relying on the teachings” (我欲依經法度人).<sup>38</sup> Though not stated explicitly, the position here seems to be some form of the common idea that advanced bodhisattvas are reborn not as retribution for past karma (as are ordinary beings), but based on their vows to liberate all beings by accumulating the merit necessary to become a buddha. In response, however, the Buddha suggests that it would be much better if one were to become a buddha *right away*. The bodhisattvas reply that this is not possible:

*The Buddha said:* There are so many of you! Why do you not each become buddhas,<sup>39</sup> but instead merely band together in groups? ... Are you not able

<sup>37</sup> The term *yu yu* 欲欲 is somewhat perplexing. Later in this passage we find simply *yu* 欲, and it is not clear what distinction, if any, is being made between the two. Some modern dictionaries have noted the term *yu yu* 欲欲 as a translation of phrases such as *kāma-rāga* or *kāma-chanda* (Hirakawa 1997: 678), “craving for desirable objects of perception,” although the relevance of these examples to a text as early and archaic as the *Fifty Contemplations* is unclear. I can find only a single example of *yu yu* 欲欲 within an authentic Han or Three-Kingdoms era Buddhist text: a passage from the (likely) An Shigao translation (see Harrison 2002) of texts from the *Samyuktāgama*, where the line (in verse): 壞欲欲思想 (*Za Ahan jing* 雜阿含經, T.101:2.495b3) appears to correspond to *pahānaṃ kāmasaññānaṃ* (*Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.134; the PTS editors read *kāmachandānaṃ*, but the variant they note, which I follow here, clearly fits the Chinese, with 思想 corresponding to *saññā*, and also matches a Sanskrit version of the verses, for which see Sander and Waldschmidt 1985, Kat.1171R8). From the Chinese side, one explanation, suggested by a reviewer of this article, would be that *yu yu* 欲欲 is a nominal reduplication meaning “each and every X” or “the many X.” Within the *Fifty Contemplations*, however, *yu yu* 欲欲 appears also as a predicate (“such are the *yu yu*” 如是為欲欲; T.397:13.397a17–18), which would be unusual for a reduplicated noun within typical Chinese grammar. Recognizing the uncertainties that remain, I will translate *yu yu* 欲欲 simply as “desires.”

<sup>38</sup> In Han and Three-Kingdoms era Chinese Buddhist translations *jing fa* 經法 usually translates *dharma*, not *sūtra* as we might expect (Vetter and Zacchetti 2004).

<sup>39</sup> The expression *qu fo* 取佛 means “become a buddha” in Lokakṣema’s *Dao xing bore jing* 道行般若經 (T.224:8.435b25–26). In Zhi Qian’s 支謙 third-century revision of this text, the *Da ming du jing* 大明度經, it appears several more times (T.225:8.485b6;

to all become buddhas right now on this very day? *The bodhisattvas replied*: We cannot all become buddhas [right now]. *The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas*: Why not? *The bodhisattvas replied*: [We cannot because] among us are some who have not yet obtained all the marks [of a buddha], some whose merit is not yet complete, and some who have not yet eliminated the sins [leading to future] rebirth.<sup>40</sup>

To this the Buddha replies that it is impossible to liberate other beings as long as one is not yet a buddha. However it *is* possible to become a buddha right now by eliminating desire and other mental impurities:

*The bodhisattvas then asked the Buddha*: In this case, why is it that we cannot become buddhas [right now]? *The Buddha replied*: It is because you do not practice *ānāpāna* [breath meditation], and when guarding your minds, you do not contemplate and abandon the 108 desires.<sup>41</sup>

Following a long description of how these 108 desires arise within the activities of the six sense organs (using a formula found throughout the text, which I will discuss in more detail below), the Buddha points out the many ways that his interlocutors are still in the thrall of such desires, despite their protests to the contrary. It is here that we begin to see the first inklings that the *Fifty Contemplations* might have a less than favourable attitude toward the bodhisattva path as normally conceived:

*The bodhisattvas replied*: But we do not have any desires! *The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas*: Do you not desire to seek to the state of buddhahood and to save the beings of the ten directions? *The bodhisattvas said*: Indeed, we desire to seek the state of buddhahood and to save the beings of the ten directions. *The Buddha replied*: These are desires; how can you say that you have no desires?

490b19; 497a10). It is further used in the Chinese-authored interlinear commentary to the first fascicle of T.225 (which as Nattier shows was itself *not* translated by Zhi Qian; Nattier 2008: 136), where it is used by the author of the commentary to explain the meaning of the phrase “the great vow of a bodhisattva” (大士弘誓; T.225:8.480c1).

<sup>40</sup> 佛言：若曹輩眾多。何以故不自取佛，但群輩相隨 ... 若曹輩寧能一日俱得佛不。諸菩薩報佛言：我不能俱得佛。佛問諸菩薩：何以故。諸菩薩報佛言：我輩中有相未具者，我曹輩中有功德未滿者，我曹輩中有生死罪未盡者。(T.397:13.396c5–11)

<sup>41</sup> 諸菩薩復問佛言：如是我何因緣不得佛。佛報諸菩薩言：若曹坐不行安般，若守意校計百八欲欲不捨故。(T.397:13.396c17–19).

*The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* And do you not keep in mind (念) the suffering beings of the ten directions? *The bodhisattvas said:* Indeed, we keep in mind those suffering beings. *The Buddha said:* Keeping in mind those sufferings beings is a desire.<sup>42</sup> How can you say that you have no desires?

*The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* Do you still remember the teachings<sup>43</sup> that you learned from the buddhas of ten directions when you visited them? *The bodhisattvas replied:* We remember all of the teachings we learned. *The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* These teachings you remember preached by the buddhas of the ten directions, do you transmit them by preaching them to others? *The bodhisattvas said:* Indeed, our daily practice is to preach these teachings to others. *The Buddha said:* When preaching these teachings for others, do you desire to cause them to understand? *The bodhisattvas said:* Indeed, we desire to cause them to understand. *The Buddha said:* If in preaching teachings for others you desire to cause them to understand, then this is a desire. How can you say that you have no desires?

*The Buddha again asked the bodhisattvas:* When you preach the teachings, do you teach people to make offerings? *The bodhisattvas said:* Indeed, we teach people to make offerings. *The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* When you teach people to practice giving, what kinds of things do you tell them to give to the Buddha? *The bodhisattvas replied:* We first of all desire to cause people to give beautiful flowers. *The Buddha said:* You [supposedly] do not desire visible forms, so why do you cause people to give the Buddha beautiful flowers of the five colors which are pleasing to the eye? So you do desire visible forms. How can you say that you do not desire visible forms?<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> This may refer implicitly to the previous passage, where the arising of desire associated with the mind organ and mental objects was explained as occurring when “having thought one thinks again” (念復念).

<sup>43</sup> On the meaning of *jing* 經 here, see above note 38.

<sup>44</sup> 諸菩薩報佛言：我曹無有欲欲。佛問諸菩薩：若曹欲求佛度十方人不。諸菩薩言：然，我曹欲求佛度十方人。佛報諸菩薩言：如是為欲欲，何以故言無欲。佛問諸菩薩：若意{read: 曹}寧念十方勤苦人不。諸菩薩言：然，我曹念勤苦人。佛言：若念諸勤苦人為欲，何以故言無欲。佛問諸菩薩言：若曹至十方佛所問經，若今為忘不。諸菩薩報言：我所問經，我皆識不忘。佛問諸菩薩：汝識十方佛說經，寧傳為人說經不。諸菩薩言：然，我日行為人說經。佛言：若為人說經，寧欲使人解不。諸菩薩言：然，欲使人解。佛言：如若為人說經為欲使人解，如是為欲欲，何以故言無欲。佛復問菩薩：若為人說經，寧教人布施不。諸菩薩言：然，我曹教人布施。佛問諸菩薩：若教人布施，持何等與佛。諸菩薩報言：我第一欲使人持好色華。佛言：汝曹不欲色，何以故使人持五色好華可眼與佛。如是汝為欲色，何以故言我曹不欲色。(T.397:13.397a15–397b04)

Having pointed out the bodhisattvas' desires for pleasing visible forms (色), examples are then given of the bodhisattvas' desires for the pleasing objects of the remaining sense organs: pleasing sounds (their rejoicing in hearing the preaching of the buddhas), pleasing smells (their wish to offer fragrant flowers and incense to the buddhas), pleasing tastes, and then finally pleasing bodily sensations, explained as follows:

*The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* Do you desire to fully obtain the thirty-two marks [of a buddha], which are pleasing to the body? *The bodhisattvas said:* We toil zealously to obtain all the marks only because we desire such a pleasing body.<sup>45</sup> *The Buddha said:* Since you have desire for this kind of pleasing body, how can you say that you do not desire?<sup>46</sup>

Upon hearing all these things, the bodhisattvas “hang their heads in shame” (稽首各自慚), and the text moves on to the next section, where a further set of 108 defilements are discussed.

We might initially imagine that in the above exchange what is being criticized is not seeking buddhahood, keeping in mind the suffering of beings, or teaching Buddhism to others *per se*, but undertaking these actions wrongly. Perhaps, in other words, this is a criticism of those who seek to become buddhas out of desire rather than from a more proper motivation such as compassion, or of those who carry out such practices with the wrong understanding, without awareness that (for example) the living beings one wishes to liberate, and the attainment of buddhahood itself, are, ultimately speaking, empty.

However while this interpretation would make sense of the text within a recognizable Mahāyāna framework, nothing like this is actually stated. Following the above cited passages, there is thus no *Prajñāpāramitā*-style declaration that bodhisattvas must attain the thirty-two marks of a buddha

<sup>45</sup> In the previous sections it is clear that 可 must mean “pleasing to” (on this usage of the word, see Jiang 1988: 110); we thus find 可眼, “pleasing to the eye,” 可耳, “pleasing to the ear” and so forth. Following this, 可身 must mean “pleasing to the body.” As far as I know the thirty-two marks are never specifically discussed as pleasing to the person who possesses them, but they are quite often described as physically attractive and beautiful to others. I translate 可身 as a “pleasing body” to try to capture both of these potential meanings.

<sup>46</sup> 佛復問諸菩薩言：汝寧欲具三十二相可身不。諸菩薩言：我勤苦具相，但欲可身耳。佛言：如若可身為欲，何以故言不欲。(T.397:13.397b14–17)

without attaining them, seek buddhahood even though buddhahood does not (ultimately) exist, or keep in mind the suffering of living beings even though there are not ultimately any living beings.

There is, in other words, no obvious reason not to read these criticisms literally. This is particularly clear for the criticism of the bodhisattvas' desire to obtain the thirty-two marks. Indeed, the bodhisattvas initially said they were unable to immediately become "buddhas" precisely because they had not yet attained such marks. This, of course, is just what we would expect: attaining the thirty-two marks and becoming a "buddha" are normally inseparable, and the basic course of a bodhisattva's practice is to steer away from immediate escape from rebirth as an arhat so as to undertake a different set of practices (or, perhaps, similar practices with a different motivation) that, over many lifetimes, lead to a rebirth endowed with all the thirty-two marks and other amazing qualities of a buddha. For the *Fifty Contemplations*, however, these two things are apparently *not* equivalent – the Buddha's interlocutors are encouraged to "become buddhas" *now*, not in a future lifetime, and hence without obtaining the thirty-two marks. Indeed it is precisely the wish to acquire the thirty-two marks in a future lifetime that prevents one from becoming a "buddha" right away.

If we leave aside the labels used, the *Fifty Contemplations* is thus here criticizing something that looks a great deal like the typical Mahāyāna presentation of the bodhisattva path – a multi-lifetime endeavor undertaken out of a wish to liberate as many beings as possible by obtaining eventual rebirth possessed of all the qualities and attributes of a buddha.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore the *Fifty Contemplations* recommends in place of this a soteriology in which one should escape from rebirth right away, in the present lifetime, through the elimination of desires and mental impurities. To this achievement the text applies the title "buddha." But keeping in mind what is actually described here rather than merely what it is called,

<sup>47</sup> There are, of course, philosophical tensions in this more classical understanding of the bodhisattva path, tensions that eventually lead to 'innovations' – Chan/Zen and Tantra being the most obvious – in which it is possible to become a "buddha" (suitably redefined) in this very lifetime. These doctrinal developments post-date the *Fifty Contemplations* by a considerable margin. Nevertheless it is also true that in certain ways the *Fifty Contemplations* seems to be responding to similar issues.

the *Fifty Contemplations* does not actually seem to be endorsing what we would normally think of as the bodhisattva path, but rather appropriating the title “buddha” to denote something essentially indistinguishable from the soteriological goal that mainstream Buddhism calls the arhat.

### Why must you be reborn?

As mentioned above, an alternate reading of the above passages would be that what is being criticized is not seeking buddhahood in a future lifetime per se, but rather undertaking such a quest motivated by desire rather than what in typical Mahāyāna understanding is called the bodhisattva “vow” (*praṇidhāna*). The notion of the bodhisattva vow is indeed what allows the soteriology of the bodhisattva path to cohere with basic Buddhist understanding by introducing a strict distinction between “desire” as a mental defilement – what keeps ordinary beings trapped in *samsāra* – and “desire” in the sense of the compassionate resolution to become a buddha – what keeps bodhisattvas on the path to buddahood (and hence also within rebirth, in a manner of speaking).

As becomes increasingly clear in subsequent passages, the *Fifty Contemplations* aims to assert that no such distinction can be made, that any action or resolution which keeps one within the cycle of rebirth can only be the generation of more karma, and hence can only be the cause of more rebirth and suffering.

This idea is raised explicitly in a dialog that occurs immediately after the Buddha has explained the 108 “types of sinful<sup>48</sup> consciousness” (罪識), which, like the other defilements discussed throughout the text, “must be extinguished before one can be fit to be called a bodhisattva” (不滅者不應為菩薩):<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Though there is a long history of scholars of Buddhism refraining from using the word “sin” on the grounds that it introduces a specifically Christian perspective, the studious avoidance of this term is equally grounded in the legacy of Orientalist scholarship that worked to present Buddhism as a rational, this-worldly, and non-dogmatic philosophy rather than a religion. Certainly in a Chinese religious context at least, “sin” is an apt rendering of *zui* 罪, a word that denotes crimes both secular and religious and also the punishment for such crimes, bestowed by either the state or the spirit world that was often modeled thereon (Robson 2012).

<sup>49</sup> T.397:13.398c13–a11.

*The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* Do you have these sins [described above] or not? *The bodhisattvas said:* We only possess the five dark elements (五陰; *skandha*).<sup>50</sup> We do not have any sins. *The Buddha asked further:* What causes people of the world to have sins and not obtain the Way? *The bodhisattvas replied:* People of the world do not obtain the Way because of craving. *The Buddha said:* When people of the world crave rebirth, do there [in them at this time] occur the five dark elements and indulgence (xi 習)?<sup>51</sup> *The bodhisattvas said:* [Yes], they possess these sins.

*The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* Will you in your present lifetime become buddhas? Or will you again be reborn? *The bodhisattvas replied:* We will again be reborn. We will not, in our present lifetimes, become

<sup>50</sup> The earliest Chinese Buddhist translations use the word *yin* 陰, “dark,” to translate *skandha*, a rendering that has long been a source of puzzlement given its seeming lack of connection to the literal meaning of *skandha* as “heap” or “aggregate” (Tang [1938] 2001: 1.167; Link 1976: 69, n. 33; Zürcher 1991: 292). Presented as the “dark” components of a human being, this translation makes of the *skandhas* a set of impurities that must be cast off. As noted by Peng Ziqiang (2000: 43–52), this does in fact fit with how An Shigao’s translations (where the word is first used) often present them. It also matches well with the sense here in the *Fifty Contemplations*, where these “dark elements” are argued to be defilements that impede liberation.

<sup>51</sup> To convey both its usage as a technical term and its meaning as a Chinese word, I here adopt the idiosyncratic, but I believe justifiable translation “indulgence” for the word *xi* 習, which in early Chinese Buddhist texts was commonly used to translate *samudaya*, “arising,” specifically (but not exclusively) within the context of the Four Noble Truths. The Chinese word *xi* 習 literally means “repeated occurrence,” and this has often been taken, by scholars of the earliest Chinese Buddhist texts, as the motivation for choosing it as a translation of *samudaya* (Vetter and Harrison 1998: 212, n. 4). In the context of the Four Noble Truths, of course, *samudaya* usually denotes, metonymically, the *cause* of the arising of suffering, namely craving or desire. And here we should note that as a description of human behavior, the Chinese word *xi* 習 does not just mean repeated occurrence, but something like *practice* or *habit*. Though this can have a positive meaning, it also can mean habit in a bad sense, to “indulge in.” Early translators of Buddhist texts clearly recognized this aspect of the Chinese word. Dharmarakṣa’s late third-century translation of the larger *Prajñāpāramitā*, for example, consistently uses *xi* 習 to render derivations of the verb *√bhuñj*, to “enjoy” (Zacchetti 2005: 322, n. 25). So too in the mid-third-century *Liu du ji jing* 六度集經: “people of the world *indulge* in depravity and delight in desires” (世人習邪樂欲; T.152:3.21a11). And in the third-century Chinese commentary to the *Yin chi ru jing* 陰持入經, we read that: “*Indulgence* is what we call the fact that even though rebirth has no end, and its sufferings are innumerable, fools delight in it.” (生死萬端，勤苦無數，而愚者樂之之謂習; T.1694: 33.11a25–27). The word *xi* 習 thus captures, to some degree, both the literal meaning of *samudaya* as “repeated occurrence” and its extended (and possibly primary) meaning of “desire.” Though not perfect, “indulgence” is my attempt to find a single English word that covers this same range of meanings.



buddhas. *The Buddha asked*: After how many more rebirths will you become buddhas? *The bodhisattvas replied*: Our rebirths still have no [fixed] end.<sup>52</sup> *The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas*: Why do they have no [fixed] end? *The bodhisattvas said*: We do not know the extent of our sin and merit, and for this reason we do not know [when our rebirths] will end.

*The Buddha said to the bodhisattvas*: If this is the case, how are you any different from the ordinary people of the world? *The bodhisattvas replied*: [We are different because] we can fly to the Buddha-lands of the ten directions, and we can understand the words of those buddhas. *The Buddha said*: If you are able to fly to the buddha-lands of the ten directions and understand the words of those buddhas, why do you not become buddhas right now? Why must you again be reborn? *The bodhisattvas replied*: We do not become buddhas right away because our former sins have not yet been completely eliminated and because the merit we formerly vowed (本願)<sup>53</sup> [to obtain] is not yet complete.

*The Buddha said*: You [earlier] said that ordinary people of the world have sins merely because they are beset by the five dark elements and indulgence in rebirth. But you have such sins as well, because of your indulgence in rebirth. How then can you say that you have no sins?

*The bodhisattvas then hung their heads in shame and accepted the teachings.*<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> On *yao* 要 meaning “ending” or “termination,” see Hu 2002: 168.

<sup>53</sup> *Ben yuan* 本願 (often *pūrva-praṇidhāna*) eventually becomes the standard Chinese term for the “past vows” of future buddhas such as Amitābha (Nakamura 2001: 1259). In second- and third-century texts, however, *ben yuan* was not necessarily a technical translation. In Lokakṣema’s *Dao xing bore jing* 道行般若經, for example, this word occurs on several occasions without any clear equivalent in either in the later Chinese translations of this text or in the Sanskrit or Tibetan versions, suggesting that here the word is perhaps primarily a Chinese term (Karashima 2010: 32). Even if not a technical translation, from early on there was a connection between it and the bodhisattva vow. In the interlinear commentary to the first fascicle of the *Da ming du jing* 大明度經, a scriptural passage that notes that buddhas remain unattached to everything yet also do not “attain extinction while still on the way [to full buddhahood]” (中道滅度) is explained as follows: “Not turning away from his former vows, because he desires to liberate [all beings in the] ten directions, [the bodhisattva] does not attain extinction while still on the way [to Buddhahood].” (不違本願, 欲度十方, 不中道滅度也; T.225:8.479b21–22).

<sup>54</sup> 佛問諸菩薩：若曹有是罪不。諸菩薩言：我但有五陰無有罪。佛復問諸菩薩言：天下何等為使人有罪，不得道者。諸菩薩報佛言：天下人皆坐食不得道。佛言：天下人貪生死，為有五陰習不。諸菩薩言：有罪。佛問諸菩薩言：若曹持見身取佛，當復生死。諸菩薩報佛言：我曹當復生死，不從是見在身得佛。佛問諸菩薩：若曹要當更幾生死當得佛。諸菩薩報佛言：我曹生死尚未有要。佛復問諸菩薩：何以故無有要。諸菩薩言：我不知自罪福多少，用是故，我不知要。佛告諸菩薩：如是若曹與天下人有何等異。諸菩薩報佛言：我能飛到十方佛國，我能曉佛所

This passage raises the question of what distinction there might be between bodhisattvas, who have not yet, and indeed *cannot* yet escape from rebirth because they must continue accumulating the merit that will lead to buddhahood in a future life, and ordinary beings, who are similarly “stuck” within *saṃsāra* for the indefinite future. The bodhisattvas here give a version of the expected answer – that though they still possess the five *skandhas* (and thus remain within rebirth), they do not have any “sin.” The argument here is that even though rebirth does continue for bodhisattvas, it is not governed by craving, bad karma, and retribution as it is for ordinary beings, but is rather motivated by the compassionate multi-lifetime quest for buddhahood.

But the ensuing dialog argues that this response does not really make sense. For, as the Buddha continues, what defines ordinary being as ordinary is that they remain within *saṃsāra*, that they possess the five *skandha* (have bodily existence at all) and are still beset by craving (“indulgence;” *xi* 習).<sup>55</sup> And so too the “bodhisattvas” here admit that they will remain within rebirth for a potentially unlimited future. Such beings cannot claim, it is thus suggested, any distinctive soteriological position or attainment given that they are still on track to be reborn.

To this the bodhisattvas reply that they cannot or do not become buddhas right away – that is, they do not end rebirth – because they have not yet obtained the merit they “originally vowed” to obtain. Such a response is, again, exactly what we would expect of a partisan of the bodhisattva path. It is, after all, precisely this goal of not just escaping rebirth but reaching, for reasons of compassion, the most exalted form of existence – that of a buddha – that is the distinguishing mark of bodhisattva soteriology. And this quest for a seemingly worldly goal (a distinctive attainment within rebirth) is made compatible with basic Buddhist understanding by positing a distinction between the bodhisattva’s resolution to achieve this state and an ordinary being’s “craving for rebirth,” as the *Fifty*

語。佛言：若曹能飛到十方佛國，能曉十方佛所語，若曹何以不應時取佛，何以故復生死要。諸菩薩報佛言：我曹尚有本罪未盡故，用本願功德福未滿故，用是故我曹不應時得佛。佛言：若曹言，天下人但坐五陰生死習故有罪，今若曹亦當復生死習有罪，若曹何以故語我言{read:言我}無罪。諸菩薩皆慚稽首受行。(T.397:13.399a11-b01)

<sup>55</sup> On “indulgence,” see note 51.

*Contemplations* puts it. We, the bodhisattvas say, remain within rebirth only because it is something we have “vowed” to do, not because we are trapped in it by our desires and defilements.

It is precisely such a distinction that the *Fifty Contemplations* then denies – for, the Buddha implies, since true liberation is escape from rebirth, inasmuch as it even temporarily leads to more rebirth a bodhisattva’s “original vow” is no different from the craving and attachment of ordinary beings.

That the resolution to become a buddha is thus essentially a bad thing – more karma rather than the first step in the glorious career of a buddha-to-be – is made explicit in a later passage. Here, after the Buddha has finished explaining the arising of, and need to eliminate, the “108 subtle sins that cannot be seen” (百八罪入空中不可見),<sup>56</sup> the bodhisattvas declare that they have finally managed to grasp something of what the Buddha has been explaining. The Buddha continues:

*The Buddha asked the bodhisattvas:* How have you come to realize [this]? *The bodhisattvas said:* Sitting in meditation, casting away sin, and not giving rise to further thoughts, [we have realized this]. *The Buddha said:* [If this is what has caused you to understand], why do you not constantly sit in meditation? Why do you rather fly off to lands of the buddhas of the ten directions? *The bodhisattvas said:* We must do these things because of our original vows (本願).

*The Buddha said:* If you have originally vowed to go to the lands of the buddhas of the ten directions, why do you sit in meditation and cast away sin [at all]? For if you [succeed in] sitting in meditation and casting away sin, your original vow too will become extinguished. *The bodhisattvas said:* When we sit in meditation, we only extinguish our future sins [that lead to bad karmic retribution]. We do not extinguish the sin that is our former vow (本願罪).

*The Buddha asked:* Will you extinguish the sins committed during the innumerable eons of your past rebirths? *The bodhisattvas said:* [Yes], we will extinguish former (本) sins from innumerable eons in the past. *The Buddha said:* If you are able to extinguish former sins [committed over the course of] innumerable past eons, why then does there remain this single sin of your original vow, which you do not extinguish?<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Translation tentative.

<sup>57</sup> 佛問諸菩薩。若何因緣覺{知}。諸菩薩{言坐禪棄罪便不復有念。佛言諸菩薩}何以故不常坐禪。何以故復飛行到十方佛所。菩薩言。用我有本願故。不得不行

To this final query the bodhisattvas have no response, and they can only “hang their heads in shame” as they do throughout the text after each round of rebuke from the Buddha.

In this passage the Buddha explicitly problematizes the bodhisattvas’ “former vows” in terms of their compatibility with basic Buddhist soteriology. For meditation – soteriologically effective practice – is “casting away sin” (棄罪), the ending of those factors that lead to rebirth.<sup>58</sup> The bodhisattvas accept this eminently traditional explanation of Buddhist practice and its goals, and declare that they too are engaged in such a process. And yet, as they concede, they do *not* abandon their “original vow,” which as the Buddha here somehow persuades the bodhisattvas to admit, must itself be a “sin” because it keeps them within *samsāra*. (It is here worth noting that “sin” 罪 was sometimes a translation of

耳。佛言。如若有本願到十方佛所。何因緣坐禪棄罪。設令汝坐禪棄罪本願當滅。諸菩薩言。我坐禪但滅當來罪耳。我未滅本願罪。佛問諸菩薩。若曹從無數劫以來所作。過去生死罪當滅不。諸菩薩言。我當滅過去無數劫本罪。佛言。若尚能滅無數劫本罪。何以故。獨不滅本願罪。The added text in { } follows the Puning 普寧 edition of 1277–1290 (cited in the Taishō footnotes as 元). According to the notes in the *Zhonghua da zang jing* 中華大藏經, this variant also occurs in all of the later editions from the Ming and Qing. It is absent, however, from all the other editions consulted by the Taishō editors, as well as some additional ones I have accessed, namely a twelfth-century copy from Fangshan 房山 (*Fangshan shi jing*, vol. 12: 545), the Jin 金 edition reproduced in the *Zhonghua da zang jing*, and the first carving of the Kōryō canon (*Gaoli da zang jing chu ke ben ji kan*, volume 4). However the Puning edition reading is likely to be correct. The text is quite disjointed without this intervening line, which moreover comprises precisely 15 characters, near to the standard 17 characters for one complete column in official manuscript copies of Buddhist scriptures (Fujieda 1999: 177). Its absence from other versions can be accounted for by assuming the loss of a single column of text (a common occurrence in manuscripts) in one or more ancient manuscript lineages. The Puning edition, though largely based on previous Song-era printed editions of the canon, was prepared in consultation with manuscripts held in the Xiaozhu 下竺 temples in Hangzhou (Li and He 2003: 327–328; Zacchetti 2005: 116), which may in this case have preserved an older, authentic reading lost in the other lineages.

<sup>58</sup> The link here between *dhyāna* (*chan* 禪) and “casting off” (*qi* 棄) is no doubt connected to the early interpretation of *chan* as meaning “casting off” (棄). (See Kang Senghui’s preface to the *Anban shou yi jing*, T.2415:55.43a16; see also T.602:15.171c18–20). An Shigao himself occasionally translated *dhyāna* as *qi* 棄 (K-ABSYJ 183–184; T.13:1.241b16–17), an interpretation that betrays either a confusion or (I suspect more likely) intentional *nirukti*-type association between a Middle Indic form of the word (e.g., *jhāna*) and *jahana* (“giving up”); see Nattier 2004: 6.

*karma* in the earliest Chinese Buddhist texts).<sup>59</sup> The rest of the Buddha’s argument follows easily: given that the bodhisattvas will not abandon the “sin” of their original vows, they cannot really be practicing meditation. What they are doing cannot lead to liberation because to truly sever all “sins,” all factors that lead to rebirth, would also destroy the resolution to seek Buddhahood in a future lifetime. Resolving to become a buddha by accumulating merit over the course of many lifetimes – the bodhisattva path as normally understood – is, in short, just more karma that perpetuates suffering, another mental defilement that must be abandoned.

The *Fifty Contemplations* does not claim to oppose anything called “the bodhisattva path,” let alone “the Mahāyāna” (a word it never uses). Nevertheless in the above passages we see what amounts to an argument against, or at least a pointed dismissal of, the validity or utility of any resolution or “vow” that puts off escape from rebirth until the future. In other words despite not using the name, the *Fifty Contemplations* is indeed arguing against the bodhisattva path as normally conceived, and is doing so by pointing out its incompatibility with basic, ‘mainstream’ Buddhist soteriology.

Its arguments to this effect are, moreover, by no means simplistic. The author(s) of the *Fifty Contemplations* has not, I would suggest, failed to grasp some principle or explanation that a more thorough familiarity with Mahāyāna doctrines or texts might have clarified. Rather he has identified a real philosophical difficulty in explaining how the bodhisattva path – which involves the accumulation of karma (albeit *good* karma) and the eventual attainment of an exalted status within the world as a Buddha – can be reconciled with the basic premises of mainstream Buddhist soteriology, in which any rebirth, however exalted, is to be avoided if at all possible.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> See An Shigao’s *Qi chu san guan jing* 七處三觀經 (T.150A:2.881c10–100; 罪為地, corresponding to *kammaṃ khettaṃ* at *Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.223), as well as his *Yin chi ru jing* 陰持入經 (T.603: 15.175b15–16) where 所身罪 corresponds to *kāyakamma* (*Peṭakopadesa* 118).

<sup>60</sup> It is significant that while the *Fifty Contemplations* asserts that there is no real difference between the resolution to become a buddha in a future lifetime and the defilement of “desire,” it emphasizes the problem of *rebirth*, not the question of purposive action per

### The Origins of the *Fifty Contemplations*

Modern scholars often take the promotion of the bodhisattva path, as an option available to beings presently living in the world, to be a hallmark of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is also usually supposed that, when first articulated, this was a new and at least somewhat controversial understanding of the goals of Buddhist practice. However if the Mahāyāna endorsement of the bodhisattva path was controversial, its critics left few traces. Though Mahāyāna texts themselves often claim that their teachings were criticized by others, there are in fact no known Indian Buddhist texts that in their own voice mount sustained argument against any feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>61</sup> But equally if not more significantly, even when supposed criticisms of it are discussed within Mahāyāna literature so as to refute them, the bodhisattva path itself is never one of the points of contention.<sup>62</sup> The *Fifty Contemplations* is thus remarkable as the only known sustained argument that the bodhisattva path (as normally understood) is incompatible with basic Buddhist teachings.

To be sure, the *Fifty Contemplations* may seem without precedent in this regard merely because other comparable Indian Buddhist texts have failed to survive.<sup>63</sup> But the apparent uniqueness of the *Fifty Contemplations*

se. Indeed, bodhisattva soteriology itself can be viewed as, among many other things, an attempt to solve a perceived contradiction between the stated goal of eliminating all desire and aversion and the fact that undertaking Buddhist practice itself can only be motivated and made coherent by the wish to turn away from suffering and attain liberation, that is to say, by some form of desire and aversion loosely conceived. But this is not the issue the *Fifty Contemplations* raises. Its criticism is not that the resolution to become a buddha is a purposive action, but only that it is a kind of purposive action that explicitly involves and leads to rebirth.

<sup>61</sup> For examples of anti-Mahāyāna arguments presented *within* Mahāyāna texts, see Schopen 2000; Tola and Dragonetti 1996–1997: 234–239; and Eckel 2008: 103–212. A few possible criticisms of Mahāyāna understanding of emptiness are found in the *Abhidharmadīpa* (Yoshimoto 1982: 287–335), and Tola and Dragonetti also identify a few vague passing references within Pāli texts that criticize people or ideas that some have identified as pointing to the Mahāyāna (1996–1997: 249–251). The very few such passages identified by these scholars serves only to highlight their general absence from surviving mainstream Buddhist literature.

<sup>62</sup> This has been noted by Nattier 2003: 190–191.

<sup>63</sup> It remains possible that new discoveries, particular the ancient and increasingly numerous documents from Gandhāra, may eventually uncover relevant material (these

nonetheless raises questions about the source of its arguments. Indeed there is a certain amount of positive evidence that the bodhisattva path as a theoretical possibility – at the very least as the path followed by the Buddha himself – was accepted by most forms of Indian Buddhism, even those that were otherwise entirely non-Mahāyāna in orientation.<sup>64</sup> If the Mahāyāna was indeed controversial in Indian Buddhism (a point that, it seems to me, remains to be demonstrated), this may, in other words, have had little to do with its understanding of the bodhisattva path as such.<sup>65</sup>

For these reasons we must therefore consider whether the *Fifty Contemplations* is even an Indian text at all. There are, as I will now suggest, good reasons for thinking that it is not, and that it instead represents a Chinese interpretation of, or response to, certain ideas found in the different kinds of Indian Buddhist texts that had appeared in China during the second and early third centuries.

That the *Fifty Contemplations* was at least in large part composed by a Chinese author is revealed most convincingly by its unusual treatment of a standard-issue bit of Buddhist doctrine: the sense organs and their objects. As mentioned above, each of the fifty “contemplations” is a version of what is initially called “guarding the six sense organs” (守六情). In each new section, this practice is elaborated with reference to the various lists of 108 defilements (or, toward the end, various positive mental qualities that should be cultivated), which are in turn classified in terms of the sense organs and their objects. Thus with respect to the five bodily senses,<sup>66</sup> each defilement is said to occur during 15 possible kinds of experience, namely, each of these five organs interacting with either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sense objects.

Though the bodily sense organs are described here in their usual way, the sense *objects* have one peculiarity. Most are what we would expect, and are given using Chinese translations standard during the second and

finds now provide the earliest known evidence for Mahāyāna texts and ideas in India; see Allon and Salomon 2010).

<sup>64</sup> Anālayo 2010. See also Fujita 2009 and Drewes 2017.

<sup>65</sup> The mere possibility of someone in the present undertaking to follow the bodhisattva path must be distinguished from the promotion of the bodhisattva path as the sole or most superior path to liberation, which might well have been a more threatening argument.

<sup>66</sup> For the mental organ, the tabulation is slightly different (see below p. 90).

third centuries – “visible forms” (*se* 色), “sounds” (*sheng* 聲), “smells” (*xiang* 香), and “tangibles” (*xi ruan* 細軟).<sup>67</sup> For the mouth, however, two objects are given: tastes (*wei* 味), the normal object of the mouth as a sensory organ in Buddhist texts, but also “words” (*yu yan* 語言), something decidedly unexpected in this context.<sup>68</sup> These objects are listed repeatedly throughout the text.<sup>69</sup> In one passage, the idea that speech is the sensory object of the mouth-organ is even integrated into a more extensive discussion (this shows that we cannot dismiss it merely as a one-off confusion about translation or as a later editorial comment accidentally incorporated into the main text).<sup>70</sup>

The rubric of the five or six sense organs and their objects, always with tastes associated with the mouth, is one of the most common classification schemes in Buddhism, and it is extremely difficult to imagine that an Indian Buddhist text could be confused about it. Pre-Buddhist *Chinese* philosophical texts, however, frequently give speech and words within lists that (to us) look like sense organs and their objects.<sup>71</sup> This occurs in

<sup>67</sup> Literally *xi ruan* 細軟 means “fine and soft [things].” The most common translation of “tangibles” (*spraṣṭavya*) in second- and third-century Chinese Buddhist texts, among all translators, was the very similar *xi hua* 細滑, “the fine and the smooth.” *Xi ruan* is rarer, but does appear in some of the texts that Nattier (2008) dates to before 280 CE (e.g. T.101:2.498b1).

<sup>68</sup> T.397:13.395b24–27, and repeated throughout the remainder of the text.

<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, however, in the very opening passages, prior to the enumeration of the fifty contemplations themselves, there are two occasions where only tastes (味) are linked to the mouth (T.397:13.394b28 and c7). This may represent an instance of what Jan Nattier calls the “principle of front-loaded emendation” (Nattier n.d.: 8), the tendency of Buddhist commentaries of all kinds, as well as textual “corrections” and emendations (in this case, the *removal* of something doctrinally “incorrect”), to be concentrated in the beginning of a text. It is also possible that we see here evidence that the text was not so much composed afresh by a Chinese author, but based on an authentic, pre-existing translation which survives in places within the final product.

<sup>70</sup> In this passage, also discussed briefly above (p. 74–75), the Buddha criticizes his interlocutors for their continuing desires classified as desires for the objects of the sense organs. That the bodhisattvas use beautiful flowers as offerings shows desire for pleasing objects of sight; that they wish to hear scriptures expounded by the buddhas shows their desire for pleasing sounds; that they burn incense shows their desire for pleasing smells, and so forth. Desire for pleasant objects of the mouth (可口), however, is the bodhisattvas’ wish to *preach* the teachings (T.397:13.397a28–b17).

<sup>71</sup> There do also exist such lists that give tastes, not speech (e.g. *Xun zi ji jie* 22/416–417), and there are many variations (see Geaney 2002). On the early Chinese approach



particular when the context is the restraint of desires. In the *Xunzi* 荀子 (3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE) we thus read that:

[The superior person] causes his eyes to have no desire to see what is not proper, his ears to have no desire to hear what is not proper, *his mouth to have no desire to say what is not proper*, his mind to have no desire to ponder what is not proper.<sup>72</sup>

Or, as stated in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (completed in 139 BCE):

When the eyes wantonly gaze, there is excess; when the ears wantonly listen there is confusion; *when the mouth wantonly speaks*, there is disorder. These three gateways must be carefully guarded.<sup>73</sup>

Similar accounts occur when recommending *not* to restrict one's desires:

Allow the ear to listen to what it desires, the eye to look at what it desires, the nose to incline towards what it desires, *the mouth to say what it desires*, the body to dwell where it desires, and the mind to go where it desires.<sup>74</sup>

This way of speaking about the sense organs and their activities remains common in Chinese texts throughout the Eastern Han (25–220 CE).<sup>75</sup> Though from a Buddhist (and perhaps also our own) perspective construing speech as the “object” of the mouth (as a sensory organ) seems like a puzzling confusion between perception and volition, it fits with the typical pre-Buddhist Chinese depiction of the eyes, ears, and other senses

to the senses, see Lewis 2006: 13–76; Brown and Bergeton 2008; Sterckx 2003; Csikszentmihalyi 2004: 169–177.

<sup>72</sup> 使目非是無欲見也，使耳非是無欲聞也，使口非是無欲言也，使心非是無欲慮也。(Xun zi ji jie 1.19)

<sup>73</sup> 夫目妄視則淫，耳妄聽則惑，口妄言則亂。夫三關者，不可不慎守也。(Huainan zi ji shi 8.608). The use of the term “guard” (*shou* 守) here to describe the restraint of sensory activity is interesting given this word is taken up, in a similar context, in Buddhist translations.

<sup>74</sup> 恣耳之所欲聽，恣目之所欲視，恣鼻之所欲向，恣口之所欲言，恣體之所欲安，恣意之所欲行。(Lie zi ji shi 7.222–223). The dating of the *Lie zi* 列子 is controversial – though it contains some passages of pre-Han origin, other sections may have been composed as late as the fourth century (Barrett 1993). For my present purposes the exact dating of this passage is not terribly important, as these ideas are consonant with what is found in other pre-Buddhist Chinese texts.

<sup>75</sup> See, e.g., *Bai hu tong shu zheng*, p. 388.

as not simply gateways of information but modalities of action.<sup>76</sup> The *Fifty Contemplations*, in including both tastes *and* words as the “object” of the mouth, has thus merged the Buddhist rubric of the senses and their objects with certain common pre-Buddhist Chinese habits of thought. This does not mean that every part of the *Fifty Contemplations* was composed from scratch by a Chinese author.<sup>77</sup> But it does show that this document is a product of Chinese Buddhism and can be read as such.

From when and where does the *Fifty Contemplations* then date? As discussed above, externally the only unquestionable *terminus ante quem* is the listing of the text in Daoan’s 道安 catalog of 374 CE, while internally, as Nattier’s analysis shows, it must post-date Lokakṣema’s translations in the last decades of the second century. There are, however, a number of other features of the *Fifty Contemplations* that link it to what we may call the ‘school of An Shigao’ – those authors working in the Chinese language who between the late second century and the end of the Wu-kingdom period (222–280 CE) focused their attention and written exegesis on the translations attributed to An Shigao.

This link is suggested by a number of terminological and doctrinal parallels between the *Fifty Contemplations* and other texts associated with the legacy of An Shigao that are known or strongly suspect to date to this period. One such text is the early commentary to An Shigao’s *Scripture on the Twelve Gates* (*Shi’er men jing* 十二門經) found at Kongō-ji 金剛寺 temple in Japan,<sup>78</sup> which was composed in China sometime between the time of An Shigao and the end of the Wu-kingdom period and was read and used by Wu-kingdom Buddhist authors and translators (such as Kang Senghui 康僧會) interested in, and influenced by, the translations of An Shigao.<sup>79</sup> In this commentary too we find, as in the *Fifty Contemplations*, the idea that speech is the object of the mouth as a sensory organ.<sup>80</sup> The two texts also share some rare technical terminology,

<sup>76</sup> Greene 2016: 269–272.

<sup>77</sup> Not all Chinese Buddhist texts fall neatly into the categories of “translation” versus “composition,” and many can be seen to contain both elements (Funayama 2002).

<sup>78</sup> On the findings at Kongō-ji, see Deleanu 2003; Zacchetti 2003; Zacchetti 2004a. Transcriptions of the texts can be found in Ochiai 2004.

<sup>79</sup> Zacchetti 2003: 281–296.

<sup>80</sup> “In the first *dhyāna* are extinguished sounds [heard by] the ear and *vocal expression*. In the second *dhyāna* are extinguished visible forms [seen by] the eyes and fragrances

notably the word *san xiang* 三向, an exceedingly unusual translation of the three “gates to liberation” (*vimokṣa-mukha*).<sup>81</sup> Terminological connections are also evident between the *Fifty Contemplations* and the “canonical” *Anban shou yi jing* 安般守意經 (T.602), which as Zacchetti (2008) has shown is not An Shigao’s original translation of this name (now known to be represented by the Kongō-ji text that bears this title) but rather a Chinese commentary associated with the activities of Wu-kingdom authors interested in the translations of An Shigao.<sup>82</sup>

Most significant of all, however, is a striking parallel between the *Fifty Contemplations* and the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas* (*Yin chi ru jing zhu* 陰持入經註), the Wu-period Chinese commentary to An Shigao’s translation of the *Yin chi ru jing* 陰持入經.<sup>83</sup> As discussed above, the *Fifty Contemplations* enumerates various classes of 108 defilements, each presented in terms of their occurrence with respect to mind – divided into “mind” (心), “will” (意) and “consciousness” (識)<sup>84</sup> – and the five bodily sense organs, also each

[detected by] the nose. In the third *dhyāna* are extinguished sensations of bodily touch. In the fourth *dhyāna* the mind is extinguished.” 一禪滅耳音口聲，二禪滅目色鼻香，三禪滅身細滑，四禪滅意。(SMJ 464–465). Here, the stages of meditation are correlated with the elimination of the objects of the five senses, and the mouth is paired with *sounds* rather than tastes.

<sup>81</sup> See SMJ 387, where it is stated that a meditator must proceed to the *san xiang* 三向 after having “passed through the twelve gates” (出十二門). The relevant passage in the *Fifty Contemplations* also mentions “the twelve gates” (T.397:13.406b23–24). This translation of *vimokṣa-mukha* is undoubtedly related to the translation *san huo xiang* 三活向, the “three pathways to [eternal (?)] life,” found in An Shigao’s *Chang Ahan shi bao fa jing* 長阿含十報法經, a translation of the *Daśottarasūtra* (T.13:1.234a11; Mittal 1957: 60).

<sup>82</sup> The key bit of shared terminology is the expression “plant the sprouts of the Way” (種道栽), discussed in the opening passages of the *Fifty Contemplations* as the fruit of guarding the senses against disturbance (discussed above p. 69). The word “sprouts of the Way” occurs in only two other known texts from the Chinese Buddhist canon: the *Anban shou yi jing*, where to “plant the sprouts of the Way” is likewise associated with directing one’s thoughts away from the activity of the sense organs during meditation (T.602:15.165b28–c7), and also the *Xiao dao di jing* 小道地經 (T.608:15.237b4–5), a short text that deserves more study but which also appears to share much unusual vocabulary with Wu-kingdom commentaries on An Shigao’s writings.

<sup>83</sup> On the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas*, see Zacchetti 2010.

<sup>84</sup> On the occurrence of this triad of terms for mind and consciousness in this text and the translations of An Shigao, see Vetter 2013: 305.

divided into three instances (the perception of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral objects). These 18 instances (three for each of the six sense organs) are then used to derive the number 108. Thus for the “108 delusions” (百八癡):

*The bodhisattvas asked the Buddha:* How does one contemplate the 108 delusions, which originally spring from the mind?

*The Buddha said to the bodhisattvas:* If, when a bodhisattva’s mind (心) has a thought he does not know the mind as it arises and passes away, then herein appear the five dark elements and indulgence (中有五陰中有習), and this not knowing is a delusion. If when the will (意) is stirred ... If when consciousness (識) is stirred ... If when the eye is stirred it sees a beautiful visible form, and one does not know the appearance and disappearance [of the beautiful form], then herein appear the five dark elements and indulgence, and this not knowing is a delusion. If the eye sees a middling visible form ... an ugly visible form ... [and so on for the ear, nose, mouth, and body and their respective objects].<sup>85</sup>

This formula, repeated dozens of times throughout the *Fifty Contemplations*, contains many peculiar features<sup>86</sup> and passages of uncertain interpretation, including the repeating phrase “herein appear the five dark elements and indulgence” (中有五陰中有習). What appears to be some kind of elaboration of, or even commentary on this formula, along with an explanation of how the number 108 derives from it, can be found in the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas*, as part of its explanation of the meaning (in the original scripture) of the word “five dark seeds” (*wu yin zhong* 五陰種; *skandha*):

<sup>85</sup> 諸菩薩問佛言：當校計百八癡從心本起者云何。佛告諸菩薩言：若有菩薩，心有所念，不自知心生心滅中有五陰中有習，不知為癡。轉入意 ... 轉入識 ... 轉入眼，眼見好色，不自知著不自知滅，中有五陰中有習，不知為癡。眼所見中色 ... 眼所見惡色 ... (T.397:13.395b5–14). My translation of this passage is uncertain in many places and is guided by how it appears to be interpreted by the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas* as discussed below.

<sup>86</sup> Note, for example, that “mind” is listed *first* (rather than last as would be more usual) and is divided into three aspects rather than being assigned “mental objects” (*dharmas*) in pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral varieties. (On the terms here for the three aspects of the mind, and their possible connections to Chinese rather than Buddhist theories about the mind and consciousness, see Lai 1986.)

The master says: “The [expression] ‘five dark seeds’<sup>87</sup> means the person.”<sup>88</sup> A person has six sense organs, and for each sense organ there appear the five dark elements and indulgence (情有五陰有習). The eye is stirred by three kinds of visible form: beautiful, middling, and ugly. For each [of these kinds of] visible forms there is the occurrence of the five dark elements and indulgence. Altogether this makes eighteen things [pertaining to the eye], and each of the remaining sense organs is also thus, yielding a total of 108 defilements.<sup>89</sup> These [defilements] pass away here [in this life] and then give birth [to a new life] in the future. In this respect they are like seeds. They rot beneath the ground but then the sprout takes on form and emerges above the surface ... for this reason [the *skandhas*] are called “seeds.”<sup>90</sup>

The number 108 is thus derived as follows: 3 classes of sense objects (good, neutral, bad), for each of which there occur six defilements (5 “dark elements” plus “indulgence”), spread over six sense organs (3x6x6 = 108). This calculation thus explains (or purports to) the mysterious phrase “there occur the five dark elements and indulgence” (有五陰有習) that occurs repeatedly in the *Fifty Contemplations*, and connects it to the number 108. Note further that the commentary here lists the classes of sense objects in the highly unusual order pleasant (好), neutral (中), unpleasant (惡), which is just as in the *Fifty Contemplations* (normally the order is pleasant, unpleasant, neutral).<sup>91</sup> One further small point showing the

<sup>87</sup> In addition to the more usual *yin* 陰 (see above n. 50), the *Yin chi ru jing* also translates *skandha* as *zhong* 種, and sometimes (as here) combines the two translations as *yin zhong* 陰種. Though *zhong* probably was originally intended to mean “class” or “category” (Ui 1971: 186), a reasonable translation of *skandha*, the commentary appears to read it to mean “seed.”

<sup>88</sup> *Shen* 身, which in classical Chinese usually means more than merely “body.” Indeed here it denotes all five *skandhas* (the five “dark seeds”), and thus the totality of the body-mind complex.

<sup>89</sup> “Defilements” translates *jie* 結, which already in the *Yin chi ru jing* 陰持入經 (which we can compare to chapter six of the *Peṭakopadesa*; Zacchetti 2002) was used to translate not only *saṃyojana* (to which it is etymologically similar) but also *anuśaya* and *kleśa*.

<sup>90</sup> 師云：五陰種身也。身有六情，情有五陰有習。眼為好色轉，中色轉，惡色轉，三色。色有五陰并習，合為十八事，六情各然，凡為百八結。滅此生彼，猶穀種，朽于下，栽受身，生于上 ... 故曰種也。(T.1694:33.10a23–b2)

<sup>91</sup> In Indian Buddhist texts and their Chinese translations, this ordering is reinforced by the usual Indic words: literally “painful” (*duḥkha*), “pleasant” (*sukha*), and “neither painful nor pleasant” (*aduḥkhamasukha*). “Neutral” thus *must* come last because it is lexically the negation of the first two. That these two texts would share this curious

connection between the *Fifty Contemplations* and the *Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas* and its commentary in particular is the use of the word *ben* 本 (“root”) to denote the sense organs, which as far I can determine occurs (among Han and Three Kingdoms Buddhist texts at least) only in these three texts.<sup>92</sup>

It would thus seem that, especially as concerns the unusual derivation of the 108 defilements (and the interpretation of the phrase “there occur the five dark elements and indulgence”), either 1) the author of the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas* was drawing from the *Fifty Contemplations*, 2) the composer(s) of the *Fifty Contemplations* were inspired by the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas*, or 3) both texts drew from another source or, more broadly, from various unusual understandings and terminology shared in certain circles of Wu-era Buddhist authors.

That the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas* does not cite the *Fifty Contemplations* (but does cite many other texts by name) might suggest that possibilities 2) or 3) are most likely. But regardless of the precise historical connection between these texts, their close relationship is evident. Taken together with the other unusual terms and ideas it shares with other products of the ‘school of

ordering is both a sign of their connection, but also perhaps further indication of the Chinese rather than Indian origin of the *Fifty Contemplations*. To be sure, a Chinese translator could well have changed the order of these expressions for stylistic reasons. I have not, however, been able to find any examples of this ever occurring in practice.

<sup>92</sup> See T.397:13.400c3–26 in the *Fifty Contemplations*. The *Ahan kou jie shi er yin yuan jing* 阿含口解十二因緣經 (T.1508:25c13), an oral teachings delivered by An Shigao (Zacchetti 2004b), may also use *ben* 本 in this meaning. In the *Yin chi ru jing*, *ben* 本 on a few occasions translates *dhātu*. Normally this means the eighteen *dhātus* (the sense organs, their objects, and the associated consciousnesses), but curiously at first mention they are called the “the six roots” (*liu ben* 六本; T.603:15.173b6; the parallel at *Peṭakopadesa* 112 does not list a quantity). And, later, when all 18 *dhātus* are discussed, the translation changes to *ben chi* 本持 (and then, even later, to *chi* 持). It would seem that *ben* 本 was taken as a valid translation of *dhātu* only in reference to the six sense organs specifically. The commentary indeed uses *liu ben* 六本 several times, clearly pointing to the sense organs specifically (e.g. T.1694:33.10c13). As a Chinese word *ben* 本 is essentially interchangeable with *gen* 根, which often translated *indriya* and often denoted the sense organs (among An Shigao’s translations, see, e.g., *Apitan wu fa xing jing* 阿毘曇五法行經, T.1557:28.998c14–15). This may explain how it came to be used this way in these (very) few instances.

An Shigao' such as the *Scripture on the Twelve Gates*, we may conclude that the *Fifty Contemplations* has a similar background, written by Chinese Buddhists working perhaps in Luoyang in the late second or early third centuries, or in the Wu kingdom in the south during the mid-third century, who looked to An Shigao's texts as a source of authority and who were engaged in exegetical projects centred on them.<sup>93</sup>

### The Chinese context

The final and most interesting question we can ask of the *Fifty Contemplations* concerns the possible context for its arguments. Of course, even if the *Fifty Contemplations* was indeed composed in China, it may well contain much inherited and adopted from Indian Buddhist thinking, derived either from texts (both those we know about and those we do not) as well as from interactions and discussions that no doubt took place between foreign Buddhists such as An Shigao and their Chinese followers. But even if so, there remains the question of why these particular ideas came to be a topic of discussion and debate in China, a question all the more pressing given that the *Fifty Contemplations'* central thesis, that the bodhisattva path (though again this word itself is not used) is incompatible with basic Buddhist soteriology, is not one that any Indian Buddhists we know of ever seem to have made.

Given how little we know of the actual situations and motivations under which Chinese Buddhist texts were read, written, or appreciated during the Han and Three Kingdoms period, any attempt to contextualize the *Fifty Contemplations* will, even in the best of circumstances, remain

<sup>93</sup> Within this roughly one hundred year window we might further wish to point, very tentatively, towards the earlier, rather than later period. As has been discussed by Zacchetti (2010) and Nattier (2008: 121, 151–152), many if not most of the translations and commentaries carried out during the Wu-kingdom period itself are marked by a distinctive style that freely incorporates philosophically and religiously significant Chinese vocabulary, and which uses a linguistic register more elevated than most Han-dynasty translations. Such trends are especially noticeable in the few surviving commentaries composed during the Wu-kingdom period such as the *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas*. The *Fifty Contemplations*, in contrast, is written in a quite simple style more reminiscent of Han-dynasty translations (I owe this suggestion to Jan Nattier).

conjectural. Despite such difficulties, I will propose that we can make sense of the *Fifty Contemplations* as an early Chinese attempt to navigate differences between the two main streams of early Chinese Buddhist translations: that associated with the translations of An Shigao, whose oeuvre consisted entirely of mainstream (‘Hīnayāna’) Buddhist texts, and that of Lokakṣema, whose output was limited to Mahāyāna sutras.

To be sure, not everyone in third-century China necessarily saw any conflict between these streams. The *Commentary to the Scripture on the Skandhas, Dhātus, and Āyatanas*, which we have discussed above, thus happily cites Mahāyāna texts translated by Lokakṣema within its exegesis of an An Shigao translation. And in precisely the reverse fashion, the anonymous (and also seemingly Wu-kingdom) interlinear commentary to the first fascicle of the *Da ming du jing* 大百度經 (a version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*) cites a version of An Shigao’s *Anban shou yi jing*.<sup>94</sup> For the authors of these commentaries, the scriptures translated by An Shigao and Lokakṣema were equally authoritative and similar enough in purport that each could help explain the other.

The *Fifty Contemplations*, however, suggests that at least some early Chinese Buddhists saw certain problems here. Indeed in arguing against the goal of buddhahood in a future lifetime – basic ‘bodhisattva-soteriology’ – the *Fifty Contemplations* takes a stand firmly opposed to ideas that in second- and third-century China would have been most familiar through the Mahāyāna scriptures translated largely (though not exclusively) by Lokakṣema. The *Fifty Contemplations* also describes the practices it does advocate – practices it claims will allow one to end rebirth right away – using terminology and concepts strongly associated with the legacy of An Shigao. Most important in this regard is *shou yi* 守意, “guarding the mind,” which throughout the *Fifty Contemplations* describes how practitioners can permanently eliminate their mental impurities. Indeed “guarding the mind” is what allows bodhisattvas to *destroy* their “original vows,” which as discussed above (p. 81–82) are asserted to be nothing but sins that bind one to rebirth:

<sup>94</sup> T.225:8.478c7–8. On the texts cited by these two commentaries, which reveal in a general way what Buddhist scriptures were most highly valued at this time, see Zürcher 1972: 54–55.



*The Buddha said:* [As you] bodhisattvas have practiced the path, for countless eons you have produced in your minds the “original vow” of rebirth (生死本願).<sup>95</sup> This may be likened to a seed planted in the earth that grows into a large tree. Once the tree has been formed, upon the tree grow millions upon millions of branches, and upon each branch there grow thousands of millions of leaves and thousands of millions of seeds. Each of these seeds will grow into another tree. Bodhisattvas, when you sit in meditation you must cast away your former sin (本罪). This is like plucking off and destroying, one by one, all the leaves and all the fruits of that tree so that no further [trees] can be planted or grow, [and then also] removing and destroying, one by one, all the branches of that tree. In this manner the leaves, seeds, and branches are utterly eradicated, and all that remains is the root. The root of the tree can be likened to the former sin produced by the single moment of intention of your original vow (本願一意所起本罪). This intention [of your original vow] is like the root of the tree. When branches and leaves grow from it, you must eliminate them. If you do not eliminate them, they will grow and give rise to more seeds. If you do eliminate them, no further [seeds] will be produced.

A bodhisattva must “guard the mind” (守意) just like one would watch over the root of that tree, not allowing any branches, leaves, or seeds to grow. For when they grow, one’s future punishment (罪) increases. If they are eliminated, one’s future punishments do not increase, and one eliminates one’s former sin.<sup>96</sup>

*Shou yi* is thus the practice of restraining the problematic “intentions” (*yi* 意) that lead to future rebirth, intentions whose source is the deep seated “original vow” that is here interpreted not as the commendable origin of the bodhisattva path but rather as the ultimate root of samsaric misery.

That *shou yi* is used so prominently in the *Fifty Contemplations* is significant because within known Han or Three-Kingdoms Chinese

<sup>95</sup> I here follow the Sixi (宋) and Puning (元) editions; other versions read “original intention” (本意).

<sup>96</sup> 佛言：諸菩薩行道，無數劫以來意生死本願。譬如菓實種著土中生大樹。已成大樹，樹上生百種億億枝，枝生億億萬葉，枝枝生億億萬實。一實者，當復轉生一樹。菩薩坐禪棄我本罪，譬如取樹葉一一滅之，取實一一滅之，便不復種生，取枝一一滅之。如是菓實枝滅盡了斲，但有根。根者，為譬如本願一意所起本罪。意譬如樹根，枝葉生當復滅之。不滅者，當長養實復生。滅者，不復生。菩薩守意，譬如守樹根不得使樹枝葉實生。生為增當來罪，滅者為不增當來罪，為滅本罪。(T.397:13.403a1-12)

Buddhist texts this word appears almost exclusively in material associated with An Shigao or his later commentators. Within the title of the famous *Anban shou yi jing* 安般守意經, perhaps An Shigao's most widely read text, *shou yi* seems to translate *smṛti*, "mindfulness."<sup>97</sup> But An Shigao used it to translate other expressions as well.<sup>98</sup> On the whole, *shou yi* is thus not the mere gloss of a single Indian Buddhist technical term, but a Chinese concept that conveniently summarized the style of mental discipline promoted in An Shigao's texts.<sup>99</sup>

To judge from documents such as the canonical *Anban shou yi jing* (a Chinese-authored commentary to An Shigao's translation of this same name), early Chinese authors and readers of An Shigao's texts appear to have understood *shou yi* to mean something like "restraining evil mental impulses."<sup>100</sup> The third-century preface to the original *Anban shou yi jing* by Kang Senghui thus explains that through *shou yi* one eliminates the thousands of "[evil] mental impulses" (意) that arise each moment and which, like seeds scattered blindly into a field, inevitably sprout into new rebirth (and yet more seeds).<sup>101</sup> This understanding that *shou yi* is the restraining or impeding of the "seeds" of rebirth (mental impulses of some kind) tallies closely, in both meaning and imagery, with the passage above from the *Fifty Contemplations*.

Not only was *shou yi* linked almost exclusively to An Shigao's texts and legacy, on the few occasions when it appears within early translations of Mahāyāna scriptures, or in Chinese compositions linked to such

<sup>97</sup> For a detailed discussion of the meaning of *smṛti*, see Gethin 1992: 36–44.

<sup>98</sup> E.g. *Qi chu san guan jing* 七處三觀經, T.150A: 2.875c19–26, where based on the Pāli parallel (*Aṅguttaranikāya* 1.261–262; see Harrison 1997: 267) *shou yi* appears to translate *cittaṃ rakkhati*. Elsewhere in this same collection, *shou yi* renders "restraint in regards to the mind-faculty" (T.150A:2.877c16–20; *manindriye saṃvaraṃ; Aṅguttaranikāya* 2.39–40). *Shou yi* 守意 does not seem to have any connection to the Chinese term *shou yi* 守一, "guarding the One," as has sometimes been claimed (see Greene 2014: 153, 175–177).

<sup>99</sup> Though *shou yi* 守意 does not seem to appear in pre-Buddhist Chinese literature (*Han yu da ci dian* 1.1996), we do find the similar or perhaps even interchangeable *shou zhi* 守志, to "keep to one's purpose" (*Dai kanwa jiten*, p. 3179; *Han yu da ci dian*: 3.1993).

<sup>100</sup> See for example T.602: 15.164a18–20.

<sup>101</sup> *Chu san zang ji ji*, T.2415: 55.43a5–16 (Link 1976: 67–80).

texts, it often points to *wrong* practices.<sup>102</sup> The Chinese commentary to the first fascicle of the *Da ming du jing* 大明度經 thus in one passage describes *shou yi* as that which leads to birth in a heavenly realm that some people wrongly take to be liberation but which is actually just a prelude to more suffering and rebirth.<sup>103</sup> In the only example of the word in any extant translation of Lokakṣema (his translation of the *Kāśyapaparivarta*),<sup>104</sup> *shou yi* describes the practices of 500 shallow-minded monks who cannot understand emptiness in its Mahāyāna variety.<sup>105</sup> This example is particularly interesting because there is some indication that the word *shou yi* did not directly correspond to anything in the original Indic passage.<sup>106</sup> We might thus speculate that *shou yi* was

<sup>102</sup> I have found only a single example within known Han- or Three Kingdoms-era Chinese translations of Mahāyāna scriptures where *shou yi* is used in a neutral or positive manner: the *Pusa ben ye jing* 菩薩本業經 (T.281:10.448a9), an early version of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra* translated by Zhi Qian (on this text, see Nattier 2007).

<sup>103</sup> T.225:8.480b4.

<sup>104</sup> *Weiyue moni bao jing* 遺曰摩尼寶經 (T.350); see Nattier 2008: 83–84.

<sup>105</sup> T.350:12.193b12–16. The monks are here characterized as “having previously, through practicing *shou yi*, attained the path of *dhyāna*” (素皆行守意得禪道).

<sup>106</sup> The later Chinese translations of this text, as well as the (single) Sanskrit copy and the Tibetan translation, here say only that the monks had “attained *dhyāna*” (*dhyāna-lābhī*; Staël-Holstein 1926: 200; Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya 2002: 48). The Indian text used by Lokakṣema may, of course, have been different (though there is otherwise close agreement in this section between the different versions). This section of the *Kāśyapaparivarta* is furthermore noteworthy in that its narrative is almost a mirror image of the *Fifty Contemplations* itself. The episode begins with the 500 “meditating” (守禪) monks leaving the Buddha’s assembly because they wish to go meditate alone in the mountains (T.350:12.193c1–2). It is clear from the context that this desire reflects their meagre, ‘Hīnayāna’ understanding. The Buddha then magically transforms into the guise of an ordinary monk and goes after them, and asks them what, in their understanding, constitutes liberation. They reply that “eliminating lust, hatred, and confusion – this is nirvana” (盡婬盡怒盡癡是為泥洹; T.350:12.193c12). But under further questioning, the 500 monks abandon this (wrong) view and arrive at a Mahāyāna-style understanding of emptiness. As a result, they become arhats (!), and then return to the assembly where they converse with Subhūti and give typical *prajñāpāramitā*-style answers to his questions: that they have neither attained nor not attained the state of arhatship, that they have neither practiced nor not practiced the path, that they will attain final *nirvāṇa* “when an illusory man attains it” and so forth (T.350:12.194a4–6). Here, then, five hundred arhats abandon the notion that *nirvāṇa* constitutes the elimination of mental defilements in favor of the Mahāyāna-style understanding that *nirvāṇa* is never (ultimately) attained since there is no one to attain it. Yet these monks are also declared to become, by dint of their appreciation of these ideas, arhats. The story here is nearly the mirror image of the *Fifty*

here used by the translator(s) as a polemical reference to the ‘An Shigao-style’ practices that the intended Chinese audience was presumed to be familiar with.

From an early date, the term *shou yi* thus may have been, in at least some contexts, a marker (if only a vague one) of certain perceived distinctions between the practices and associated soteriology discussed in the texts translated by An Shigao, and the ideas found in Mahāyāna scriptures associated primarily (though not exclusively) with Lokakṣema. We can find some hints that other, related terms may have functioned similarly. To “extinguish evil mental impulses” (*mie yi* 滅意) is thus, in at least two Han- or Three Kingdoms-era texts associated with An Shigao and his textual legacy, what successful meditation accomplishes.<sup>107</sup> Lokakṣema’s *Kāśyapaparivarta*, however, gives to this expression the radically different meaning of “extinguishing the intention [to become a buddha]” by becoming an arhat, something taught to bodhisattvas by bad friends. As with this same text’s use of *shou yi*, one is tempted to see here a conscious effort by the translator or his team to dismiss the “extinguishing of evil mental impulses” (滅意) that is praised in An Shigao’s texts as really being the selfish abandonment of the “intention” (意) to become a buddha, an equation that would parallel the arguments of the *Fifty Contemplations* in reverse.

The *Fifty Contemplations*’ emphasis on *shou yi* 守意, interpreted as meaning “restraining evil mental impulses,” is thus a more or less explicit endorsement of a vision of Buddhist practice that during the late second and third centuries was associated with the texts and legacy of An Shigao, and which was often (though not necessarily always) contrasted with what was sometimes (though again, not necessarily always) felt to be the rather different understanding predominately found in the Chinese translations of Mahāyāna scriptures produced by Lokakṣema. What the

*Contemplations*, where 500 bodhisattvas, who begin with typical (but vaguely expressed) Mahāyāna declarations that they will become buddhas in a distant future lifetime, are led by the Buddha to the view that true liberation is actually the immediate destruction of mental defilements. Though speculative, I wonder if this episode might not have inspired the author(s) of the *Fifty Contemplations*, whose story of the “bodhisattvas” expresses, of course, a precisely contrary point.

<sup>107</sup> *Anban shou yi jing*, T.602: 15.166c28–167a1; SMJ 462–465.

*Fifty Contemplations* promotes is basic Buddhist soteriology – the immediate end of rebirth accomplished by permanently severing mental impurities and defilements, though the labels “bodhisattva path” or “buddha” are here freely appropriated as designations for this goal. The *Fifty Contemplations* is thus not so much an “anti-Mahāyāna” text as originally proposed by Shizutani, but an early Chinese attempt to negotiate perceived (and indeed, actual) differences between the two numerically most significant streams of early Chinese Buddhist literature in translation.

There is, furthermore, at least one other surviving text that seems to address a similar set of concerns – the *Scripture on the Bodhisattva’s Internal Practice of the Six Pāramitā* (*Pusa nei xi liu boluomi jing* 菩薩內習六波羅蜜經; T.778). Recorded as an anonymous translation in our earliest (fourth-century) surviving catalog,<sup>108</sup> this text takes as its main subject the six *pāramitās*, which in the first half of the text are aligned with the six stages of breath meditation (*ānāpāna*) as presented in the translations of An Shigao (“counting” 數, “following” 隨, “stopping” 止, “contemplating” 觀, “turning back” 還, and “purifying” 淨).<sup>109</sup> Within Han- and Three Kingdoms-era translations, the six stages of breath meditation are almost never discussed outside of the works of An Shigao,<sup>110</sup> where, conversely, the six *pāramitās*, a constant subject of discussion within early Chinese translations of Mahāyāna scriptures, are

<sup>108</sup> Daoan’s catalog (as reproduced in the *Chu san zang ji ji*) lists it as an anonymous translation, under the name *Nei wai liu boluomi jing* 內外六波羅蜜經 (T.2145:55.17c25).

<sup>109</sup> On these six stages, discussed at length in the *Anban shou yi jing* (both the ‘canonical’ version and the Kongō-ji version), see Deleanu 1992.

<sup>110</sup> These ideas are also, of course, discussed within early Chinese prefaces and commentaries to An Shigao’s translations. The only exception to the otherwise strict association between this topic and the translations of An Shigao is the *Tai zi rui ying ben qi jing* 太子瑞應本起經 (T.185:3.476c26–27), a biography of the Buddha translated by Zhi Qian (Nattier 2008: 135–136). This exception may not even be an exception, however, for as Zacchetti has shown (2003: 286), Zhi Qian drew, at various points in this text but in particular in passages describing the Buddha’s meditation practices, from An Shigao’s *Shi er men jing* 十二門經. It seems quite likely that the reference to the six stages of *ānāpāna* is another instance of this. (A parallel passage mentioning the six stages of breath meditation does appear in the *Xiu xing ben qi jing* 修行本起經, T.184:3.469c6–7. This text, though traditionally held to be a Han-era translation, is now thought to have been revised and expanded as late as the fourth century; see Kawano 1991).

never mentioned. The *Scripture on the Bodhisattva's Internal Practice of the Six Pāramitā* thus effectively defines the *pāramitās* as aspects of An Shigao-style meditation practice. To take the case of the second *pāramitā*:

The second [stage of breath meditation] is “following.” This is the same as [the second *pāramitā*,] *śīla-pāramitā* (尸波羅蜜). The mind and the breath follow each other in and out. With no perverse thoughts, the mind does not stir, and one does not violate the prohibitions of the Way. This is the internal *śīla-pāramitā*, the attaining of liberation through the non-violation of the prohibitions of the Way.<sup>111</sup>

The expression “attaining liberation through the non-violation of the prohibitions of the Way” (不犯道禁得度) appears to be a calque of *śīla-pāramitā*,<sup>112</sup> and that in this sentence the word is both transcribed (in a form used in Lokakṣema's translations) and translated is one of several indications that this text, like the *Fifty Contemplations*, is not the direct translation of an Indian text but a Chinese composition or compilation.<sup>113</sup>

The *Scripture on the Bodhisattva's Internal Practice of the Six Pāramitā* thus takes key concepts that figure throughout the Mahāyāna scriptures translated in the second and early third centuries (the *pāramitās*) and explains them as nothing other than the practices familiar from An Shigao's meditation texts.<sup>114</sup> Like the *Fifty Contemplations*, this text

<sup>111</sup> 二、相隨，為尸波羅蜜。意與心 {read: 息?} 相隨俱出入，不邪念，意不轉，為不犯道禁，是為內尸波羅蜜，為不犯道禁得度。(T.778: 17.714b15–17)

<sup>112</sup> “Not violating the prohibitions of the Way” (不犯道禁) translates *śīla*, in the context of the *pāramitās*, in T.362, Lokakṣema's translation of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha* (T.362:12.302b16; see also 315c15 where there appears the slight variant 不犯道禁忌; on this text, see Harrison 1998: 556–557). The words *du* 度 (“traversed”) or *du wu ji* 度無極 (“traversed immeasurably”) are common pseudo-etymological translations of *pāramitā* in Lokakṣema's corpus. Though the precise expression *de du* 得度, “attaining liberation,” is not, as far as I know, attested as a translation of *pāramitā*, it seems clear that “attaining liberation through non-violation of the prohibitions of the Way” (不犯道禁得度) serves as a word-by-word translation and/or explanation of the phrase *śīla-pāramitā*.

<sup>113</sup> The likely apocryphal nature of this text has also been suggested by Nattier 2007: 136, who notes that it borrows the listing of the ten bodhisattva stages found in Zhi Qian's *Pusa ben ye jing* 菩薩本業經 (T.281).

<sup>114</sup> The descriptions of the remaining *pāramitās* leave little doubt that the author(s) here took their basic understanding from An Shigao's translations (or some other similar source of typically mainstream Buddhist ideas), not from the early Chinese translations of

thus seems to stem from an intellectual climate in which the substantive content of the Buddhist practices and understandings described in An Shigao's translations was considered orthodox, but where a need or desire had arisen to explain how this kind of Buddhism was related to the things discussed in Mahāyāna scriptures. One further point demonstrates that these two texts indeed share a similar intellectual background: the *Scripture on the Bodhisattva's Internal Practice of the Six Pāramitā* displays the same "confusion" between speech and tastes (as the "object" of the mouth organ) found in the *Fifty Contemplations*.<sup>115</sup> The *Scripture on the Bodhisattva's Internal Practice of the Six Pāramitā* is, we may conclude, another example of an extremely early Chinese 'apocryphal' scripture, one that while perhaps raising more questions than it answers, nevertheless affords us a glimpse into the thinking of some of the earliest Chinese Buddhists.

## Conclusions

For better or worse, I tend to introduce undergraduate students to 'Mahāyāna' Buddhism – usually after several weeks on the doctrines, cosmology, and social organization of 'early' Indian Buddhism – with the notion of the bodhisattva path. Invariably some students feel there to

Mahāyāna scriptures. For example the sixth *pāramitā* is explained as follows: "The sixth [stage] is 'purifying'; this is the *prajñā-pāramitā*. To know that human beings and the myriad creatures will all die, that when the mind is impure one will be impelled towards rebirth, and that the severing of desire and the purification of the mind is the accomplishment of wisdom – this is the internal [practice] of the *prajñā-pāramitā*, the attainment of liberation by wisdom." 六、淨，為般若波羅蜜。知人萬物皆當消滅，意不淨向生死，愛欲斷，心淨潔，智慧成就，是為內摩訶般若波羅蜜，從點慧得度。(T.778:17.714c2–4). The contrast between this understanding of *prajñā-pāramitā* and what we find in the Mahāyāna scriptures translated by Lokakṣema and others could not be clearer.

<sup>115</sup> See above p. 86. In the *Scripture on the Bodhisattva's Internal Practice of the Six Pāramitās*, the six *pāramitās* are said to each regulate or restrain the interaction of a given sense organ and its corresponding objects. The organs and their objects are all the usual ones, except for the case of the mouth, linked to the fifth *pāramitā* (*dhyāna*), which is explained as follows: "Question: Why does the mouth [organ] correspond with *dhyāna-pāramitā*? The Buddha said: When the mouth does not slander, lie, speak falsely, speak evil, or curry favor, then this is calmness. For this reason it belongs to the *dhyāna-pāramitā*." (T.778: 17.715a2–4)

be a deep problem reconciling a soteriology that involves continuing rebirth motivated by the desire to help others with what they have at this point absorbed as the goals of basic Buddhism. I try to offer various possible ways of making sense of this – pointing out, for example, that “desire” in the sense of *craving* might be distinguished from “desire” in the sense of motivation; that the aim of ending rebirth has always gone hand in hand with the idea that renunciants are powerful sources of merit that can help others achieve better rebirth; that despite theoretically condemning *all* rebirth as suffering most Buddhists, monastic and lay, saw better rebirth and spiritual progress as inextricably linked; or that the bodhisattva path is implicit in the traditional understanding of the career of the Buddha himself. At the same time, however, I also suggest to students that they are not wrong to see here a real tension, arguably one of the deep creative paradoxes of Buddhism more broadly. At this point I also typically assign an essay in which I ask to students to either defend or refute the compatibility of the bodhisattva path with early Buddhist soteriology.

I am tempted to see in the *Fifty Contemplations* a second- or third-century Chinese version of just such an essay. Whoever wrote the *Fifty Contemplations* did not suffer from any systematic misunderstanding of the Buddhist texts and doctrines then available in China. On the contrary, its author or authors evidently understood the basic presuppositions of different accounts of Buddhist soteriology with enough sophistication to have discerned real philosophical and structural tensions of the kind that we are pleased to see our own students discover upon reading similar material in English translations nominally (or so we would like to think) far more accurate than anything available in second- or third-century China.

The author of the *Fifty Contemplations* did not necessarily have a flawless grasp of Indian Buddhism – the confusion concerning the object of the mouth as a sensory organ is one indication that at least some fundamental Buddhist concepts and forms of analysis had yet to be fully understood. But taken as a whole, the *Fifty Contemplations* shows a degree of intellectual engagement with fundamental Buddhist ideas and doctrines that we might not have expected given the commonly painted picture of such very early Chinese Buddhists as struggling to gain even



a rudimentary understanding of basic Buddhist concepts, as hopelessly constrained by poor translations and dubious analogies with Chinese ideas, and as interested in Buddhism as little more than a cult to a powerful foreign god.<sup>116</sup>

Modern scholars surveying early Chinese Buddhist intellectual history have often concluded that, as Peter Gregory writes, “it was only toward the end of the fourth century that enough texts had been translated for Chinese Buddhists to become aware of the diversity of the teachings to which they were heir.”<sup>117</sup> Only at this point, it is claimed, did Chinese Buddhists begin to analyze systematically the Buddhist texts and doctrines to which they had been introduced, to compare them with one another, to discern within them tensions, inconsistencies, and downright contradictions, and finally to make arguments about which way of understanding things was best. The *Fifty Contemplations*, however, suggests the possibility that this level of intellectual engagement with the Indian Buddhist tradition was already happening, in some circles at least, at a far earlier time, in the mid third century if not before. Though the glimpse it offers of these activities is but hazy, it is enough, perhaps, to suggest that what Zürcher called the “embryonic” phase of Chinese Buddhism was rather more sophisticated than we have suspected.

### Abbreviations and Primary Sources

*Āṅguttaranikāya*. Edited by R. Morris and E. Hardy. London: Pali Text Society, 1885–1900.

*Bai hu tong shu zheng* 白虎通疏證. Edited by Chen Li 陳立. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1994.

*Dai kanwa jiten* 大漢和辭典. Edited by Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次. Tokyo: Taishukan shoten, 1955–60.

*Fangshang shi jing* 房山石經. 30 vols. Beijing: Huaxia chu ban she, 2000.

*Gaoli da zang jing chu ke ben ji kan* 高麗大藏經初刻本輯刊. Chongqing: Xi nan shi fan da xue chu ban she, 2013.

*Han yu da ci dian* 漢語大詞典 (縮印本). Edited by Luo Zhufeng 羅竹風. Shanghai: Han yu da ci dian chu ban she, 2000.

<sup>116</sup> For a classic statement of this view of the first two centuries of Buddhism in China, see Wright 1959: 32–38.

<sup>117</sup> Gregory 2002: 111.

- Huainan zi ji shi* 淮南子集釋. Edited by He Ning 何寧. Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1998.
- K-ABSJY = Kongō-ji *Anban shou yi jing* 安般守意經. See Ochiai 2004. Cited by line number(s).
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- SMJ = *Shi er men jing* 十二門經. See Ochiai 2004. Cited by line number(s).
- T = CBETA electronic edition (version 5.2, 5/28/2014) (with corrections) of *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次朗 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932. Texts indicated by text number (T) followed by volume, page, register, and line number(s).
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#### ABSTRACT

This article argues that the *Scripture on the Fifty Contemplations* (*Wushi jiaoji jing* 五十校計經), an obscure, little studied text that Chinese catalogs attribute to the early translator An Shigao (fl. 148-168), is in fact a Chinese composition and is hence potentially one of the earliest known apocryphal Chinese Buddhist scriptures. As such, it offers us a precious resource for understanding what Erik Zürcher once called the “embryonic phase” of Chinese Buddhism during the second and third centuries, a time from which there survive few other documents composed by Chinese Buddhist authors. The *Scripture on the Fifty Contemplations* is, I will suggest, an uncompromising but surprisingly coherent criticism of Mahāyāna soteriology from the perspective of a more traditional understanding of the Buddhist path. Apart from its significance as one of the most extensive anti-Mahāyāna polemics from any Buddhist tradition, the *Scripture on the Fifty Contemplations* provides evidence of a robust, if idiosyncratic intellectual engagement with the Buddhist scriptural tradition on the part of at least some Chinese Buddhists at a surprisingly early date in the history of Chinese Buddhism.