The Ten Virtues of Loudly Invoking the Name of Amitābha: Stein Tibetan 724 and an Aspect of Chinese Nianfo Practice in Tibetan Dunhuang

JONATHAN A. SILK
LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

Stein Tibetan 724 was earlier identified as a list of virtues of the Buddha Amitābha. A new reading of the document and identification of its Chinese source allow its re-identification instead as a list of the virtues of invoking the Buddha Amitābha in a loud voice. The article offers a corrected transcription of the manuscript, presents and examines possible sources, and suggests the most plausible proximate original for the Tibetan translation, briefly exploring the practice of loud invocation as a Buddhist practice in medieval Dunhuang.

In 1993, as an appendix to a paper on a Tibetan poem in praise of the Buddha Amitābha found in Dunhuang, I presented the text of a very short manuscript, a single folio side, on which—I thought—were recorded ten qualities or ‘virtues’ of the Buddha Amitābha. 1 At that time, I suspected a connection of this text with Chinese Buddhism in Dunhuang, due to the use, in what appeared to be the title of the text, of a mye ta pur, a transcription in Tibetan script of the Chinese name of the Buddha Amitābha, 阿彌陀佛. This usage unequivocally locates the text in the multilingual world of Dunhuang, in which some individuals honored Chinese-language Buddhist texts but preferred, probably because of its relative simplicity, the Tibetan script to the Chinese. Now, however, I realize that I earlier mistook the basic nature of the document. I therefore present a new transcript of the manuscript, identify what may plausibly be considered its direct Chinese source, and offer an English translation of the Tibetan text, in light of its evident Chinese Vorlage. Moreover, I also provide the fuller context of the suggested Chinese original, knowledge of which allows us to better locate the text. Finally, in looking at several related texts, I attempt to set the whole in a somewhat broader framework.

1. Silk 1993: 71–72. This manuscript is found in the Stein Tibetan Collection, with the shelfmark IOL Tib J 724, numbered folio ka 78 (ka don bryyad); the verso is blank. It was earlier catalogued as Ch. 73 viii, fragment 3. In poṭhi format, 37 × 6.5 cm, it is written in a clear dbu can, with several interlinear corrections in a quicker hand. The entry in La Vallée Poussin 1962: 232 misunderstands the title: “Contains the enumeration of the ten qualities of the Amitābha’s (?) magical nail.” This is based on the wrong assumption that the syllable phur is Tibetan, when it is in fact rather Chinese (see below). La Vallée Poussin went so far as to “reconstruct” the title as Amitābha kilaguna-daśaka, based on his misapprehension. The text was published in Tōyō Bunko Chibetto Kenkyū Iinkai 1984: 47. When I studied it in 1993, I had to base myself only on the transcription in this catalogue. Now that clear color photographs are available on the IDP website (http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_scroll_h_a4d?uid=690601914;recnum=5576;index=4), I have re-edited the text, the earlier transcript of which contained many errors.

I transcribe with ‘a-rten with a flag on the right shoulder . This is the only form found in the manuscript, and is common in older manuscripts. It is referred to by Dotson and Helman-Ważny (2016: 109) as the “hooked ‘a.” I transcribe with i the reversed gi gu (gi gu log).

For a number of valuable suggestions I thank my student Channa Li, as well as Ruixuan Chen and Wu Juan, and for the solution to the problem of the reading chung, Charles Ramble. For several important suggestions of interpretations of Chinese I owe thanks to my friend Stefano Zacchetti, and further to Antje Richter.
Tibetan manuscript IOL Tib J 724:2
|| a mye da phur kyi yon tan bcu la ||
dmyig [written below: gnyid] chung ba dang cig ||
bsdud bsgangs ba dang gnyis ||
sgra snyan pa grags pa dang gsum ||
ngan tsong gi sdugs sngal zhi ba dang bzhi ||
phyi +i sgra skad +gags pa dang lnga ||
sems myi g.yeng ba dang drug ||
brtson +grus kyi go ca dang ldan ba dang bdun ||
sangs rgyas dang byang cub sems dpa+ thams cad dgyes pa dang brgyad ||
ting nge +dzin thams cad mngon du gyur pa dang dgu ||
sangs rgyas kyi zhing kham yongs su dag par skye ba dang bcu +o ||

The source of this list is, I suggest, found in a work attributed (wrongly) to the Tang dynasty scholar Kuiji (632–682), a commentary on the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtra (Amituo jing 阿彌陀經), the Amituojing tongzan shu 阿彌陀經通贊疏.3 There we find the following:4

有十種功德。一，能排睡眠。二，天魔驚怖。三，聲遍十方。四，三塗息苦。五，外聲不入。
六，心不散亂。七，勇猛精進。八，諸佛歡喜。九，三味現前。十，往生淨土。

The correspondence between the Tibetan text—I would now say, the translation—and the Chinese—I would now say, the original—is very clear. For ease of comparison, I place them here side by side, making the necessary corrections to the Tibetan in brackets, as explained immediately below:

有十種功德 a mye da phur kyi yon tan bcu la
能排睡眠 dmyig gnyid chung [phyung] ba
天魔驚怖 bsdud [bdud] bsgangs ba
聲遍十方 sgra snyan pa grags pa
三塗息苦 ngan tsong [song] gi sdugs sngal zhi ba
外聲不入 phyi +i sgra skad +gags pa
心不散亂 sems myi g.yeng ba
勇猛精進 brtson +grus kyi go ca dang ldan ba
諸佛歡喜 sangs rgyas dang byang cub sems dpa+ thams cad dgyes pa
三味現前 ting nge +dzin thams cad mngon du gyur pa
往生淨土 sangs rgyas kyi zhing kham yongs su dag par skye ba

Several observations are necessary to clarify what is generally a very closely corresponding pair of lists. In the first item, I understand the verb chung ba to correspond to pài 排 ‘to

2. The text transcribed here is followed on the last line by material I believe to be entirely unrelated, namely a zodiac. Already read by La Vallée Poussin, it appears to be in a different hand, the letters are smaller, and the ink also appears somewhat lighter in color: || || byi la || glang la || stag la || yos bu la || +brug la || sbrul la || rta la || lug la || sphre+u la || bya la || khyi la || phag la || || Below each of these, respectively, are written tshi, che+u, +ying, +bre+u, zhin, zi, +gu, +byi, ghzin, ye+u, ghshur, hra+. Takata (2000: 69) identifies the latter, which in Tibetan are meaningless, with Chinese terms, namely tshi 子, che’u 丑, ‘ying 寅, ‘bre’u 卯, zhin 辰, zi 巳, ‘gu 午, ‘bri [so Takata, but it is clearly byi] 未, ghzin 申, ye’u 酉, ghshur 戌, hra’ 亥. Takata (2000: 59) terms this a “Tibeto-Chinese bilingual list of the ‘twelve branches,’ which would have been necessary on a daily basis for the purpose of indicating dates,” but he pays no attention to the rest of the leaf, and consequently makes no attempt to explain what such a necessary list might be doing added as the last line on a folio, the rest of which has nothing whatsoever to do with dating. This seems to me to remain a problem.

3. Here I understand zän 贊 in the sense of clarification or summation, and thus tōngzàn as something like comprehensive clarification or summation.

push open’ or ‘to push aside’, taking chung as a miswriting for phyung, perfect of ‘byin ‘to cast out’. Tibetan has, moreover, (mis)understood Chinese mián眠 ‘sleep’ as the graphically very similar yán 眼 ‘eye’, which it renders with the archaic spelling dmyig. The result is meaningful, but somewhat different from the Chinese sense. I do not know the significance of the fact that gnyid is added below the line.

In item two, for bsdud read bdud, a misspelling. The Chinese tiānmó 天魔 strictly speaking is equivalent to devamāra, which is perhaps more normally rendered in Tibetan as lha’i bdud. I think, however, that the equivalence is close enough to be fully understandable.

In item three, Tibetan does not render shìfāng 世界, the ten directions. Note that Jäschke (1881: 197) cites as an example sentence khyod kyi snyan pa phyogs bcur grags, “every part of the world rings with thy praise,” a rendering which would correspond remarkably well to the Chinese expression.

In item four, ngan tsong should be read ngan song = apāya, another misspelling.

In item eight, the Chinese does not mention bodhisattvas, but the addition is quite normal in Tibetan.

In item nine, mgon du gyur pa indicates something like ‘made manifest, realized’, and the Chinese xiànqián 現前 means that something is evident as if right before one’s eyes; the rendering is thus very precise.

In light of this Chinese text, we may translate the Tibetan, including the introductory expression, as follows:

With regard to the ten virtues of uttering Amitābha!

1) Sleep is cast away from the eyes, and
2) Māra is shocked, and
3) The fame of the voice pervades [the world], and
4) The defilements of the evil states are pacified, and
5) External sounds are suppressed, and
6) The mind is unagitated, and
7) One is endowed with the armor of energy, and
8) All buddhas and bodhisattvas are pleased, and
9) All samādhis are made manifest, and
10) One is born in a purified buddha-field.

In what I believe to be its full original context, the Chinese passage is contained in a comment on the following sentence of the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtra: 5 “Hearing this music, all spontaneously awaken the mind of mindfulness of the Buddha, mindfulness of the Dharma, and mindfulness of the Sangha.” 經云:「聞是音者，皆自然生念佛、念法、念僧之心」. However, to understand the relevant portion of the commentary we need to look to the previous passage in the commentary as well. This, in turn, runs: 6

The Scripture says: “Śāriputra, in that buddha-land gentle breezes blow, moving the rows of jewelled trees and the jewelled nets, which produce exquisite music, just like that of a hundred thousand kinds of instruments being played together.”

The Clarification says: The eighth [ornament of the Land of Bliss] is that breezes blow, producing music. This discussion is divided into four parts: 1. The wind shakes the jewelled trees. 2. Their voice is like music. 3. Hearing [that music] causes good mindfulness. 4. The completion of the ornaments [of the land]. In the first two expressions here, “gentle breezes” means soft breezes. They are not sudden or violent winds. They blow on the trees and nets, and these

5. T. 1758 [XXXVII] 341c8, quoting T. 366 (XII) 347a23.
subsequently emit exquisite musical sounds. In “just like,” “just” indicates a comparison, “like” a resemblance. It is like a hundred thousand melodies performed together. Soft breezes gently arise and blow the trees and nets. Harmonious sounds then fill the entire universe. Their elegance is the same as that of all sorts of music. Therefore it says “just like that of a hundred thousand kinds of instruments being played together.”

**Conclusions:**
- Breezes blow spontaneously, gently moving these bells, which swing gracefully. The breezes blow in perfect harmony. They are neither hot nor cold. They are at the same time calm and fresh, sweet and soft. They are neither fast nor slow. When they blow on the nets and the many kinds of jewels, the trees emit the innumerable sounds of the subtle and sublime Dharma and spread myriad sweet and fine perfumes. Those who hear these sounds spontaneously cease to raise the dust of tribulation and impurity. When the breezes touch their bodies they all attain a bliss comparable to that accompanying a monk’s attainment of the samadhi of extinction.

I do not know why the title *Ruixiang jing* 瑞相經 is used to refer to the Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha, but it does appear in other texts as well.
It is clear from this passage that the advantages or merits enumerated here apply to the practice of loud recitation of the phrase “Hail to Amitābha Buddha!”—a mye ta pur in Tibetan transcription.9 This string of sounds, meaningless in Tibetan, is nothing other than a transcription of 阿彌陀佛, Modern Standard Chinese a mi tuo fo.10 This fact in turn suggests that the manuscript may date to the time of the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang, the period of roughly 780–850, although it might also be somewhat later, even as late as the tenth or eleventh century, since Tibetan continued to be used in Dunhuang through this period. The expression at the beginning of the Tibetan text, which cannot be considered a title as such, is therefore to be understood not as referring to merits or virtues of Amitābha Buddha himself, but rather as “The Ten Virtues of [recitation or utterance of the exclamation] Amīta Buddha!” That is, Tibetan a mye ta pur must be understood as a transcription of the Chinese exclamation, and thus we could also render the expression “The Ten Virtues of [proclaiming] A mi tuo fo!” What the original context makes clear is that this recitation is to be done in a loud voice, not quietly. In this light, the virtues arising from this practice begin to make sense: a loud voice will wake the sleeping, terrify Māra, drown out other voices, and so on.11 The practice of loudly proclaiming Amitābha Buddha’s name goes on to have wide currency in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, as discussed by several scholars.12

Turning to the text that evidently provided this listing, as noted above the Amituojing tongzan shu is traditionally attributed to the scholar Kuiji, a direct disciple of the famous Xuanzang.13 However, it was argued already by Sasaki (1913: 260–61), and by Mochizuki (1922: 480–502), that this attribution is not correct.14 Hayashi (2006–2007: 108–9) also concludes that the author cannot be Kuiji, but maintains that whoever did write it was very familiar with Kuiji’s thought and with Yogācāra doctrine. Whoever the author may have been, the Amituojing tongzan shu was certainly known in Dunhuang, with at least one, albeit fragmentary, manuscript from the site identified (kept in St. Petersburg, Д x 00684).

Although I believe the source of our small Tibetan text is now clear, it is necessary to consider that there are at least a few other possibilities. For, the same list is found in a number of texts, two of which date from the Tang period, and manuscripts of these texts have also been recovered from Dunhuang; therefore they are known to have been available in the time and place in which our Tibetan text was written. As Kaneko 1976 has clearly shown, a number of

9. Nagai (1990), noticing our passage, offers a brief introduction to Chinese discussions of the practice of recitation of the Amitābha Buddha’s name in a loud voice, but his main focus is on Japan. Notice that this approach to recitation is not mentioned by Jones 2001, who surveys methods of nianfo.

10. The phonology of this exclamation is discussed in Silk 1993: 17–19 (which overlooked the relevant remarks of Laufer 1916: 423). The medieval pronunciation of 阿彌陀佛 was something like ŋâ mi̯e dâ bjwət, reflected in a mye ta pur; concerning the last syllable, the -t final often became -l/-r in Middle Chinese, as reflected clearly in the Korean pronunciation of ‘buddha’, bul, seen here in the Tibetan -r.

11. Indian tradition—in this case non-Buddhist—distinguishes three modes of mantra recitation (japa): vocal (vācika), whispered (upāṁśu), and purely mental (mānasa). Padoux quotes a verse of Kṣemarāja in which he refers to the form of recitation which others can hear as udāhr ̥ ta (Padoux 1987: 119 n. 6). My thanks to Péter Szántó for his advice in this regard.


13. What seems to be the first such attribution is that found in the Sinp’yŏn chejong kyojang ch’ongnok 新編諸宗教藏總録 of Ŭich’ŏn 義天, a work of 1190, which reads as follows: 小阿彌陀經 . . . 通贊疏二卷玄基述 (T. 2184 [LV] 1171c23–25).

other texts also contain what is for all intents and purposes the same list of ten virtues of the loud recitation of the name of Amitābha, but most of these are too young to have provided the source for our manuscript. Moreover, in the oldest two, the Tang period works, we find the list in different forms, these facts together suggesting the identification of the Amituojing tongzan shu as the best candidate for the immediate source of the Tibetan version. However, the others also deserve some consideration.

Embedded in a longer text we find a short work, in verse, the Praise of Loudly Reciting the Buddha’s Name, Gaosheng nianfo zan, attributed to the eighth-century monk Fazhao (c. 747–821?). 15 In addition, in this text the ten items are found within a denser context. The ten items read as follows, with the relevant portions underlined:

1. Can push away the impediment of sleep. Contemplation causes everyone to become free of heavy darkness. Through destroying the impediments, the body and mind become clear. Then one can see the hundred jeweled gates in the Western direction.

2. Shakes the realm of Māras. It makes the mind take refuge in the practice of recitation of the name of the Buddha. If beings of the palace of Māra hear even a single recitation of the name of the Buddha, they will compassionately honor the Lord of Compassion forever.

3. Makes one’s voice penetrate the entire universe. It stops all sufferings of the evil realms. Everyone able to hear the name of the Buddha Amitābha: Immeasurable Lifespan will all attain the Pure Land and wander there at will.

15. T. 2827 (LXXXV) 1259c8–28, embedded in the Jingtu wuhui nianfo songjing guanxingyi 淨土五會念佛誦經觀行儀. I collated the text from three sources: Pelliot chinois 2250, Stein 5572 (in Huang 1986, vol. 43, p. 467), and from a manuscript in the Shanghai collection (in Shanghai bowuguan, Shanghai guji chubanshe 1993: 1–2, §48.1 [41379]). In the notes, the first is indicated by P, the second by S, the third by Sh. I have selected readings based on my assessment of inherent probability.
4. Pacifies the sufferings of the three evil realms. Instantly [the three realms] transform into a jeweled lotus palace. Evil-doers without exception are located within a flower [before it opens]. Immediately [after it opens] they hear the teaching and awaken to [the fact that all things are] unproduced.

5. Prevents external sounds from entering [one’s mind]. In every thought one approaches the home of the Dharma King, the bright light shines for a long time on the Lapis Lazuli Palace, and the transformationally produced children born there scatter golden flowers.

6. Pacifies one’s mind making it undisturbed. The Pure Land of Amitābha is perfected in thought. Between the trees of the jeweled forest he proclaims the magnificent teaching. Every voice only praises the scriptures of the Great Vehicle.

7. Makes one bravely energetic. The dust of ignorance disappears on its own. Every moment of thought always contemplates the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Amitābha, the Lord of Compassion, bestows the bright pearl [of the teaching].

8. Pleases all Buddhas. They will protect those who have faith [in Amitābha]. All of them together prevent [believers from] backsliding. At the end of their lives, [the believers] will attain a golden body.

9. Makes possible entry into samādhi. It [leads to] final repose, the unconditioned, meditation free of defilements. When one recites, without mental activity one sees all buddhas, 16 and eternally surpasses transmigration, becoming free [from rebirth even as] human or god.

10. Being endowed with these merits, as many as the sands of the Ganges river, the fruit of merit and wisdom is complete, and at the end of one’s life on a lotus flower in the Pure Land, Amitābha with his retinue will himself come to welcome one.

Here we see a significant difference in phrasing in the last item, which speaks of going at the end of one’s life to (rebirth in) a lotus flower in the Pure Land. This aside, on the whole the correspondence between this list and that in our Tibetan text is close as regards the underlined portions, but both the presence of the rest of the poem and the significant difference in the tenth item make this poem an unlikely source for our Tibetan version.

The second text brought forward by Kaneko is one belonging to the Chan tradition, the Contemplation Method of the South Indian Dhyāna Master Bodhidharma, Nantianzhuguo Putidamo chanshi guanmen 南天竺國菩提達摩禪師觀門, in which we find the following: 17

16. I find this foot of the verse particularly difficult to understand. Evidently there is some play on niàn 念 here, as elsewhere in the texts translated in this paper, but the actual sense in this case escapes me.

17. The most easily accessible version is that in T. 2832 (LXXXV) 1270c1–5. A number of Dunhuang copies in Chinese are known; seven are listed by Tanaka and Zeng 2012: 536, including Stein 2583, 2669, 6958, and Pelliot 2058c, and the text has been studied a number of times. The best round-up is found in Tanaka and Zheng 2012: 536–534 [sic]. Sharf (2003: 305–6 and n. 83) translates the ten items, stating in the note that “the origin of this list of ten benefits is unclear.” Aside from this text, however, he refers only to a later version in T. 2017 ([XLVIII] 962b7–11). Sharf translates as follows: “(1) evil voices will not be heard; (2) your invocation of the Buddha will not be scattered; (3) it eliminates sleepiness; (4) it brings courage and energy; (5) it pleases all the devas; (6) it scares away demons; (7) your voice will stir the ten directions; (8) it eliminates suffering; (9) all samādhis appear before you; (10) rebirth is attained in the Pure Land.” Despite the suggestion of several scholars that the list of ten merits is a later addition to the Nantianzhuguo Putidamo chanshi guanmen, Tanaka (1965: 133 = 1983: 224, and see 1980: 228) points out its near ubiquity in the manuscripts. As Tanaka and Zheng (2012: 534) detail, Japanese scholars since the time of Yabuki Keiki (1933: 541 [not seen]) have discussed the relation between Buddha name recitation (nianfo) and Chan, the subject of Sharf’s paper, although Sharf does not refer to these discussions or this literature. See also the next note.
Here we see that the order of the items is quite different from that in our text (using the numbers of our text, we could say that here the items run 5, 6, 1, 7, 8, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10), and the wording here and there is significantly different as well, both arguing against a direct identification of this as the source of the Tibetan version. However, what is most interesting about this text is not only that it is found in Dunhuang in Chinese, but that the Chinese text is also found in Tibetan transcription, highlighting its presence in a community which, while adhering to Chinese forms of Buddhism, nevertheless felt more comfortable in Tibetan script than in Chinese.18

One final question must be addressed. Some texts—but none that can be dated before the Song dynasty, so far as is known (according to Kaneko)—contain a passage attributing the list to a sūtra, as follows: 19

業報差別經云：高聲念佛誦經，有十種功德。一，能排睡眠。二，天魔驚怖。三，聲遍十方。四，三途息苦。五，外聲不入。六，令心不散。七，勇猛精進。八，諸佛歡喜。九，三昧現前。十，生於淨土。

This list, we observe, is precisely the list with which we began. But what of its putative source, the Yebao chabie jing 職報差別經? There exists, in fact, a sūtra titled Fo wei shoujia zhangzhe shuo yebao chabie jing 佛為首迦長者說業報差別經 (T. 80), apparently translated during the Sui dynasty, which contains a number of lists of ten virtues to be gained from various practices. However, recitation of the Buddha’s name, or mindfulness of the Buddha, is not included in the text, at least as we have it now. The absence of any reference to this text in works dating from before the Song convinced Kaneko that this attribution belongs to the late Tang, at the earliest.

In the end, then, based on the evidence available at present, it seems almost certain that the text contained in IOL Tib J 724 reflects the Chinese list contained in the Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha commentary titled Amituojing tongzan shu. Whether this was the proximate source, or there was some still-undiscovered intermediary, is not known, but that this text, or something very much like it, was the source does seem to be clear. Why this list should have been abstracted from its context and translated into Tibetan remains unknown. To say that it played some role in practice in Dunhuang is not wrong, but also not, in and of itself, terribly informative. I see, at this point, no reason to assume some association with “Pure Land” practice in any sort of exclusivistic sense. In terms of its context, however, the presence of the list in Chan literature is interesting, and scholars of Chan at Dunhuang, already aware of the list as found in the Nantianzhuguo Putidamo chanshi guanmen, may now wish to examine other Chan-related Tibetan materials for possible additional evidence, which might contribute to sketching a larger and more contextualized picture.

18. Pelliot tibétain 1228, transcribed in Takata 1988: 287, lines 25–29 (see 31–32 for a brief discussion) and in the so-called “Long Scroll,” IOL Tib J 1772 (Ch. 9.II.17), edited by Takata (1993: 373), in the text lines 113–17. On the phonology, see also Ikeda 1989. Virtually none of the very important and highly relevant materials referred to in this and the previous note are mentioned in the recent catalogue of van Schaik 2014: 78 (item 41).
19. The earliest example, according to Kaneko 1976: 220, is found in the Wanshan tonggui ji 萬善同歸集 of Yanshou 延壽 (904–975), in which we find the passage at T. 2017 (XLVIII) 962b7–11.

