

Repenting for Karmic Hindrances

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Teachings on Repentance in “Early Buddhism”

The Meaning of Repentance

In Early Buddhism,¹ repentance was a helpful means by which to further one’s practice. Training in repentance is related to the training of morality. By the time of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism,² “repentance for unwholesome karma” (see “[The Meaning of Karma](#)”) became a common practice that was observed regularly. In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, almost all of the *sūtras* that emphasize faith discuss the elimination of the major karma of cyclic existence alongside discussion of the practice of recollecting the buddhas (not just limited to recollecting Amitābha Buddha). The many popular practices of repentance in Chinese Buddhism all stem from this impetus to end the karma of cyclic existence.

The Chinese word for repentance consists of the characters *chàn* (懺) and *huǐ* (悔). *Chàn* is the transliteration of the Sanskrit word *kṣama*, which means “tolerance.” When someone has made a mistake, he or she asks the victim (an individual or group) for forgiveness and tolerance. This is the original and primary meaning of *chàn*. *Huǐ* is the translation of the Sanskrit word *deśanā*, which literally means “speak out.” Having made a mistake, a person should admit and confess their mistake to the victim; this is not only an admission to being wrong, but also a clear statement of the wrong committed. This is the meaning of *huǐ*. In the *Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Sūtra* it says, “one should confess to the mistakes they have made and seek the victims’ tolerance and forgiveness.”³ Confessing to errors (*huǐ*) and seeking tolerance (and forgiveness, *chàn*) are combined to become *chànhuǐ* (repentance). This term, “repentance” (*chànhuǐ*), has become an idiom in Chinese Buddhism. Further, the Sanskrit word *kaukr̥tya*, which means a person is dissatisfied with what he or she has done (regret), is also translated as *huǐ* in Chinese. *Kaukr̥tya* means that the person feels that what he or she has done is wrong,

¹ Early Buddhism here refers to the period from around 482 to 50 BCE, which includes the time from the Buddha’s enlightenment to the formation of the early schools of Buddhism and just prior to the establishment of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

² *Mahāyāna* Buddhism refers to the period from around the 1st century BCE to the 7th century CE, when the bodhisattva practice was popular. Venerable Yinshun further splits this period into Early *Mahāyāna*, which was when *Mahāyāna* teachings emerged and the main focus was on the principles of emptiness. Later *Mahāyāna* was the period when the teachings emphasized “consciousness-only”. Some scholars describe a longer period for *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, to include Esoteric Buddhism (7th–12th century CE, when vajrayana practice was popular).

³ *Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Sūtra* 《三曼陀跋陀羅菩薩經》 (CBETA, T14, no. 483 page 668)

and this is developed as regret. This type of *hui* (regret) can be wholesome or unwholesome.⁴ But regardless of which type of regret it is, once regret arises the mind is unable to settle. This disturbance will obstruct the practice of meditation. We must bear in mind that *hui* can mean “regret” or “confess,” and that they are completely different concepts and experiences.

The True Meaning of Monastic Repentance

Uniting the Saṃgha with Dharma to Ensure the Righteous Dharma Remains

The ancient Chinese Buddhists named the repentance practice found in Early Buddhism’s monastic regulations “monastic repentance.”⁵ Since Chinese Buddhism has adopted *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in the main, the monastic repentance is accordingly not valued highly by Chinese Buddhists. The Buddha used the Dharma⁶ to unite the monastics; that is, to bring renunciants together as a community and to allow them to live a harmonious, happy and pure communal lifestyle. Such a community is called the *saṃgha*. The key to maintaining the purity of the *saṃgha* community is the regulations set by the Buddha. These regulations include moral standards (such as rules against killing, stealing and so on), living standards (such as rules concerning clothing, food, shelter and so on), and organizational standards (such as rules concerning receiving the full ordination, *poṣadha* [formal precept recitation gatherings], retreats and so on). The harmony, happiness and purity of the *saṃgha* (externally) can assist people in society to develop faith in Buddhism, while internally they are conducive to attaining liberation if monastic members are all diligent in their practice. Attaining the goal of ensuring

⁴ An example of wholesome regret is when someone regrets doing something bad or regrets not doing something good. Unwholesome regret is when someone regrets doing something good or regrets that his or her actions were not bad enough.

⁵ Monastic repentance is a technical term referring to the practice of repentance undertaken by monastics. These practices have procedures corresponding to the severity of the breach.

⁶ In *The Way to Buddhahood*, Venerable Yinshun explains, “The Buddha guided and united the monastic disciples in accordance with the Dharma so that they can become a harmonious saṃgha community. Dharma refers to the true path for humans as well as nirvana that is ultimate. By means of this Dharma, the Buddha inspired the congregation so that the assembly would unite for the purpose of accomplishing this important aim of humans [which is to attain nirvana]. Dharma also includes the monastic code, which are the regulations that align with this righteous path for humans. Based on the ideal principle of communal living, the Buddha established sets of rules and system to organize the members [into a saṃgha community].”

「佛是「依法以攝」受他們，使之成為「僧」伽的。法，是人生的正道，究竟的涅槃；佛是以此法來感召大眾，讓大眾為這人生大事而集合攏來。法也是律法制度，就是契合於人生正道的規制；佛是本著這自他共處的完善法則，制為規章法度來組織大眾的。」（《成佛之道》（增注本），page 23）

According to this explanation, the word Dharma here includes principle, truth, rules etc., but the focus from a practical perspective is on the monastic code.

the righteous Dharma remains in this world is dependent on a *saṃgha* that is pure and lives in accord with the Dharma.

Severity of Breaches and Corresponding Repentance Procedures

Everyone has a responsibility to respect and abide by the laws of the country in which they find themselves. The regulations of the *saṃgha* are like the laws of a country. If there is a breach and it is extremely severe, then no repentance is possible. In this case, the violator must disrobe and is expelled from the *saṃgha* (an experience to the death penalty in certain countries). In this case, the violator is no longer considered a member of the community. If the breach is not considered extremely severe, then the violator is allowed to repent in accordance with the regulations. If someone does not admit to his or her faults and repent, then he or she is excluded from living in the community, and none of the other members speak to or keep in contact with that person (an experience that can feel just like being in exile), but he or she remains as a renounced disciple of the Buddha. When the person truly wishes to repent and seek repentance, then he or she is allowed to repent and return to the *saṃgha* after completing the necessary rehabilitation process (*mānatva* 摩那埵) and the reinstatement ceremony (*āvarhaṇa* 阿婆呵那).

The regulations that permit repentance, if there is a contravention, also include degrees of severity. Breaching any of the *saṃghāvaśeṣa*⁷ regulations is considered a severe breach. If someone commits a severe breach and does not hide it, that person should acknowledge his or her error and seek repentance that same day. A person is required to accept six days of *mānatva* rehabilitation as punishment. This punishment mainly involves a confiscation of rights (similar to the confiscation of public rights in a worldly context). These confiscations include sitting and sleeping to a side (that is, away from the main group), demotion in position within the group, requirement to pay respects to all the *bhikṣus*⁸ and to perform chores or services for the community. If during these six days the person sincerely accepts and abides by the punishment, then upon completion he or she is allowed to undertake the reinstatement ceremony (*āvarhaṇa*).

⁷ The monastic rules are grouped in several categories based on their severity. *Saṃghāvaśeṣa* (僧殘) is the second set of rules; breaches of these are considered severe but they can be repented. Different schools of Buddhism have slightly different precept rules.

⁸ *Bhikṣu* is the Sanskrit word for a fully ordained Buddhist monk. A fully ordained Buddhist nun is called a *bhikṣuṇī*.

If someone commits a severe breach and covers it up for fear of others knowing, then when someone else in the *saṃgha* reports the breach, or the person later realizes that his or her own actions were improper and seeks repentance, then the punishment is more severe. Concerning the breach of covering up, the person must first undertake *parivāsika*,⁹ which is to live away from the *saṃgha* for as many days as the breach has been concealed. After the *parivāsika* punishment there is the six days of *mānatva* before the person is able to undertake the reinstatement ceremony. The tasks of the punishment during the *parivāsika* are the same as under the rehabilitation process. The reinstatement ceremony is part of the repentance procedure and must be done in the presence of 20 *bhikṣus* if the *saṃghāvaśeṣa* regulations have been breached. Afterwards, that member is allowed to restore his or her position as a pure monastic (that is, without faults). If someone has committed a minor breach, then he or she may confess the faults to a single *bhikṣu* after a certain procedure has been undertaken by the *saṃgha* (there must be four monastics or more present). If someone has committed a very minor breach, he or she may confess those faults to one *bhikṣu*. In the case where the fault is extremely minor, the person needs only to self-reprimand and vow to avoid doing it again.

The repentance procedures prescribed by the Buddha for *saṃgha* members are punishments based on the Dharma teachings and monastic code. The purpose is to guide the offender back onto a moral path. If someone completes these proper repentance procedures he or she will regain the position of a pure *bhikṣu*, which is similar to the punishments given in some countries whereby, after the term of imprisonment is served or fines have been paid, that person cannot be charged or punished for the same crime, unless he or she commits the crime again.

In the regulations of the *saṃgha*, reporting another *saṃgha* member for breaching the precepts should be done out of compassion. Only in this way is the *saṃgha* able to help the offender regain purity and practice in accordance with the Dharma. Apart from the very minor types of breaches that only require self-reprimand, all other breaches require the offender to clearly state in front of the *saṃgha* or a single *saṃgha* member what breaches he or she has committed. The importance here is that the person earnestly admits the breach. After the repentance procedures, the *saṃgha* member is considered rehabilitated and other members are not permitted to bring up these breaches again, or to ridicule or discriminate against him or her (based on that fault).

⁹ *Parivāsika* (波利婆沙) refers to prescribed punishments for covering up one's breach of the monastic rules.

If members ridicule or discriminate against a member who has repented in accordance with monastic code, then they themselves are deemed to have committed an offence. Within the *saṃgha* community, no one has special rights, and there is true equality, democracy, and rule of law; that is, the precepts set by the Buddha are put into practice. Such a practice is used to maintain the purity of each member and the *saṃgha* as a whole. In Early Buddhism, the original intention of repentance is the true meaning of repentance, and the repentance methods based on such intention are the most ideal. This is the same as the true meaning of the Buddha-dharma considered as primarily benefiting humans in this world, which is most ideal.

If One has a Fault One Must Repent, After Repentance then there is Happiness

Monastics should behave in accordance with the monastic precepts. If someone commits a breach (or fault, both of which translate to the Sanskrit word *āpatti*), he or she should repent. For example, the monastic precepts include avoidance of the ten unwholesome deeds, which are common to all Buddhists and non-Buddhists. If a person commits these unwholesome deeds, he or she will have faults due to having harmed others, and so he or she is considered unwholesome. This applies regardless of whether the person has taken the precepts and regardless of whether the person is a monastic or lay Buddhist. However, the regulations set by the Buddha aim to avoid this type of unwholesome behavior relating to moral standards, as well as to avoid breaches relating to living standards and organizational standards. Some of the regulations were laid down to avoid creating misunderstanding within society during the Buddha's time; that is, some rules were created to prevent criticisms from society. In order to maintain the harmony, happiness and purity of the *saṃgha*, many precepts were stipulated. Externally, these qualities of harmony, happiness and purity are conducive to enhancement of people's faith in Buddhism, and internally they contribute to the maintenance of peace that aids practice and realization of the truth. Accordingly, the aim of ensuring the righteous Dharma remains is possible to attain. Anyone who renounces his or her home life, undertakes full ordination and enters the *saṃgha* is responsible for abiding by the precepts; just as the citizens of a country are responsible for abiding by the laws of that country.

In Buddhism, when someone renounces his or her home life to undertake spiritual practice, there is no guarantee that the person will not commit a breach. If a breach is committed and the person covers it up and does not repent, then he or she knows no shame. These people need not be discussed further. Those monastics who sincerely want to practice and do know shame,

upon committing a breach their regret will increase and they will be unable to be at peace; just as in the ancient sayings: “internally they harbor guilt,” and “the conscience is uneasy.” Thus, committing a breach is not only a fault, but also a hindrance to spiritual practice. Therefore, the purpose of repentance in the *saṃgha* is that someone sincerely states what he or she has done wrong in front of either the *saṃgha* or a single member, which is to seek an opportunity to be rehabilitated. Upon properly undertaking repentance procedures, the person may eliminate the mental hindrances and restore peace and happiness, which then allows him or her to continue in spiritual practice. Therefore, it is said, “If one has a fault one must repent, after repentance one then gains happiness.”

The repentance procedures for monastics are unlike the common practices of repenting for unwholesome karma in past lives. The purpose of the monastic repentance procedure is for a monastic to repent his or her present faults or breaches. Those who earnestly renounce home life and undertake spiritual practice for the sake of attaining liberation should repent properly when they have made a mistake; that is, they should sincerely and verbally admit to the error in front of another person. In a *saṃgha*, a person should develop a mind that is righteous and pure, which is like the saying, “There is nothing that one cannot reveal to others.” When a monastic diligently practices in accordance with the Dharma, while he or she may have committed many unwholesome deeds prior to renunciation, they will not be hindered in their spiritual progression by these bad karmas; a person may awaken to the true Dharma and attain liberation. This is the true meaning behind the monastic repentance in Early Buddhism.

The Meaning of Karma

Physical Karma, Verbal Karma and Mental Karma

When we say “repent for hindrances of karma,” the word *karma* is taken from the Sanskrit for “action” (and also “function”). According to teachings from Early Buddhism, behaviors of the body and language are initiated through mental volition (*cetanā*). In other words, “How does one go about dealing with any matter or object one encounters?” Through the function of volition, which accords with consciousness, a person takes consideration and decision, and then calls into action the body and language to deal with that matter or object. These actions of body and language are physical karma and verbal karma, respectively, and the internal workings of volition that accord with consciousness are called “mental karma.” Physical, verbal and mental karmas are collectively known as the “three karmas.”

Wholesome Karma and Unwholesome Karma

These types of internal mental activities and their manifested physical and verbal activities are also found in the buddhas. Just as in the “eighteen qualities unique to buddhas”, there are the “physical karma that accords with wisdom,” “verbal karma that accords with wisdom,” and “the mental karma that accords with wisdom.” The three karmas are in accord with wisdom, and so every activity is a wholesome action that accords with the Dharma. In the course of creating these three karmas, if internally the mind develops greed, hatred, incorrect views or other negative mental factors, such that physical and verbal karmas are manifested that are harmful toward others, or to oneself and others, these are considered unwholesome karmas, or bad karmas. If the mind does not develop greed, hatred, or no shame, and develops repentance and other positive mental factors, such that there are manifested physical and language karmas that are beneficial toward others, or oneself and others, then these are considered wholesome karmas, or good karma.

Karmic Forces Do Not Cease Until After They Ripen

These types of wholesome and unwholesome karmas, in the form of physical and language activities, manifest what is in a person’s mind, and therefore they are called “manifested karma” (*vijñapti-karman*). These types of wholesome and unwholesome activities can affect other people — family, society, country. Hence, unwholesome activities must be dealt with by a country’s legal system. These activities can also profoundly affect the self: a person’s own physical and mental activities will leave behind latent karmic forces. These wholesome and unwholesome latent karmic forces are named “being,” and are also called “forming,” in the sense of existent and active aspects in the doctrine of “dependent co-arising.” Wholesome and unwholesome karmas that exist internally and latently are called “unmanifested karma” (*avijñapti-karman*). In the cycle of birth and death, the results (*vipāka*) of these unmanifested karmas can be temporarily halted. Nonetheless, until these karmas have come to fruition, they will always remain latent, and therefore it is said that “karmic forces do not cease.”

Sentient beings lack true wisdom, and therefore all our actions are affected by the defilement centered on selfishness. Accordingly, wholesome and unwholesome karmas all eventually must come to fruition — as results. Wholesome karma yields the delightful fruits of the human and heavenly realms, while unwholesome karma leads to the result of suffering in the three evil destinies of the realms of hell, animal, and hungry ghost. Since the time without beginning,

sentient beings have continually created karma: some light, some severe, others wholesome and yet others unwholesome. Of these innumerable past karmic forces, only a small portion has come to fruition and been exhausted, yet we continue to create karma. The amount of karma sentient beings have created since time without beginning is truly numerous and manifold. Fortunately, in the process of arising and falling of wholesome and unwholesome karmic forces, the stronger forces will probably ripen in the future (stronger karmic forces ripen first). Therefore, we do not have to worry about how much unwholesome karma we have created in the past. What is important is to undertake more wholesome karma now. As wholesome karma grows, so does unwholesome karma relatively decrease, and naturally a person will most likely reap delightful results in the future.

Ending the Cycle of Birth and Death: Cutting Off Defilements and Ceasing to Create New Karma

However, even if we attain a human or heavenly rebirth in the coming future life, once the results from those wholesome karmic forces come to an end there remains the likelihood of regressing to the evil destinies. This is because past karmic forces are innumerable and manifold, and we continue to create new bad karma. So how might we gain complete liberation from this cycle of birth and death? This question goes to the key concern of the Buddha-dharma. Two fundamental aspects about the key concern are: (1) Why do the actions of sentient beings create karmic forces that can result in birth and death? (2) Why do the karmas of the buddhas and the *arhats*, who also have manifested physical, language and mental karmas, not lead to future results? In fact, karmic forces come about through causes and conditions. When the fundamental defilement (*kleśa*) of a self-view (*satkāya-dṛṣṭi*) is lacking, the actions will not create the karmic forces that yield cyclic existence. As for the pre-existing karmic forces, without defilements as the triggers, they are also unable to result in future births and deaths. In short, defilements have two functions that affect wholesome and unwholesome karmic forces. One is to create karmic forces and the other is to be the trigger that enables karmic forces to result in births and deaths. Therefore, when defilements are cut off, no new karmic forces will be created. In addition, the countless karmic forces of the past will lose the opportunity to bear fruit.

In the teachings of Early Buddhism, the disciples were taught to avoid creating unwholesome karma. But the innumerable wholesome and unwholesome karmas created in the past should

not be of concern. Buddhist practitioners should take note of how to cultivate the spiritual path so as to cut off defilements and realize the truth. After realizing the truth and cutting off defilements, a person will definitely attain liberation from the suffering of birth and death. For example, in fascicle 31 of the *Samyuktāgama* it says:

When a disciple of the Buddha accomplishes right view, sees the truth and cuts off self-view, then that disciple has already cut off [what needs to be cut off] and knows [what needs to be known]. The fundamental [defilement] has been cut off, just like a palm tree being chopped down, and therefore it will not grow again. The suffering that is eliminated is countless like the water of a great lake while the suffering that remains is like a few drops on the end of a hair.

The amount of past karma we have created that can result in future lives is countless. When disciples of the Buddha accomplish right view and are able to gain insight into the truth (such as the Four Noble Truths), then they will end defilements such as *satkāya-dṛṣṭi* (translated as “self-view”), which are the fundamental causes for future births and deaths. As a result, all those countless past karmic forces will lose their ability to bring forth new fruits. What is left is just seven rounds of birth and death in the human and heavenly realms. This is like when a great lake dries up and all that is left are a few drops of water. According to the *sūtras*, someone is destined to attain liberation within at most seven rounds of birth and death.¹⁰ If the person continues to practice diligently, it is possible to attain the final fruit of *arhathood* in this very life. It is said in the *sūtras* that:

After [one] truly understands [these five spiritual faculties], the three defilements are cut off. What are the three defilements? They are self-view, improper attachment to precepts, and doubt [about the truth]. Such [a person] attains (the fruit of) srotāpanna (Stream Enterer) and will no longer take rebirth in the evil destinies.

¹⁰ The phrase “seven rounds of birth and death” refers to seven sets of birth and death in the heavenly and human realms, so it actually totals 14 more lives, not seven lifetimes.

One is certain to attain saṃbodhi (enlightenment); that is, after at most seven rounds of lives left in the heaven and human realms, one will come to the very edge of suffering.

Repenting for Karmic Hindrances

Be Careful to Avoid Creating Unwholesome Karma, and Repent if a Fault is Created

When monastics contravene the precepts, if they conceal the faults and do not properly repent (openly admit to the faults), then they will experience worry and unease in their minds, and their faults will become even greater. This is like a rotting item that is hidden in a jar and placed somewhere away from sunlight and fresh air; the item will simply continue to rot. Therefore, if those monastics who contravene the precepts can properly repent by openly admitting and confessing to their faults, in order to rehabilitate themselves, their faults will not become a hindrance to their attainment of sagehood. However, the karmic forces created by contravening the precepts do not disappear as a result of repentance. Nonetheless, concerning the karmic forces, in the course of learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma, monastic disciples of the Buddha must carefully avoid creating unwholesome karmas and repent properly if they contravene the precepts, so as to diligently continue practicing the spiritual path.

Hindrances Due to Defilements, Karmic Forces and Results

In the Early Buddhism era the attitude toward unwholesome karma was like what is expressed in the verse:

*If a person commits a grave fault,
But practices wholesomeness to extinguish [that fault],
That person is able to illuminate the world,
Just like the full moon rising out from the clouds.*

Among unwholesome karmas, there are some that are extremely grave, and these are referred to as “hindrances due to karmic forces.” The *Mahāvibhāsā Śāstra* quotes the *sūtras*:

For sentient beings who are in the six conditions, though they hear the Dharma and Vinaya, which is what the Buddha has awakened to and taught, yet they are unable to attain the state of distancing themselves from

defilements and to attain the clear vision of Dharma¹¹ that sees the truth of all dharmas. What are the six conditions? They are (1) having hindrances due to defilements, (2) having hindrances due to karmic forces, (3) having hindrances due to results of past karmas, (4) having no faith [in the Buddha-dharma], (5) having no desire [to learn the Buddha-dharma], and (6) lacking in wisdom.¹²

The above quotation from the *sūtras* is parallel to the content in the *Āṅguttaranikāya*, Chapter Six (AN. 6.86). Based on the quote from the *sūtras*, subsequently the three hindrances became technical terms: hindrances from defilements (*kleśāvaraṇa*), hindrances from karma (*karmāvaraṇa*), and hindrances from results (*vipākāvaraṇa*). If someone has any of these three hindrances, then although he or she may hear the righteous Dharma and practice the spiritual path, that person will be unable to awaken to the truth and be free from defilements to attain liberation.

Karmic Hindrances Specifically Refers to the Five Extreme Faults

The content of karmic hindrances in Early Buddhism includes the five kinds of faults that bring the perpetrator immediate results (*ānantarya*), which is commonly referred to as “the five extreme faults.” These are (1) to kill one’s own mother, (2) to kill one’s own father, (3) to kill an *arhat*, (4) to create a schism in a harmonious *saṃgha*, and (5) to cause the Buddha to bleed out of evil intentions. In ordinary worldly teachings, killing one’s own parents is a most serious crime. In terms of killing an *arhat*, an *arhat* is a sage who has attained the final liberation. Creating a schism in a harmonious *saṃgha* is like what Devadatta did.¹³ Devadatta broke up a *saṃgha* community and encouraged monastics to abandon Buddhism. To cause the Buddha to bleed out of evil intentions is like what Devadatta did when he pushed a boulder over a cliff for the purpose of crushing the Buddha to death. The result was that the Buddha’s toe was injured and bled. The last three extreme faults are the most serious crimes in terms of

¹¹ Clear vision of Dharma (淨法眼) is a level of wisdom that allows the practitioner to properly discern the Four Noble Truths, and emptiness.

¹² Note that condition 6 惡慧 (Sanskrit, *duḥprajñā*/ Pali, *duppañña*) can mean, variously, lacking in wisdom, wrong understanding, undiscerning, weak discernment, poor discernment, or lacking in discernment.

¹³ Devadatta was the Buddha’s cousin who had joined the Buddhist monastic order, but later he wanted to take over the Buddha’s role as leader and tried many ways to kill the Buddha and entice other monastic members to follow him instead.

transcendental teachings. Having committed any one of these karmic hindrances in this life, upon death a person cannot avoid the certainty of immediate rebirth in the most miserable hells, and therefore they are called the karmas that bring people immediate retribution. Ordinarily, karmic forces ebb and rise depending on the wholesome and unwholesome deeds undertaken, and their results may not come forth in the immediate next life. However, these five extreme faults will certainly bring about the corresponding retributions in the immediate next life.

Learning the Dharma and Repentance Can Weaken the Strength of Karma with Immediate Results

Next, we look at a real example of a lay Buddhist disciple who committed a fault that brought immediate results. As recorded in the *Sūtra on the Fruition of the Śramaṇa*, King Ajātaśatru had committed the extreme fault of killing his father in order to gain the throne. In the king's heart he felt much anxiety and unease. One night, the king went to see the Buddha and the Buddha taught him the Dharma. After hearing the teachings, King Ajātaśatru repented and took refuge in the Triple Gem. The Buddha then spoke to the king:

You have been engrossed in the five desires and so you killed your father. Now that you [sincerely] repented in accordance with the noble Dharma, you will gain benefit. On account of sympathy for you, I acknowledge your repentance.

After King Ajātaśatru returned to the palace, the Buddha addressed the congregation of *bhikṣus*:

If King Ajātaśatru had not killed his father, he would have attained the clear vision of Dharma upon hearing these teachings just now. Nevertheless, as King Ajātaśatru has repented for his fault, the karmic force due to the extreme fault has reduced and become weakened.

The reason King Ajātaśatru was not able to awaken to the truth is due to the hindrance of that extreme fault of killing his father. This is the meaning of the word “hindrances” in the term “karmic hindrances.” Although those who have created karmic hindrances are unable to realize the truth in this life, if they can repent sincerely they still can gain some benefits from repentance. Just like King Ajātaśatru, who upon hearing the Buddha's teachings and repenting, gained some benefit after all. In the *Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya* of the Mahāsāṃghika school, it says:

The Buddha specified that King Ajātaśatru, son of Queen Vaidehī of Rājagṛha, is the foremost one among lay disciples of the Śrāvakayāna path, who possess the quality of amūlakayā-śraddhā.

Amūlakayā-śraddhā is possibly referring to faith in the Triple Gem, which is strong but not yet unshakable. When someone who has committed extreme faults hears the Dharma and repents, he or she can still gain some relief from extreme karma. If the force of extreme karma is weakened, can someone still be reborn in the hells in the immediate next life? In the *Sūtra of King Ajātaśatru's Questions Concerning the Five Extreme Faults*, it says that:

Although the king of Magadha killed his father, he will shortly take rebirth in the palace of the Four Mahārājas (heavenly kings) after this life comes to an end. He will definitely take rebirth in the hells in the immediate next, but his stay in the hells will be [short] like the bounce of ball.

In other words, even though King Ajātaśatru had repented, he still had to bear the fruit of rebirth in the hells. However, once in the hells, his life there was short and he quickly gained release, just like a bouncing ball that rises as soon as it touches the ground. In the *King Ajātaśatru Sūtra* of the *Mahāyāna* text, it says that “the extreme fault of Ajātaśatru has a light retribution,” and also that “although Ajātaśatru is reborn in the hells, he [shortly] gains rebirth in the heavens.” From this example we can see that the retribution of rebirth in the hells due to extreme karma is certain. However, after sincere repentance, that karmic force is greatly weakened, and the person can quickly gain release from the hells. The idea concerning repentance for karmic hindrances in Early Buddhism originally is as such.

Teachings on Repentance in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism

Within the *Mahāyāna* teachings that emphasize faith, “repenting for karmic hindrances” has become a means by which to practice on the Buddha path. The teachings on repentance in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism include many unique aspects. Some are outlined below.

Repenting to the Present Buddhas of the Ten Directions

Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem and Upholding the Five Precepts

The previous section explained the repentance procedures specific to the *saṃgha* community. But how do lay Buddhists repent? Ordinary people whose actions are criminal are dealt with

through the laws of their country or the usual conventions of their tribe (society). Buddhism has no power to intervene in non-Buddhists' behaviors. However, if a person takes refuge in the Triple Gem and becomes a disciple of the Buddha, then he or she should be dealt with under the rules of Buddhism. The essence of taking refuge in the Triple Gem is faith. When someone develops right faith he or she should also behave in wholesome ways. In other words, the person should also uphold the five precepts of the lay Buddhist (*upāsaka/upāsikā*). Taking refuge in the Triple Gem signifies an undertaking to uphold the five precepts. In the very early days of Buddhism the five precepts were not yet formally established, but those who took refuge in the Triple Gem would naturally behave properly.

The first four items of the five precepts are: (1) no killing, with the focus on no killing of human beings; (2) no stealing; (3) no sexual misconduct, which relates to all sexual activity that is forbidden by law or tribal traditions; and (4) no false speech, which primarily relates to a prohibition on making false statements. Contravening any of these four precepts will also contravene secular laws and tribal customs. Disciples of the Buddha who have right faith in the Triple Gem would naturally abide by these precepts and would uphold them even more strictly. The Buddha-dharma is founded on wisdom, and therefore (5) no taking of intoxicants is prescribed. This precept is to nurture clarity and rationality, and to avoid situations in which the mind can become confused and irrational.

Over the course of the Buddha-dharma's transmission, the standard for undertaking the precepts was relaxed, which may be due to a purpose of making Buddhism appealing to a broader audience. Such a relaxation of the standard may also be regarded as a decline in the Buddhist disciples' quality. In this case, the standard was relaxed to the extent that someone who took refuge in the Triple Gem was not required to take up the five precepts, and those who did take up the precepts were permitted to uphold only one of the five precepts. This is the practice promoted in the Mahāsāṃghika school, and is evidenced by its teachings, including the *Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya* and the *Ekottarikāgama*. Accordingly, there are two major institutions in Buddhism: one requires Buddhists to uphold the full five precepts upon taking refuge, while the other permits Buddhists to take refuge without upholding any precept, or only partially upholding the precepts.

Lay Buddhist Repenting in Front of Buddha or Monastics

Those who vow to take up the five precepts must uphold them for life.¹⁴ If a lay Buddhist contravenes any of the precepts, how does he or she repent? For a lay Buddhist, there are also the eight precepts of “staying close” (*upavāsa*). That is, a lay Buddhist must vow to live close to the *saṃgha* and to live a pure lifestyle, like the monastics, for a day and night. Although these eight precepts are upheld temporarily, it is possible that someone who vows to uphold the eight precepts might also contravene them during that day and night. If so, how should he or she repent?

Although the lay disciples of the Buddha are called “the assembly of *upāsakas* (male) and *upāsikās* (female),” they have complete freedom to live in accordance with the Buddha-dharma. This is unlike the monastic disciples, who are organized into a *saṃgha* according to the monastic code. Moreover, lay Buddhists are also unlike followers of Western theist religions, who are incorporated into the organized group. When lay Buddhists contravene the precepts, they repent on their own initiative. Even though their faults may vary in degree of gravity, they do not have different commensurate methods of repentance such as the repentance methods that apply to *saṃgha* members.

The *Saṃyuktāgama* has a record: a Nirgrantha’s disciple wanted to refute the Buddha’s teachings. After hearing the Buddha’s answers, this Nirgrantha’s disciple repented in front of the Buddha and said, “Oh Buddha! I now repent. I was stupid, ignorant and unable to discern the good from the bad. I was dishonest and tried to deceive the Buddha, I have lied.” This example is similar to the earlier example given of King Ajātaśatru, who repented in front of the Buddha for his extreme transgression of killing his father. Both situations relate to a time when the Buddha was alive, and are actual examples of repentance in front of the Buddha. Lay Buddhists repented in front of the Buddha when he was alive. Likewise, after the Buddha passed away, lay Buddhists naturally repented in front of a Buddhist monastic; this should be considered reasonable.

¹⁴ In Buddhism, when someone vows to uphold the precepts, there is a precept substance within them; that is, a protecting force that arises. The five precepts are meant to be upheld until the end of the person’s life and, at this point, the accompanying protecting force subsides.

The Procedure for Taking the Eight Precepts and Repentance

According to the teachings in the Buddhist canon, at the moment when someone takes a vow to take refuge in the Triple Gem, upholding the five precepts is also considered part of that vow. Therefore, the meaning of repentance is not obvious during the procedure of taking refuge and the five precepts. However, the eight cleansing precepts of *upavāsa* have a very close relationship to repentance. In Buddhism there is the activity of *poṣadha*, where every half-lunar month *saṃgha* members gather to purify themselves and recite the *prātimokṣa* (monastic precepts). The practice of cleansing together every half-lunar month, as a means to live in a pure spiritual way, is called *upāvasatha* (also called *poṣadha*). In fact, this practice originated from the sacrificial ceremonies described in the Indian *Vedas*. During the lifetime of the Buddha, the Indian theistic religions held events to conduct *poṣadha* gatherings as part of their religious activities on the 8th, 14th, and 15th day of each half-lunar month, which is also referred to as “the six cleansing days” (each lunar month). To adapt to these worldly traditions Buddhism also has the activity of *poṣadha*. At the beginning, during the first 12 years after Buddha attained perfect enlightenment, he only taught the verse that begins with “carefully guarding the [actions of] body and speech.” This was the content of *poṣadha*. Over time, Buddha gradually prescribed monastic precepts separately. Every half-lunar month, in the evening, the *saṃgha* members assembled to conduct *poṣadha* by reciting the *prātimokṣa* (commonly referred to as “precept recitation”). Lay Buddhists generally attended the monasteries on the six cleansing days to take up the eight cleansing precepts (this was their *poṣadha*) and the monastics would share with them Dharma teachings.

The word *poṣadha* was translated by Venerable Xuanzang as “nurturing,” while Venerable Yijing translated it as “nurturing purity.” In the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayayasamgraha*, *poṣadha* is explained as “nurturing wholesomeness on account of maintaining one’s mind” and “developing wholesomeness and getting rid of unwholesomeness.” These explanations are similar in meaning to teachings in the *Sūtra on the Mother of Vinaya*, which says that “cessation is the meaning of *poṣadha*” and “purity is the meaning of *poṣadha*.”¹⁵ The ancient Chinese

¹⁵ *Sūtra on the Mother of Vinaya*, fascicle 3 says, “What is the meaning of *poṣadha*? Cessation is the meaning of *poṣadha*. [It] can cease breaches of morality, defilements, and all unwholesome deeds; this is the meaning of *poṣadha*. [Also], purity is the meaning of *poṣadha*.”

《毘尼母經》卷3：「何故名布薩？斷名布薩。能斷所犯、能斷煩惱、斷一切不善法，名布薩義。清淨名布薩。」(CBETA, T24, no. 1463, pages 814b16–18).

masters aptly translated *poṣadha* as “cleaning;” that is, “cleaning means to purify the mind.” *Poṣadha* originally was a religious lifestyle in which people purified their minds. The procedure for taking the eight cleansing precepts is explained in the *Ekottarikāgama* as follows.

1. On the 8th, 14th and 15th day [of a half-lunar month], sons of good family and daughters of good family head to where monastics or elder *bhikṣu* resides and take the oath that they themselves will follow how the arhats live and resolutely maintain such a vow.

2. On the (8th,) 14th and 15th day of a [half-lunar] month, the time of reciting the precepts and cleansing, sons and daughters of good family go to the four-fold assembly and vow, “Today is the day of cleansing, I vow to uphold the eight cleansing precepts, I sincerely ask the venerable to teach me about the precepts.” Then, on behalf of the four-fold assembly the monk should immediately teach them the practice of the eight cleansing precepts.

The *sūtras* say that on the days of *poṣadha* lay Buddhists go to “where the monastics or an elder *bhikṣu* resides” or “go to the four-fold assembly.” In essence, both accounts have the same meaning. When lay Buddhists take up the eight cleansing precepts, the ceremony is conducted in the presence of the four-fold assembly: the two-fold assembly of lay Buddhists and the two-fold assembly of monastics (that is, a total of seven-fold assemblies in detail).¹⁶ However, only one *bhikṣu*, or elder *bhikṣu*, confers the precepts and teachings. This is similar to the procedure for taking the full monastic ordination, where the precepts are conferred by the three precept masters, but in essence the precepts are attained from the whole congregation (which is the position of the *Mahāsāṃghika* school). That is, the precepts are conferred by all the monastics present at the ceremony. Likewise, when lay disciples take up the practice of the eight cleansing precepts, although only one *bhikṣu*, or elder *bhikṣu*, confers the precepts, the eight cleansing precepts are attained from the four-fold assembly because the procedure is carried out in the presence of the four-fold assembly. All members present in the four-fold

¹⁶ The two-fold lay Buddhist assemblies consist of the male assembly and female assembly of lay disciples. Similarly, the two-fold assembly of the monastics consists of the male and female assemblies. This is what the four-fold assembly refers to. Further, the male monastic assembly consist of the *bhikṣu* (fully ordained) and *śrāmaṇera* (novice) assemblies, while the female monastic assembly consists of *bhikṣuṇī* (fully ordained), *śikṣamāṇā* (probationary), and *śrāmaṇerikā* (novice) assemblies. So, in total there are two lay Buddhist assemblies and five monastics assemblies, making a total of seven assemblies.

assembly must have taken up life-long precepts (the five precepts are also a type of life-long precept).¹⁷ The account that “[the eight cleansing precepts] are to be attained from the seven-fold assembly in all cases,” found in *Mahāvibhāsā Śāstra*, has the same meaning as discussed above.¹⁸

The *Ekottarikāgama* says that in the procedure where lay Buddhists take up the eight cleansing precepts, before the elder monk confers the precepts, he must first teach them to repent. Afterwards, the elder teaches about the eight cleansing precepts. According to the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, the elder monk first conducts the ceremony of taking refuge in the Triple Gem for the lay Buddhists, next he teaches them to repent and then he confers the eight precepts and the rule about no consumption of food after midday. In terms of repentance, the exegesis says:

I, so and so, have unwholesome karma of body, unwholesome karma of speech, unwholesome karma of thought ... from this life and from past lives. I have such faults and so I now sincerely repent. Upholding the eight precepts after cleansing the body, speech and mind is the meaning of poṣadha.

The Origins of Why Lay Buddhist Repent In Front of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions

In the *Sūtra on Upholding the Ten Wholesome Precepts*, of which the translator is unknown, the procedure for lay Buddhists to take the eight precepts starts with taking refuge in the Triple Gem, then repentance and then taking up the precepts. Precepts are taken in front of a virtuous one, a senior *bhikṣu*, while repentance is carried out “before the buddhas and *arhats* of the three time periods, and the senior *bhikṣus* ... They sincerely confess with full prostration and repent for all their faults. This is the practice of *poṣadha* that lay Buddhists undertake.” The procedure has already embodied the meaning of *Mahāyāna* repentance. For lay Buddhists, the procedure of repentance and taking the eight precepts normally occurs on the six cleansing days of each

¹⁷ Life-long precepts relate to precepts that a person vows to uphold until the end of this life. The monastic precepts are such types, so too are the full five precepts.

¹⁸ *Mahāvibhāsā Śāstra*, fascicle 24, “Question: From whom should one attain the *upavāsa* [eight] precepts? Answer: From the seven-fold assembly in all cases and no other. Why? Because if there is anyone who has not taken up a life-long precept, that person is not worthy of being a precept teacher.”

《阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論》卷 124：「問近住律儀從誰應受。答從七眾受皆得非餘。所以者何。若無盡壽戒者。則不堪任為戒師故。」(CBETA, T27, no. 1545, pages 647b23–26).

lunar month. The procedure is that lay Buddhists take up precepts before the four-fold assembly and a senior *bhikṣu* confers the precepts and teachings. However, over time and in the course of Buddhism's transmission, the procedure of the (eight) precepts of *upavāsa* clearly transformed to the extent that a lay Buddhist who had taken a life-long precept (full five precepts) may confer the eight precepts. Therefore, the *Mahāvibhāsā Śāstra* says that the eight precepts can be attained "from the seven-fold assembly in all cases." This means that anyone who belongs to the seven-fold assembly can confer the eight precepts. In the *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* (*Exegesis on Establishment of Truth*), which is dated to around the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, there is an account that says, "if there is no one (who can confer the precepts), one can bear in mind and say out loud, 'I uphold the eight precepts.'" Upon making the oath, the person completes the procedure of taking the eight precepts. Over the course of Buddhism's propagation, this eight-precept practice, which is prescribed to further enhance lay Buddhists' practice, has been liberally adapted by some Buddhist schools. As a result, it is even possible to repent and take the precepts without the involvement of *saṃgha* members (we could say: this heralds the beginning of "lay-person-centered Buddhism").

This adaptation could have been a result of some difficulties during those times. For example, some people may have been very old and wanted to take the *upavāsa* precepts but were unable to attend the monasteries to do so. Therefore, an adaptation allowed them to attain the eight precepts from a lay Buddhist who has taken the life-long precepts (full five precepts), or allowed them to just "bear in mind and say out loud, 'I uphold the eight precepts'". In such cases, they need not repent before the *saṃgha*. At that time, faith in the present buddhas of the ten directions was flourishing and so *Mahāyāna* Buddhists repented to the buddhas of the ten directions instead. This is a very plausible cause for this adaptation.

Developments Leading Monastics to Forgo the Saṃgha

In terms of the monastics, the longstanding practice was to undertake repentance in front of the *saṃgha* community in accordance with the *vinaya*. However, difficulties also arose. An example is when, upon contravening the *saṃghāvaśeṣa* precept, someone immediately wants to confess and repent without hiding his or her fault but has no chance to do so. This is because contravention of any *saṃghāvaśeṣa* precept requires 20 pure *bhikṣus* to conduct the formal ceremony of confession for monastics so that the perpetrator is able to restore purity. In fact, some places do not have enough monastics and so are unable to conduct the formal ceremony

of confession for monastics. Notably, when Buddhism flourished, more and more monastics did not possess good character. Accordingly, it became difficult to gather 20 pure *bhikṣus*. In the *vinaya* it is said that temporarily suspending the formal ceremony of confession for monastics is permissible. The ceremony will take place when all the conditions are met. Although the *saṃgha* may temporarily suspend the formal ceremony of confession for offending monastics, the guilt that the monastic at fault experiences remains unresolved. Is this not a situation where someone wants to repent but has no avenue to do so? This is the most likely reason monastics began to abandon the methods of the *saṃgha* community and instead conducted repentance toward the buddhas of the ten directions. The *Sūtra on the Dharma Mirror* says:

At a time when there is no buddha and no Dharma teacher and one has no chance to meet the noble monastics, one should pay respects to all the buddhas of the ten directions [as repentance].

In the same *sūtra*, the “three types of Dharma practice,” which refers to repentance, appreciative joy, and requesting that the Buddha give Dharma teachings, are mentioned together with paying respects to the buddhas of the ten directions. Why should one pay respects to the buddhas of the ten directions? Because “at that time there is no buddha,” that is, the Buddha has already passed away. Although there are stupas that house the Buddha’s relics, their function is mainly for people to make offerings and create merit. “No Dharma teacher” means that no one understands the *sūtras* well enough to provide teachings on the *sūtras*. “One has no chance to meet the noble monastics” means that someone is unable to meet the noble monastics who have attained one of the eight states within the four fruits on the *Śrāvaka* path.¹⁹ After the Buddha passed away, the righteous Dharma was in decline and the monastics only had monastic appearance without the required quality. At that time, it just so happened that the teachings on the buddhas of the ten directions were flourishing and therefore monastic disciples naturally undertook repentance and other practices by paying respects to the buddhas of the ten directions.

¹⁹ The four pairs and eight states of attainment on the *Śrāvaka* path are: first fruit of *srotāpanna* (stream enterer), second fruit of *sakṛdāgāmin* (once returner), third fruit of *anāgāmin* (non-returner) and the final fourth fruit of *arhat*. Each of the four fruits contains two states, which are the state of entering and the state of complete attainment, hence the description of four pairs and eight states.

Repenting for Unwholesome Karma Created in Present and Past Lives

The Agamas and Vinayas Focus on Repenting for Unwholesome Karma Created in the Present Life

The original intention of repentance in Early Buddhism is to repent for the unwholesome karma created in the present life. That is, knowing that we have made a mistake, we confess to the fault so as to seek repentance for it. Regardless of whether the instruction on repentance is found in the teachings on regulation (*vinaya*) or in the teachings on cultivation (*Agamas*), the common point was to repent for the unwholesome karma committed in this present life, although the procedures for repentance were not the same for monastic and lay disciples.

Mahāyāna Teachings Focus on Repenting for Unwholesome Karma Created in the Present and Countless Past Lives

Method of Repentance in the Verses on the Aspiration of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva

The repentance practice in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism does not only repent for the faults committed in this present life but also for the unwholesome karma committed since time without beginning. The widely known text, *Verses on the Aspiration of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva*, says:

*For all the unwholesome karma I have already committed,
All arising from greed, hatred and ignorance,
All born out through bodily actions, language and thoughts,
I [now] confess to all [these faults].*

*With all the merits I have accumulated,
From paying respects, making offerings and confessing my faults [to the
buddhas],
From appreciative joy in others' merits and requesting [Dharma teachings],
All [these merits] I dedicate to [all beings for the attainment of unsurpassed]
bodhi.*

The text, *Verses on the Aspiration of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva*, was translated by Amoghavajra in the Tang dynasty. In the 40 fascicle version, the *Flower Sūtra* (also known as the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*), the line “For all the unwholesome karma I have already committed” is translated as “For all the unwholesome karma I have committed in the past,” and the corresponding explanation says, “from my past since beginningless eons.” The words “confess”

and “confessing my faults” are translated as “repent” and “repent and remove [faults].” We can see that the repentance found in the ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, which is recorded in the *Flower Sūtra*, intends to repent for unwholesome karmas committed since time without beginning. The words “confess” and “confessing my faults” are still verbal admittance of faults, which is the original meaning of openly admitting faults and not concealing them. Since time before beginning, in every life sentient beings have committed unwholesome karmas (and also carried out wholesome karma), which is universally acknowledged by all Buddhists.

However, what types of karma have been carried out in the past? No one really knows what the ordinary person has done in past lives. So, if someone does not know what faults he or she has committed, how then might this person repent? In the *Verses on the Aspiration of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva*, all faults are put in a nutshell; that is to say, all unwholesome karmas are considered no other than those driven by the defilements of greed, hatred, and ignorance (these three defilements encompass all defilements), and are borne out in bodily actions, language and thoughts. Therefore, in front of the buddhas of the ten directions, a person can openly confess his or her faults in this manner, in order to repent.

Repentance Practice in the *Triskandhaka Sūtra* (*Sūtra on Repentance Taught for Śāriputra*)

In terms of the repentance practice of Early *Mahāyāna*, according to the *Sūtra on Repentance Taught for Śāriputra*, for example, repentance is to confess to the buddhas of the ten directions. The person first states his or her faults, which are due to the compulsion of greed, hatred, and ignorance, which means that defilements propelled the creation of unwholesome deeds. The person also states his or her ignorance of the Buddha, Dharma, and *saṃgha*, as well as what was good and bad. Next, the person openly confesses the unwholesome karmas committed since time before beginning. The unwholesome karmas include:

1. Causing a buddha to bleed out of bad intentions, defaming the righteous Dharma, causing a schism in a harmonious *saṃgha*, killing an *arhat*, and killing one’s father or mother.
2. Committing the ten unwholesome deeds; committing them personally; directing others to commit them or delighting in seeing others commit them.

3. Scolding, defaming, conducting deceptive trade practices, and aggravating sentient beings, as well as being unfilial to one's own parents.
4. Stealing objects from a stupa, stealing from the *saṃgha*, destroying Buddhist scriptures and regulations, disregarding or contravening a master and *ācārya*'s (spiritual teacher) teachings.
5. Insulting noble practitioners of the three vehicles, verbally abusing a buddha with harmful intentions, and declaring the true teachings as false, and vice versa.

The contents of point 1 include the five extreme faults, which are most severe. In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism there is the additional extreme fault of defaming the scriptures. For example, in the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*, it is said that “for those on the *Śrāvaka* path, if they commit one of the five extreme faults, the Buddha said that they will suffer in the hells for one eon. For those on the Bodhisattva path, if they destroy the *Mahāyāna* teachings, the (Buddha) said [they will be reborn in the hells and] when this world comes to an end, they will be reborn in another world's (hells) and [continue to] endure countless sufferings.” This is the same as what is taught in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, Chapter 41: Faith and Defamation.

The contents of point 2 are about the ten unwholesome deeds. These are the most common worldly bad deeds. The contents of point 3 consist of other bad worldly behaviors. The contents of point 4 relate to unwholesome deeds within Buddhism, which are carried out by monastics. The contents of point 5 relate to the attacks on the Buddha, Dharma, and *saṃgha* by non-Buddhists. All these types of unwholesome karma, created since time without beginning, were in fact unwholesome deeds that *Mahāyāna* Buddhists faced at that time. At present there are buddhas in the ten directions, and therefore *Mahāyāna* Buddhists confessed and repented to the buddhas of the ten directions. Even though they do not physically see the buddhas of the ten directions, these buddhas are omniscient and can know the offenders' faults and confession. These buddhas can accept an offender's repentance. Repentance has the important meaning that one hopes to “purify their karmic hindrances,”²⁰ and “hopes that [the results] from past faults can be born out leniently in this present life.” Also, someone hopes that in future he or

²⁰ See the *sūtra* titled *Removing Karmic Hindrances* 《滅業障經》. This text is also called the *Bodhisattva Treasury Sūtra* 《菩薩藏經》 (CBETA, T24, no. 1491).

she will not be reborn in the three evil destinies or into the eight difficulties (this should be translated as the eight leisureless situations),²¹ and instead is able to be reborn in the human (or heavenly) realm and continue to learn and practice the Buddha's teachings.

The Underlying Purpose of Repentance in Early Buddhism

In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, repentance to the buddhas of the ten directions is undertaken daily and six times a day. In Early Buddhism, the original intention was that Buddhists' need only repent for any unwholesome karma created in this present life. The person repents immediately or soon after he or she contravenes any precept so that the fault does not become a hindrance to the practice of the noble path. Within the monastic repentance, it also had the purpose of maintaining the purity of the *saṃgha*. As for the unwholesome karmas from past lives, it could be said that there is no need to deal with them. What was essential was abstaining from unwholesome deeds and cultivating wholesome deeds in the present life so that the person is able to tame and end afflictions. If afflictions do not arise or were tamed and destroyed, then the three karmas of body, language and mind would certainly be undefiled, and the person would be able to cultivate wholesomeness and accomplish the noble path. Once the noble path was attained, then at that time the countless past karmic forces would lose the ability to come to fruition.

Origins of the Concept Regarding Mahāyāna Buddhism's Repentance for Unwholesome Karma Committed in Past Lives

The easy path in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism particularly emphasizes repentance for unwholesome karma committed since time without beginning and, with reference to the meaning of repentance, there is a significant difference between *Mahāyāna* Buddhism and Early Buddhism. It is true that *Mahāyāna* Buddhists' sincere and regular repentance to change their ways for the better has a good effect on abstinence from unwholesomeness and cultivating wholesomeness. However, in terms of the development of Buddhist doctrines, this teaching on repentance for unwholesome karma committed since time before beginning deserves our close attention.²² One possible reason to focus on repenting for past unwholesome karmas is that the teaching on

²¹ See the *Sūtra on the Buddha's Teaching of the Eight Leisureless and Leisured Situations*.

《佛說八無暇有暇經》(CBETA, T17, no. 756, page 590b11).

²² There are *Mahāyāna* teachings (such as the *Prajñā sūtras*) that do not promote the easy path but emphasize the practice of directly eliminating the fundamental defilements of attachment to an intrinsic self and all phenomena. These *Mahāyāna* teachings are wisdom inclined.

karmas and their results became prevalent within Buddhist circles. At first, in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, the second truth, on the origin of suffering, is about the causes and conditions leading to the suffering of cyclic existence. The cause is collectively said to be “craving,” or sometimes “ignorance and craving,” and this indicates that defilement is the cause of the suffering of cyclic existence. The doctrine on dependent co-arising is identical in terms of the cause for the suffering of cyclic existence. In the doctrine on dependent co-arising, “volitional formations” (meritorious volition, non-meritorious volition, and inactive volition) and “existence” are referred to as karma.²³

In the *sūtra* category of the *Samyuktāgama*, only the ten wholesome karmas and the ten unwholesome karmas are mentioned. Subsequently, the *Madhyamāgama* and *Ekottarikāgama* included a great many elaborations on karma. For example, the *Parrot Sūtra* and *Sūtra on the Analysis of Strong Karma* contained in the *Madhyamāgama* not only detail how karma brings forth the fruition of rebirth in the human realm, heavenly realm and so on, but also explain that within this human world the status of people, whether they are rich or poor, long-lived or die young, and so on, all of these are due to differences in their karmic result.

In the *geya* category of the *Samyuktāgama* it is said that in one of Mahānāma’s previous lives he was very miserly, and at one time he made an offering to a sage but regretted the offering he had just made; he even killed his half-brother to get hold of the brother’s wealth. Therefore, in this life, though he is rich, he does not have the opportunity to enjoy that wealth. Moreover, he has no son as heir and after his death his wealth will be turned over to the country and he will be reborn in the hells. Another example can be found in the *vyākaraṇa* category of the *Samyuktāgama*. Here, it records that Lakṣaṇa could see many different types of ghosts and also elaborates on the unwholesome karma these ghosts carried out in past lives. These types of stories about karma and its result are very popular. Furthermore, the *jātaka* and *avadāna* categories of canonical texts were widely propagated, and there are quite a few stories on the relationship between karma in past lives and the result in this present life.

²³ Volitional formations and existence here refer to the doctrine on the twelve links of dependent co-arising. Volitional formation is a mental activity while existence refers to the start of life, at the point of conception in the mother’s womb.

The concept of karma can be considered as universally accepted by Jainism and the main Indian religion of Brahmanism (although the explanation of karma in Buddhism is different from theirs). When the teachings on karma spread and became popular, ordinary followers' understandings of the teachings may have had some inclination toward the ideology of fate. An example is An Shigao, who went to China in the 2nd century CE to spread Buddhism. He said that in one of his previous lives, toward his later years, he "intentionally headed to Guangzhou to settle an old score from a previous life." When he reached Guangzhou, An Shigao came across a young man and was killed by that young man without any reason. In this life, he said, "I still have some remnant karmic result, so I now head to Guiji to settle that old score." After arriving in Guiji, there was unrest in the city and An Shigao again was accidentally killed. Stories like this, about karmic result, more or less incorporate the ideology of fate. When facing worldly human relations, economic livelihood, personal illness and so on, if a person thinks that everything is predestined due to past karma (and overlooks the influence of causes and conditions from this present life), then he or she will feel powerless about effecting any change, but at the same time may wish to change things for the better. Therefore, based on the repentance practice inherent in Early Buddhism and due to the impetus of the teaching that "all karma can be transformed, even severe karma can be changed," the thoughts about how to address and remove the past unwholesome karma may occur to Buddhists. This is likely to be the origin of the ideology on repenting for unwholesome karma committed in past lives.

Repenting to the Buddhas of the Ten Directions Six Times a Day: Washing the Filth of the Mind with Pure Dharma Water

The practice of repenting many times a day, introduced by *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, is the purification of a superstitious worldly practice. Karma, or more precisely, the unwholesome karma, is what should be purified, and this is a common belief of all Indian theistic religions. For example, there are brahmins who claim that they can cleanse themselves with holy water. They believe that bathing in (holy) water can cause their unwholesome karma to become purified. The *Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra*, for example, says:

... those who have delusive attachment to purity ... develop these [erroneous] views and establish these doctrines: 'if sentient beings bathe their body in the Sundarikā River then all of their unwholesome karma will be eradicated.

Likewise, if [sentient beings] bathe in the Bāhudā River, Gayā River, Sarasvatī River, Gaṅgā River and so on, they will eradicate all their unwholesome karmas. This is the best purification.'

This false doctrine in the *Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra* is based on the account in the *Samyuktāgama* and *Madhyamāgama*. The brahmins who claim that they can cleanse themselves with holy water believed that “the Sundarikā River is that which enables traverse (that is, attain liberation), auspiciousness (attainment of merits), and purity. Every time one bathes in this [river], one is able to eliminate all their unwholesome karma.” The Buddha told this brahmin:

*If one is truly pure in heart,
One can accomplish the precepts and always make offerings*

...

*If one can avoid killing and stealing,
Sexual misconduct and false speech,
And can believe in virtues and vices,
One will not envy others.
Dharma waters wash away defilements,
[One] should bathe in this place.*

...

*If one enters the river of noble precepts,
One can cleanse all defilements,
Although external filth is not cleaned,
Internal filth is indeed removed.*

In Early Buddhism, the method to purify oneself, cleanse the filth from the mind (21 mental defilements), and remove unwholesome karma relied on having faith in the Triple Gem, upholding the precepts (*poṣadha*), performing acts of generosity, cultivating concentration, and so on. The belief that a person attains rebirth in the heavens or liberation through cleansing away unwholesome karma with holy water is a common one in the theistic religions of India. The later generations seem to place special emphasis on the Gaṅgā River. For example, an account in *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* states that the:

Gaṅgā River ... is said to be holy water in non-Buddhist texts. Although one has created many faults, bathing [in it] will remove [them all]. Those who commit suicide will attain heavenly rebirth and enjoy fortune if they die while immersed in [the Gaṅgā River]. After death, if peoples' bodies are cast [into the Gaṅgā River] they will not fall into the evil destinies. If one agitates current and waves of the river lost souls will be released.

Those practitioners who claim that they can cleanse themselves with holy water became highly superstitious during later times. The faults that a person cleanses away include not only those created in this life but also all the faults that came with them since birth. For example, in Judaism disciples believe that if a person's ancestors committed sins, then from that point on all their children, grandchildren and so on will be born with sins. Before the time of Jesus, people were already advised to repent and regain purity from cleansing with holy water. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, and after the baptism he had a spiritual experience. Thereafter in Christianity, when followers convert to the faith of God, they are required to be baptized (commonly a ceremony symbolic of baptism is used) to show that their original sins have been cleansed. Baptism as repentance usually only happens once in most Christian denominations (normally repentance is done through confession or prayers). In parts of India, people cleanse with water and bathe frequently to seek purity. For example, it is stated in the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, “[people] may bathe once a day, twice a day, and even up to seven times a day.” Each day a person may bathe several times for the sake of cleansing away bad karma and attaining liberation. In the *Alternate Translation of the Saṃyuktāgama* it is said, “[one should] completely uphold precepts and constantly cleanse themselves ... [one should rely on] the waters of Dharma to cleanse defilements.” Is it not true that cleansing the defilements of the mind by wholesome deeds is similar to cleansing by bathing?

Taking the precepts and performing *poṣadha* are inseparable from repentance. In terms of the practice whereby a person repents many times each day to remove unwholesome karma from the time before beginning, is not this practice similar to the Indian tradition of bathing several times a day in holy water to seek purity? Nevertheless, the *Mahāyāna* practice, whereby a person repents many times a day, does not contain the factor connected to ancient superstitions of bathing in holy water to seek purity. The practice of repenting many times each day to the buddhas of the ten directions arose and developed as *Mahāyāna* Buddhism became widespread.

This practice can remove karmic hindrances and therefore the problem of predestination, which arose from the development of popularized teachings on karmic result, can also be addressed. At the same time, the practice also adapted and purified the imprecise worldly practice of cleansing with water.

Broadening the Scope of Repentance for Faults

Extending What Can Be Repented

Repentance for Karmic Hindrances Includes All Unwholesome Deeds

Originally in Early Buddhism, karmic hindrances was taken as reference to the five extreme faults. Committing any of these five extreme faults in this life was said to hinder a person from awakening to the true Dharma in this life, even if he or she repented for that fault. Therefore, these were called karmic hindrances. If someone commits acts of killing, stealing and so on before taking refuge in the Triple Gem, these unwholesome karmas will hinder their spiritual practice. Likewise, if after taking refuge or becoming a monastic, someone contravenes the precepts set by the Buddha, his or her spiritual practice will be hindered by these unwholesome karmas. Therefore, the “karmic hindrances” that someone repents for in the *Chapter on the Aspiration of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva* are not limited to the five extreme faults. Rather, in a broad sense, all unwholesome karmas are included in karmic hindrances.

Repenting for Five Types of Hindrances

The meaning of repentance is that someone who has faults or commits unwholesome deeds openly confesses the faults, and repents. Hence, the faults that he or she repents are unwholesome deeds. However, in early times, as the practice of repenting many times a day became widespread and popular, the faults that someone may repent for were broadened in scope; that is, the faults are not limited to karmic hindrances (unwholesome deeds). An example can be seen in the *Mahāyāna Sūtra on Repentance by Three Kinds of Practice*, as translated by Jñānagupta and Dharmagupta, which says:

... these sentient beings have all sorts of karmic hindrances. How do they repent? How do they confess? In terms of defilement hindrances, hindrances from rebirth as sentient beings, hindrances to Dharma practices and hindrances to future [better] rebirths, how do they repent? How do they confess?

Here, the five types of hindrances that someone repents are karmic hindrances, defilement hindrances, hindrances from rebirth as sentient beings, hindrances to Dharma practices, and hindrances to better future rebirths. However, in a parallel text, *Sūtra on Repentance Taught for Śāriputra*, translated by An Shigao, there is no mention of these different kinds of hindrances. Similarly, another parallel text, *Sūtra on Bodhisattva Treasure*, translated by Saṃghavarman in the Liang dynasty, also does not contain these different kinds of hindrances and only says that:

Over countless cycles of birth and death since time without beginning, [I have] committed [many] unwholesome karmas to hinder all sentient beings ... if one wishes to be pure and free from [all] hindrances toward all dharmas, one should repent for all karmic hindrances in this way.

However, these five types of hindrances have appeared in other early translated texts. For example, the *Sūtra on Repentance taught by Mañjuśrī*, translated by Dharmarakṣa in the Western Jin dynasty says, “based on these merits, [one] is naturally free from being shrouded by the five coverings.” In the same era of the Western Jin dynasty, the first chapter in the text *Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Sūtra*, translated by Niè Dào zhēn, is on the five coverings. The text here says, “all the fault coverings, defilement coverings, and Dharma coverings are completely removed.” The word “covering” is obviously an alternate translation for hindrance. The fault covering is identical to karmic hindrance; defilement covering is identical to defilement hindrance; Dharma covering is identical to hindrances to Dharma practices. Although this text only has three types of coverings, the Dharma coverings are undoubtedly the same as the three hindrances in the five hindrances, as shown above.²⁴

Repenting for Four Types of Hindrances

Another contemporary translation during Jñānagupta’s time was by Narendrayaśas, who translated the *Sūtra on Treasury of Sun* and the *Sūtra on Treasury of Moon*. These *sūtras* mention the following four types of karmic hindrances:

²⁴ Note that the Chinese here does not make sense, as “法蓋與五障中的法障” is repetitive. It makes more sense to treat this text as a conclusion, which is reflected in the English translation.

1. *During countless cycles of birth and death, the countless hindrances that a person has created, such as karmic hindrances, hindrances from rebirth as sentient beings, hindrances to Dharma practices, and defilement hindrances, which are as many as the sands in the Ganges and can hinder all wholesome roots, will be completely eliminated, whether these hindrances have yet to yield their results or are not yet exhausted or have not been repented for.*
2. *All faults, such as karmic hindrances, defilement hindrances, hindrances to Dharma practices, will completely cease except for the five extreme faults, the [fault] from destroying the righteous Dharma and [fault] from defaming noble sages.*
3. *All those deities, dragons and even the kaṭapūtana spirits [extremely bad-smelling ghosts] turned toward the bodhisattva mahāsattva and repented for their karmic hindrances, hindrances from rebirth as sentient beings, hindrances to Dharma practices and defilement hindrances.*

In the above three passages, except for the second passage, there is mention of repentance for four types of hindrances. These four types of hindrances are found in the five hindrances. Within these five or four types of hindrances, the “hindrances from rebirth as sentient beings” possibly refers to “hindrances of karmic results,” and “hindrances to Dharma practices” likely means “hindrances to the learning and practice of the *Mahāyāna* teachings.” Although the true meanings of these two hindrances are uncertain, it is undoubted that hindrances from defilements (*kleśāvaraṇa*) is included in the hindrances for which a person should repent.

Imprecise Teachings of the Western Regions Had Far-reaching Effects on Chinese Buddhism

How is it possible for someone to repent and eradicate his or her defilements? I believe this concept is a distortion of the Buddha-dharma from the Western Region.²⁵ This is because those *sūtras* that mention repentance being able to eliminate defilement are all from this area. Dharmarakṣa and Niè Dào zhēn were translators who were active in the second half of the 3rd

²⁵ “Western Region” is a term used in the Han dynasty to refer to regions west of the Yuman Pass. This includes areas of modern-day Xinjiang, Central Asia and sometimes even the Indian subcontinent.

century CE. Dharmarakṣa and his ancestors lived in Dunhuang and he “followed his master to travel to the countries in the Western Regions ... [he] collected and took the scriptures to China.”²⁶ The *sūtras* that Dharmarakṣa translated were sourced from the Western Region. Jñānagupta and Narendrayāśas were translators from the mid to latter half of the 6th century CE. The *sūtras* they translated were also from the Western Region. It is said:

In the 6th year of Wǔpíng²⁷ the monks Bǎoxiān, Dàosùì, Sēngtán and others totaling ten people, who were from the kingdom Northern Qi, travelled together to the Western Region to seek scriptures [in their original form]. They travelled in this area for seven years to carry out this task before returning to the east. They acquired 260 different Sanskrit scriptures.²⁸

[Jñānagupta and Narendrayāśas’ translations] were also based on these source texts from the Western Region.

From the 3rd to the 6th centuries CE, the scriptures that came from the Western Region included contents relating to repentance of four hindrances or five hindrances. Therefore, the teachings on the four hindrances and five hindrances are not a case of erroneous or accidental translation. Buddhism spread from northern India to the Western Region, where the culture was less advanced, and therefore Buddhists in the Western Region lacked precise understanding concerning the meaning of the Buddha-dharma. This is similar to the situation in China when Buddhism first came, during the Han, Wei and Jin dynasties. At that time, there were many misunderstandings concerning the Buddha-dharma. The Buddhism that was popular in the Western Region emphasized the repentance practice that suited the common people. Due to the continuing propagation of misunderstandings, different teachings on repentance for three hindrances, four hindrances, and five hindrances developed. The authentic doctrines that were prevalent in India did not have such views concerning repentance practices. As the originals of these translated Chinese scriptures came from the Western Region, the teachings on repentance for three hindrances, four hindrances, and five hindrances can be regarded as special teachings

²⁶ Quote from *Biography of Great Masters* (Taisho 50, no. 2059, page 32) 《高僧傳》卷1 (CBETA, T50, no. 2059, pages 326c9–12)

²⁷ *Wǔpíng* is the name for the reign of Emperor Gāowēi of the Northern Qí Dynasty, 570–576 CE.

²⁸ Quote from *Extension on Biography of Great Masters* 《續高僧傳》卷2 (CBETA, T50, no. 2060, pages 433c28–434a2).

specifically derived from Buddhism in the Western Region. Such an inference should be plausible.

During the later Wei dynasty, the North Indian master, Bodhiruci, translated the work *Sūtra on Buddha Names*, totaling 12 fascicles. Someone expanded this work to 30 fascicles, in which the names of *sūtras*, bodhisattvas and some relevant wordings were added after each passage, listing the names of buddhas. In addition, at the end of each fascicle a section of the *Mahāyāna Sūtra on Baoda Bodhisattva's Questions Regarding Karmic Results* was also added. This *sūtra* is not considered a genuine text. The inserted text on repentance is quite well written and says:

Although there are countless different faults, generally speaking, they all fall within three main categories. What are the three? They are (1) defilement hindrances, (2) karmic hindrances, and (3) karmic result hindrances. These three types of fault are able to hinder [one's practice of] the noble path and obstruct the desirable outcomes of rebirth in the human and heavenly realms. Thus, in the sūtras they are regarded as three hindrances. Accordingly, all the buddhas and bodhisattvas teach the practices of repentance to remove these three hindrances.

... With such practices of repentance what kind of faults is impossible to be eliminated? And what kind of hindrances is unable to be removed?... The sūtra's teaching says that for ordinary people, every bodily or verbal action creates faults ... these three types of hindrances continuously arise relying on their cause: on account of defilements, unwholesome karma is created, due to the cause and conditions of unwholesome karma the fruit of suffering is begotten. ... Therefore, the first priority is to repent the hindrances of defilements.

This is not a translation based on an authentic *sūtra*. It was a repentance ritual that was composed and compiled by someone in China. In the Korean Buddhist canon, this *sūtra* has a colophon, which says, "I know that the *Mahāyāna Sūtra on Baoda Bodhisattva's Questions Regarding Karmic Results* is not an authentic text, but I do not have the ability to deal with this issue. The detriment in the Dharma-ending age has reached such a dire situation. Oh, how miserable it is!" Repenting for the three hindrances is clearly stated in the *Sūtra on Buddha*

Names. Such an inauthentic teaching, which was popular in the Western Region, has influenced Buddhism in China to a very great degree.

Expansion on the Methods of Repentance

The previous section focuses on the extension of faults for which someone can repent. There is also an extension regarding the methods of repentance. For example, the text *Great Tranquility and Insight*, written by Master Zhiyi, contains the five practices of repentance: repenting, requesting, delighting in others' achievements, dedicating merits, and making vows.²⁹ The first four items are the same four practices included in the easy path, which can be found in the *Sūtra on Repentance Taught for Śāriputra*. This same *sūtra* and text is also quoted in the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā (Exegesis on the Detailed Exposition of the Ten Stages)*. By adding the practice of making vows, this group of practices is called the five practices of repentance. So, repenting is just one of five practices. In Master Zhiyi's understanding, “*chàn* (懺) means to confess and wash away unwholesomeness, while *huǐ* (悔) means to change past bad ways and develop wholesome practices hereafter” (this is an interpretation by Chinese Buddhists, which is different from the original meaning). In total there are five practices of repentance:

The practice of repenting overcomes the faults of serious unwholesome karmas;

the practice of requesting overcomes the faults of defaming the teachings;

the practice of delighting in others' achievements overcomes the faults of envy;

dedicating merits overcomes the faults leading to existence

(there is no explanation on what faults the practice of making vows overcomes).³⁰

The original meaning of *huǐ* (悔) is literally to “speak out loud;” that is, to confess to one's faults. However, Master Zhiyi explains it as “to change bad ways and develop wholesome practices hereafter.” This interpretation includes broad meanings and does not align with the

²⁹ Because Master Zhiyi's explanation of *huǐ* (悔) implies that all wholesome practices belong to the practice of repentance, these five practices are called “the practices of repentance.”

³⁰ *Mahāyāna Insight Meditation*, fascicle 7 《摩訶止觀》卷7 (CBETA, T46, no. 1911, page 98).

original meaning as interpreted in India. Undertaking wholesome practices is surely able to counteract (overcome) unwholesomeness. If undertaking wholesome practices is called *huǐ* (悔), then all wholesome practices are a form of *huǐ* (悔 repentance). It has become a convention in China that the use of *huǐ* (悔) means *chànhuǐ* (懺悔). Accordingly, almost all of the practices belonging to the easy path are integrated into the practice of repentance, except the practice of recollecting the buddha to gain rebirth in a pureland. It is no wonder that the popular Buddhism in contemporary China considers ceremonial repentance services as essential practices.³¹

Repenting for Karmic Hindrances Does Not Eliminate the Fault But Merely Reduces the Karmic Force of that Fault

Unwholesome karma: can it really be eliminated by repentance? Nāgārjuna provides a clear explanation. In the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā*, it is said:

I do not say that with repentance unwholesome karma is completely eliminated and then no [future] karmic results will be begotten. I say that with repentance the results become lighter, that is, experience [of the results] is shorter. Hence the verse on repentance says,

*If the fault will cause one to fall into the three evil destinies
May I bear the result while being a human.*

... Another example is like the case of Ajātaśatru. The king Ajātaśatru harmed his father who had attained sagehood, but the extreme fault came to have a lighter result due to the conditions of [being taught the Dharma by] the Buddha and Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva.

According to what the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā* teaches above, repenting for karmic hindrances does not eliminate faults. Rather, it causes the karmic force of that fault to become weaker — “*the extreme fault came to have a lighter result.*” In other words, originally, a person would have had to bear the severe result of extreme faults in the next life or another future life, but

³¹ Because Master Zhiyi’s explanation implies that all wholesome practices fall under repentance, almost all of the wholesome practices belonging to the easy path thus fall into the category of repentance practices. Over time, the practice of repentance has become representative of all practices on the easy path in popular Buddhism in contemporary China.

due to the wholesomeness of repentance, bears that result in a weaker form in this human life. As a result, that extreme karma is now exhausted.

The *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* says:

If a son or a daughter of good family accepts, bears in mind, reads and recites this sūtra, but is despised by others, this is the case that they bear lighter karmic results. They originally would have fallen into the three evil destinies due an extreme fault committed in a past life, but that extreme fault has now been borne out in the lighter result of being despised. After bearing the lighter result, they have exhausted that extreme fault.

Reading and reciting the *sūtras* can exhaust (extreme) unwholesome karma, which is the same as the meaning found in the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā*. However, the *sūtras* in the later *Mahāyāna* Buddhism period are numerous and their emphases may be on different points of such a teaching. Therefore, some of these teachings in the *sūtras* on this topic cannot be interpreted in the same way.

Reciting the Buddha's Name to Mitigate Karmic Hindrances

Practice of Recollecting the Buddhas in a Broad Sense

The “three kinds of practice on recollecting buddhas” are undertaken before the buddhas of the ten directions, throughout the six time periods in a day and night.³² The practice of recollecting buddhas (*buddhānusmṛti*) consists of reciting the buddhas' names, bearing them in mind, and making prostrations to the buddhas. As for the practice of recollecting buddhas in a broad sense, it includes the cultivations of reducing all karmic hindrances, delighting, requesting, and dedicating merits to the [accomplishment of the] Buddha's awakening. These practices are based on having faith in the buddhas, recollecting the buddhas, and holding them as our ideal goal. Such practices make it easier to attain rebirth in a pureland where one has the bodhi mind that will not weaken anymore and is certain to attain Buddhahood.

³² Here, the term “three kinds of practice on recollecting buddhas” is referring to the practices of repenting for karmic hindrances, delighting in others' achievements, and requesting the Buddha to remain and teach the Dharma.

Reciting the Buddha's Name Can Mitigate Karmic Hindrances: Vows of the Buddhas When They Were Bodhisattvas

In the spread of Buddhism, recollecting the buddhas became a common and popular practice, and also developed further. Mitigating karmic hindrances (*karmāvaraṇa*) was a key component (that caused the practice to become common and popular) and we shall discuss this aspect here.

The teaching on the “three kinds of practice on recollecting buddhas” mentions the present buddhas of the ten directions without providing further details. In the hearts and minds of ordinary followers, it is believed that there are buddhas in the ten directions and occasionally a certain buddha in a certain direction is mentioned. Nonetheless, it is unavoidable that the followers may feel that the early teachings on the present buddhas of the ten directions were abstract and did not create affinity toward those buddhas. Therefore, in the *Mahāyāna sūtras* the names of the ten buddhas in the ten directions are provided such that their names can be recited, kept in mind and prostrations done toward them. Such practices can mitigate karmic hindrances and lead to the attainment of virtues such as achieving the state of non-regression (from the bodhisattva path). For example, in the 5th fascicle of the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā*, it is said:

Some quickly attain the state of non-regression (avivartin) by means of the easy path of faith-based practice. This is as what the verses say,

The Wholesome Virtue Buddha in the East,

...

The Vast Countless Virtue (Buddha) in the above direction,

There are all these world honored ones,

Who are now present in these ten directions.

If one would like to quickly accomplish,

And attain to the stage of non-regression,

One should reverently recollect the buddhas,

and recite the names of these world honored ones.

In the above quote, among all the buddhas in the ten directions, one buddha's name from each direction is provided. The ten buddhas in the ten directions, such as Wholesome Virtue Buddha, may not have garnered much attention in the later time period of Buddhism. However, in the process of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism's development, these names of the buddhas in the ten directions could be the earliest set that occurred in Buddhism, and these buddhas were esteemed by faith-based *Mahāyāna* Buddhists. For example, in Nāgārjuna's *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā*, when talking about reciting the buddhas' names and recollecting the buddhas, Wholesome Virtues and the other buddhas of the ten directions are mentioned at the beginning. In addition, the *Sūtra on Ocean-like Samādhi of Contemplating the Buddha*, which was translated in the Eastern Jin dynasty by Buddhahadra, reveals the past lives' practices of the buddhas in the ten directions, such as the Wholesome Virtues Buddha in the East. It is said that one master and nine disciples now have become buddhas in the ten directions because "[countless eons ago they] went to a buddha's stupa, prostrated to that buddha statue ... recited verses of praise [about that buddha]." This *sūtra* also mentions visualizing and contemplating the buddhas of the ten directions such as Wholesome Virtues Buddha in the East. During the Liu Song dynasty, the *Sūtra on Insight to Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Practices*, translated by Dharmamitra, also mentions "Wholesome Virtues Buddha in the east ... there is a buddha called Sandalwood Virtues in the south." Furthermore, in the *Bodhisattva Treasury Sūtra* (a parallel scripture to the *Sūtra on the Three Kinds of Practice*), which was translated by Saṃghavarman in the Liang dynasty, the names of the ten buddhas in the ten directions such as Wholesome Virtues Buddha, are also found but some of the translated names are different from the previous ones.

Based on the aforementioned quotations, it is evident that the ten buddhas in the ten directions, such as Wholesome Virtues, were important among the faith-inclined *Mahāyāna* practitioners in the early *Mahāyāna* period. These practices regarding the ten buddhas in the ten directions stem from the *Sūtra on Enquiries of Ratnacandra*. For example, in a parallel to this *sūtra*, the *Mahāyāna Sūtra on Enquiries of Ratnacandra* translated by Dānapāla during the Zhao Song dynasty, it is said:

If sentient beings in a split second or even a moment in time hear the names of the ten buddhas, and after hearing [these names they] respectfully bear in mind, write out, read, recite, and explain [about the ten buddhas in the ten

directions] to many others, then all their unwholesome karmas such as the five extreme faults will be mitigated. Also, they will not fall into the realms of hell, animals or ghosts and will soon attain the stage where they will not retreat from unsurpassed supreme awakening.

[After] hearing the names of the ten buddhas and respectfully accepting, writing, reading, reciting, and practicing with belief and joy, [then] all immeasurable merits and virtues will be attained completely and the [karmic forces of past] faults from the three karmas [body, language and volition] will no longer bring about results.

In short, on the one hand, hearing about the buddhas of the ten directions, “reciting and recollecting their names,” bearing in mind, reading, reciting, and teaching others about the buddhas of the ten directions can mitigate all unwholesome karmas, including the five extreme faults. On the other hand, all meritorious outcomes can be acquired, and the stage of non-regression will be attained soon. In terms of their meanings, such a practice of “recollecting the buddhas to mitigate bad karmas” is somewhat different from the practice of repenting for past bad karma before the buddhas. According to the *sūtras*, the practice of recollecting the buddhas to mitigate bad karmas is the vow made by these buddhas of the ten directions when they were still bodhisattvas.³³

³³ *Sūtra on Enquiries of the Child Ratnacandra*: “These ten tathāgatas were bodhisattvas during the time of the Diligent Auspicious Buddha and in front of this buddha they made offerings and the following vow, ‘After we attain unsurpassed awakening in the buddha-lands, those sentient beings who hear our names, even for just a short moment, and afterwards respectfully bear in mind, write, read, and recite our names and teach others to do likewise will diminish all their bad karma such as from committing the five extreme faults. In addition, they will no longer be reborn in the hell realm, animal realm or Yama’s realm. [Instead] they will quickly attain the stage of non-regression [on the path to unsurpassed awakening].’”

《大乘寶月童子問法經》：「彼十如來於精進吉祥佛所為菩薩位，於其佛前供養發願：『我等各於佛剎成無上正等正覺之時，若有眾生經剎那間至須臾之間，聞我十佛名號，聞已恭敬受持、書寫讀誦、廣為人說，所有五逆等一切罪業悉皆消除，亦不墮地獄、傍生、焰魔羅界，於無上正等正覺速得不退。』」(CBETA, T14, no. 437, pages 109b12–18)

The above excerpt from the *sūtra* indicates that this practice of recollecting the buddhas to mitigate past bad karmas arose from the buddhas who made a special vow when they were still bodhisattvas; they vowed that those who recollect their names will gain the benefits of mitigating bad karma, so there is the element of relying on the assistance of the buddhas, which is different to the original meaning of repentance in front of the buddhas.

Hearing Buddhas' Names, Having Sincere Faith, Meeting with All the Buddhas, Hearing the Dharma and Practicing It to Mitigate Bad Karma

There are quite a few of such kinds of *sūtras* that teach about mitigating bad karma by hearing the buddhas' names. For example, the *Sūtra on Praising and Propagating the Virtues of the Buddhas (Kusumasañcaya Sūtra)*, which was translated by Kinkara³⁴ in the Northern Wei dynasty, extensively illustrate the names and virtues of the buddhas in the six directions. Some cases are shown as below:

1. Those who are able to hear the name of Treasure Ocean Tathāgata and bear in mind, recite from memory, delight, believe and rejoice in [hearing the name], will attain the treasure of the seven factors to enlightenment and abide in the stage of non-regression. They then will quickly accomplish the unsurpassed and perfect awakening and mitigate the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for 60 eons.

2. Those who are able to hear the name of Perfect Treasure Tathāgata and bear in mind, recite from memory, delight, believe and rejoice with a sincere mind, will mitigate the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for 500 eons.

3. Those who are able to hear the name of Treasure Light Tathāgata and bear in mind, recite from memory, read, delight, believe and rejoice, and prostrate as a show of respect, will mitigate the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for 200,000 eons.

Such teachings are commonly found in the *sūtras*, and all of them relate to the virtue that someone hears a buddha's name and then with sincere faith bears in mind, reads, and recites it. Generally speaking, the virtues include that a person "abides in the stage of non-regression and is assured to attain the unsurpassed and perfect awakening." The aforementioned account that someone can "mitigate the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for XX eons" means that on the path of cultivation to Buddhahood, the person reduces the length of time (XX eons) that they suffer cyclic existence. This is similar to the account that in one of

³⁴ See http://www.acmuller.net/descriptive_catalogue/files/k0371.html

Śākyamuni Buddha's past lives he gained the merit of attaining Buddhahood earlier than the scheduled time by nine eons due to his praise of the Tīṣya Buddha by reciting a hymn. Therefore, the expression "karmic forces of cyclic existence" does not necessarily refer to unwholesome karmas. Rather, it is a term that generally refers to any defiled karma that is able to bring about the results of cyclic existence.

This *Sūtra on Praising and Propagating the Virtues of the Buddhas* especially praises Akṣobhya Buddha. In it the mara king Pāpīyas says:

I would rather cause a person to bear in mind the names of 1,000 other buddhas and also encourage and cause other people to learn and bear in mind the names of those buddhas than to cause these people to bear in mind the name of Akṣobhya Buddha. As for those who bear in mind the name of Akṣobhya Buddha, it will be impossible for me to destroy their intention to seek unsurpassed awakening.

In truth, the virtues and merits of all the buddhas are equal. A teaching found in the *Sūtra on Causes and Conditions of 1,000 Buddhas*, which was translated by Kumārajīva in the Later Qin dynasty, shows similar meaning to what the *Sūtra on Praising and Propagating the Virtues of the Buddhas* teaches. For example, it says:

At that time, when 1,000 virtuous kings heard the names of 1,000 buddhas they rejoiced and paid their respects to the buddhas. On account of this cause and condition they reduce the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for a duration equal to the number of sands in 900 million trillion Ganges rivers. ...

If a son or a daughter of good family hears this buddha's name, they will always meet a buddha and their bodhi mind attains the stage of non-regression. At the same time, they reduce the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for 1,200 million eons.

Moreover, the *Sūtra on the Jeweled Net*, which was translated by Dharmarakṣa in the Jin dynasty, indicates the virtues of 60,000 buddhas and also says:

[If a son or a daughter of good family] hears that buddha's name, delights in [hearing the name] and has faith without any doubts ... [they] decrease the [karmic forces that will bring about] cyclic existence for more than 10 trillion eons. [Although] they are at an early stage of the bodhisattva path, they will quickly attain unsurpassed and perfect awakening.

The *Sūtra on the Merits Arising From Reciting the Names of Seven Buddhas*, translated by Yijing in the Tang dynasty, also says the same thing, that “those who hear the name of that buddha will lessen [the karmic forces that will bring about] the suffering of cyclic existence for one trillion great eons.”³⁵

In the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*,³⁶ compiled and translated by Bodhiruci in the Tang dynasty, there is a text called *Assembly on Questions by Guṇaratnasāṅkusumita Bodhisattva*.³⁷ This text mentions the ten buddhas in the ten directions, in which the eastern direction has “a Tathāgata called Adorned with Treasures of Immeasurable Virtues Benevolent King.” The text further indicates that “those who recite that buddha's name can immediately diminish the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for 60,000 eons.”

The *Buddhamakuṭa Sūtra*,³⁸ which was translated by Dānapāla in the Zhao Song dynasty, mentions the buddhas of the six directions and the bodhisattvas who are the leading figures in these buddhas' lands. The *sūtra* frequently teaches: “those who are able to recite and bear in mind the buddha's name ... will attain the stage of non-regression from unsurpassed and complete awakening and weaken the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for 30,000 eons.”

The *Māyopamasamādhi Sūtra*, which was translated by Dharmodgata in the Liu Song dynasty, says: “those who hear the names of the past Golden Light Lion Mastery Tathāgata and

³⁵ The Chinese text has the description “100,000 *koṭis*, great eons” to imply that the time is very long. *Koṭis* represent different numerical figures depending on which text is used; here we have assumed *koṭis* to be 10,000,000 based on the Chinese commentary, and hence we have translated the time as one trillion. Note that these numbers are intended to describe a very long time and should not be taken literally.

³⁶ The *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* is actually a collection of different *Mahāyāna sūtras*. Possibly to avoid confusion, all these texts are termed “assemblies” instead of *sūtras* in this collection. Each of these assemblies portray an event at which questions are answered and discussed.

³⁷ See <http://ntireader.org/words/45567.html>

³⁸ See http://www.acmuller.net/descriptive_catalogue/files/k1479.html. (Note: there it says the translator was Dharmarakṣa and others.)

Skillfully Abiding in Treasury of Virtues King Tathāgata, will transform [away from] the female body and reduce the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for 4,000 million eons.”

All the quoted texts above show the same meaning. The expression, such as “mitigate, weaken, lessen, decrease, reduce or diminish” karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence,³⁹ means that one is able to overcome the obstacles caused by karmic forces and can definitely attain the stage where a practitioner will never retreat from the path toward unsurpassed awakening. This is possible because, upon hearing a buddha’s name with sincere faith (toward that buddha) they memorize, read, and recite that buddha’s name, and then start to make the bodhi vow such that they meet buddhas, learn the Dharma from the buddhas and practice the Dharma. In short, the practice of recollecting buddhas has a strong connection to the beneficial results of mitigating the karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence and attaining the stage of non-regression from the path toward unsurpassed awakening.

Due to a myriad of buddhas’ names being revealed and propagated, the conviction that there are buddhas in the ten directions and the three period of times (past, present and future) can be fulfilled.⁴⁰ However, including the names of too many buddhas may cause confusion among ordinary Buddhists as to which buddha to follow when practicing Dharma for repentance, removing karmic hindrances or attaining the level of non-regression. Therefore, it became essential for certain buddhas’ names to be specified as the object for the practices of recollection or repentance. Examples can be found in the *Assembly on Upali* in the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*:

³⁹ The translation here has deviated from the Chinese words, to provide clarity. The Chinese verbs used in the quoted *sūtras* literally mean “to eradicate or eliminate,” but the correct meaning is to reduce or mitigate karmic forces. The Chinese verbs, such as “to eliminate” and “to eradicate” can mislead the reader about the concept of karma. For example, one *sūtra* uses the word “eliminate,” which may give readers the idea that karma can be eliminated. However, this is not correct. The proper understanding should be that karmic forces can be reduced in their intensity, but not eliminated entirely. For a karmic force to be eliminated, it must be exhausted; that is, come to complete fruition. In our translation, to avoid this possible misunderstanding, we have chosen verbs with the meaning “to reduce.”

⁴⁰ During the period of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, in addition to the practice methods that were profound and difficult to undertake, there were faith-inclined practice methods of the easy path, which were even more popular. Therefore, *sūtras* that contained the names of buddhas were continually made available and the number of buddha names that were revealed was numerous.

Śāriputra! Those bodhisattvas who contravene a pārājika precept should, with an honest mind and great earnest, repent in front of 10 pure bhikṣus. Those bodhisattvas who contravene a saṃghāvaśeṣa precept should, with an honest mind and great earnest, repent in front of 5 pure bhikṣus.

...

Those bodhisattvas who develop desire due to seeing and being touched by a lustful woman should repent with an honest mind and great earnest in front of one or two pure bhikṣus.

...

Śāriputra! Those bodhisattvas, who have committed the five extreme faults, violated the pārājika precepts, breached the saṃghāvaśeṣa precepts, violated the Buddha stupas, harmed the saṃgha or carried out any other offences, should stay alone day and night and with great earnest repent in front of 35 buddhas...

*May I transfer all merits from repenting of all my grave faults,
Rejoicing in all other's virtues,
And requesting the buddhas [to stay and teach],
To the attainment of unsurpassed awakening [of the buddhas].*

...

Śāriputra! Bodhisattvas should primarily view these 35 buddhas wholeheartedly and should also pay respects to all the tathāgatas. In short, they should undertake such wholesome repentances.

...

If bodhisattvas are able to mitigate these faults [by repentance], then at that time all the buddhas, who appear in myriads of forms for the sake of guiding all sentient beings to liberation, manifest themselves in front of the bodhisattvas.

The 24th text in the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*, titled *Assembly on Upali*, elucidates the *Mahāyāna* monastic code (*vinaya*). This text has a parallel titled *Sūtra on the Buddha's Discourse on the Definitive Monastic Code*, which is the earliest parallel, translated by Dharmarakṣa. There is an extract version of the *Assembly on Upali*, titled *Buddha's Discourse on the Confession Through Reciting the Names of 35 Buddhas*. This text was translated by Amoghavajra in the Tang dynasty. The monastic code includes repentance. Therefore, in the aforementioned texts repentance for monastic bodhisattvas is included. According to these texts, the repentance methods of bodhisattva monastics in the *saṃgha* community are different from those found in the *vinaya* of Early Buddhism. For example, the punishment for those monastics who contravened a *pārājika*⁴¹ precept is to be expelled from the *saṃgha* community. There is no repentance available for such a fault. But here, for bodhisattva monastics, it is possible to restore purity through repenting and confessing one's faults in front of ten pure *bhikṣus* (according to the *Mahāyāna* monastic code). According to the monastic code of Early Buddhism, those who have contravened a *saṃghāvaśeṣa* precept have to undertake a repentance ceremony before 20 pure *bhikṣus* to restore purity. But here, for bodhisattva monastics, the requirement is to repent only before five pure *bhikṣus*. The changes to punishment reflect the *Mahāyāna* spirit of forgiveness. But another fact would be that the number of bodhisattva monastics who contravene these primary precepts began to increase and the number of pure *bhikṣus* declined. Therefore, there was no choice but to lower the standards. For example, the precept masters from the Sarvāstivāda school also have a similar viewpoint. Their position is that those who contravene certain *pārājika* precepts can maintain their monastic status after repentance. In summary, these are separate *Mahāyāna* repentance methods, specifically for bodhisattvas (whether they are monastics or lay Buddhists), which allow them to repent for all kinds of transgressions.

These *Mahāyāna* repentance methods include reciting the names of the 35 buddhas: “homage to Śākyamuni Buddha ... homage to Treasure Lotus Skilful Abiding by the Sala Tree King Buddha,” and repenting in front of the buddhas, rejoicing, requesting (and dedicating merits). Such methods are similar to the methods found in the *Sūtra on the Three Kinds of Practice*, and both methods were taught to Śāriputra, who is the key audience member. In the list of the

⁴¹ The monastic rules are grouped in several categories based on their severity. *Pārājika* (波羅夷) is the first set of rules ; these are considered fundamental and cannot be repented.

35 buddhas, the first is the Śākyamuni Buddha. This shows that the *Mahāyāna* practitioners in the Early *Mahāyāna* period had not lost sight of the fact that the Śākyamuni Buddha is the source of the Buddha-dharma in our world.

The text, titled *Assembly on Upali*, says that “[upon repentance] if bodhisattvas are able to mitigate their faults” then at that time all the buddhas manifest and appear in myriad forms. This is why it is called repentance through visualization. This is not a verbal recitation of the buddhas’ names, where it suffices to recite the names as written. Rather, this repentance through visualization requires “wholeheartedly visualizing these 35 buddhas,” and “living alone in hermitage day and night in order to repent with great earnest.” The appearance of all the buddhas in myriad forms is the indication that someone has mitigated his or her karmic faults and become purified. This is a process whereby the person begins with the method of reciting the buddhas’ names and then moves toward the method of repentance through visualization. This method is not so easy to accomplish, but we cannot say that it is a profound practice. In any case, this world is always inclined toward what is more common. For example, at the end of the *Buddha’s Discourse on the Confession Through Reciting the Names of 35 Buddhas* it is said, “*Mahāyāna* practitioners from countries in five areas of the Indian subcontinent regularly practice the repentances day and night without fail. The merits are too vast to list them all and so [we] briefly record what these Indian practitioners mentioned.” This situation is similar to the function of the *Sūtra on Mañjuśrī’s Vows*, which was commonly recited by *Mahāyāna* practitioners on a daily basis.

Sūtra on Contemplation of Bhaiṣajyarāja and Bhaiṣajyasamudagata Bodhisattvas was translated by Kālayaśas in the Song dynasty. The key teaching in this *sūtra* is about the virtues of Bodhisattva Medicine King (Bhaiṣajyarāja) and Bodhisattva Sublime Medicine (Bhaiṣajyasamudgata), and methods for visualizing them. This *sūtra* mentions the past 53 buddhas — “Universal Light Buddha ... and Always Accomplished in All Dharmas King Buddha.” It is said in the *sūtra* that those who are able to hear the names of these 53 buddhas will never fall into the evil destinies for millions and billions of eons. In addition, those who recite the names of these 53 buddhas will meet buddhas life after life. Moreover, those who wholeheartedly pay homage to these 53 buddhas are able to:

mitigate the [faults from contravening the] four fundamental [precepts],⁴² five extreme faults, and the bad karma from defaming Mahāyāna (sūtras); that is, all returns to purity. On account of the initial fundamental vows of all the buddhas, the aforementioned faults are mitigated with every single thought [when paying homages to these 53 buddhas].

These benefits are shown in the following quote from the *sūtra*:

If sentient beings want to eliminate the fault of [contravening] the four fundamental [precepts], repent for [committing] the five extreme faults or ten unwholesome deeds, and remove the severe fault of defaming [another practitioner] without any basis, they should diligently recite the mantra of the [aforementioned] Bodhisattva Medicine King and Bodhisattva Sublime Medicine.

They should also pay homages to the buddhas of the ten directions [such as the above mentioned Sumeru Light and so on].

Next they should also pay homages to the seven buddhas of the past and then pay homages to the 53 buddhas.

They should also pay homages to the 1,000 buddhas of the Bhadra eon and then pay homages to the 35 buddhas.

Finally, they pay homages to the all the countless buddhas in the ten directions.

They should undertake the practice of repentance through visualizing [the buddhas] clearly day and night, just like running water [meaning one thought after another].

⁴² The four fundamental precepts are no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct (for monastics this precept is no sexual conduct), and no lying.

After that they should visualize with every thought the pure physical appearance of the Bodhisattva Medicine King and the Bodhisattva Sublime Medicine.

The 53 buddhas are the past buddhas and, due to their “initial fundamental vows,” those who wholeheartedly pay respects to the 53 buddhas have the virtue of diminishing their karmic forces. Because the *Sūtra on Contemplation of Bhaiṣajyarāja and Bhaiṣajyasamudagata Bodhisattvas* mentions the 35 buddhas from the *Assembly 24 on Upali* and includes mantras, this *sūtra* must have appeared later than the text *Assembly 24 on Upali*. Although this *sūtra* has a repentance practice related to the 35 buddhas, it in fact is different from the repentance methods regarding the 35 buddhas found in the text *Assembly 24 on Upali*. This *sūtra* teaches that “those who hear the two bodhisattvas’ and my names as well as the names of the other buddhas in the ten directions can immediately diminish the karmic force that will bring about cyclic existence for a billion eons” and “on account of the strength from this virtue, which arises by paying respects to all the buddhas, [one] immediately reduces the karmic force that will bring about cyclic existence for countless millions of eons.” Such repentance practices are based on hearing the names of buddhas and paying respects to the buddhas, which can diminish the karmic force that brings about cyclic existence. However, this does not fit the meaning of repentance, which requires practitioners to confess. In addition, the 53 buddhas are past buddhas. However, in the *Sūtra on the Three Kinds of Practice*, the buddhas to whom a practitioner repents are present buddhas of the ten directions. This is another point of difference. This *Sūtra on Contemplation of Bhaiṣajyarāja and Bhaiṣajyasamudagata Bodhisattvas* extensively explains the visualization and contemplation of the pure physical appearance of these two bodhisattvas. In addition, the *sūtra* mentions several times that at the time of death a person is able to take rebirth in any of the purelands,⁴³ based on his or her preference, if the person recites the mantras of the two bodhisattvas. This is similar in theme to the *Sūtra on Contemplation of Amitābha Buddha*, which is another text translated by meditation master Kālayaśas.

⁴³ Purelands refer to the realms of the buddhas, which are pure without defilements. These are considered ideal places for Buddhist practitioners as one always has access to a buddha and other enlightened sages as one’s teachers.

But some ancient Chinese masters combined the 35 and 53 buddhas into a single repentance text, which has been propagated even to the present day. Moreover, there is also the repentance practice to the 25 buddhas. For example, in the *Sūtra on Buddha Names* the Buddha taught Śāriputra the 25 names of the buddhas in the Eastern direction. The *sūtra* says, “those who recite and recollect these 25 buddhas day and night each day and repent [as such] for a complete 25 days can mitigate the faults from contravening the four fundamental precepts and the 8 prohibitions⁴⁴ and so on.” It is unknown from which *sūtra* this content was extracted, but the meaning is similar to the two texts of the *Assembly 24 on Upali* and *Sūtra on Contemplation of Bhaiṣajyarāja and Bhaiṣajyasamudagata Bodhisattvas*. A large number of *sūtras* exist on this topic of mitigating faults through recollecting buddhas. Here, we have pointed out only a few important examples.

Faith-based Skilful Means of the Easy Path: Transformation into Relying on Others’ Power

The practices, such as reciting the buddhas names, recollecting the buddhas, paying respects to the buddhas, undertaking repentance, rejoicing and so on before the buddhas in the ten directions belong to the faith-based, skilful means of the easy path. Such methods stemmed from the practice of repentance in front of the *saṃgha*. These practices can be regarded as a broader definition of recollecting the buddhas using self-effort.⁴⁵ However, according to the teachings above, the practices such as prostrating toward, reciting, and contemplating the past

⁴⁴ It is not clear what the Chinese term “八禁” is actually referring to. It could be the eight precepts that lay people undertake as a special practice, or it could be referring to the eight prohibitions; that is, the primary eight precepts for *bhikṣuṇīs*, in which contravention of any one will result in expulsion from the monastic order. However, the appearance of the four fundamentals with eight precepts often refers to the monastic primary precepts.

《淨心誠觀法發真鈔》卷3：「八禁即尼八重也」(CBETA, X59, no. 1096, page 559b5 // R105, p. 394b5 // Z 2:10, page 197d5).

⁴⁵ In volume 2 of the *Huayu Collection*, Venerable Yinshun has the following explanation. He says that: “In principle, the easy path can be regarded as the practice of buddha recollection in a broader meaning. These practices are centered on the Buddha. [According to the *Daśabhūmikavibhāśa* the easy path includes] recitation of buddhas’ names which is a verbal karma, prostration to buddhas which is a bodily karma and recollection of buddhas which is mental karma. These are the three pure karmas which arise due to respect to and faith in the buddhas. The practices of repentance, requesting, rejoicing and dedicating merits to the attainment of Buddhahood in front of the buddhas are also included in the easy path and the last practice of merit dedication summarizes all these practices.”

「原則的說，易行道是廣義的念佛法門。對於佛，稱（佛）名是語業，禮拜是身業，憶念是意業：這是對佛敬信而起的清淨三業。在佛前，修懺悔行，勸請行，隨喜行，以回向佛道作結。」（《華雨集》第二冊，page 137）

or present buddhas of the ten directions before their images, can yield the benefit of reducing karmic forces that will bring about cyclic existence for eons. This is possible due to the initial fundamental vows of those buddhas. Although these practices require personal effort to prostrate, recite, and contemplate, the benefits gained from these practices indeed indicate the meaning of “reliance on others’ powers;” that is, the blessings of the buddhas. In ordinary people’s minds, reciting the buddhas’ names is similar to the situation when a person calls to the heavens or his or her parents for help. This is easily understood to have the meaning of seeking others’ assistance. The following example demonstrates the reason the practice of recollecting the buddhas, which initially was based on a self-effort approach, developed to become a practice that relies on others’ powers.

In the *Exegesis on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* it is said that as everyone on the ship recited the buddha’s name, they avoided the tragedy of being eaten by the king of makara fish.⁴⁶ The reason was that in a previous life this makara fish was a Buddhist disciple. Therefore, when it heard the words “I pay homage to the buddha,” it then closed its mouth and the people on the boat were not swallowed up. This narrative does not suggest the meaning of being saved by the power of a buddha. However, in terms of the point of avoiding calamities, the reason does not seem so ideal because reciting “I pay homage to the buddha” would be useless if the king of makara fish had not been a Buddhist in a previous life. This Buddhist legend should have the element of reliance on another’s power, just like the account found in the *Mahākaruṇāpuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, translated by Narendrayaśas in the Gao Qi dynasty. It says:

In the past there was a great merchant leader who led all the merchants to sea. When their ship was out at sea, a giant [makara] fish suddenly appeared and wanted to swallow the ship ... The merchant leader then bared his right shoulder and his right knee knelt down on the deck of the ship. He then wholeheartedly recollected the buddha. With his palms joined together he prostrated and shouted loudly “I pay homage to all the buddhas, the ones who have attained great fearlessness, possesses great compassion, and takes pity on all beings!” The merchant leader repeated these words three times and then all the merchants followed. With their palms joined together, they

⁴⁶ Makara is a mythical sea monster or some sort of giant sea creature that can swallow whole boats.

made prostrations and shouted the same words. At that time when the makara fish heard the buddhas' names and the sounds, it developed a mind of great respect and love and ceased the thought of killing. As a result, the makara fish closed its mouth. Then, Ānanda, the merchant leader and all the merchants gained security and safety and avoided a disaster with that fish.

The merchants avoided death because the king of makara fish heard the buddhas' names and ceased the thought of killing. According to the account, this result is due the power of the buddhas. In the text, *Primary Practices of Contemplation*, the idea about avoiding disaster due to the power of buddhas is more explicitly pointed out, which says:

... those who recollect any buddha will reduce their countless severe faults and then attain meditative concentration. When they wholeheartedly and single-mindedly recollect the buddha, the buddha also bears them in mind. This is just like the situation where a person is held in regard by a king and then that person's enemies and debtors dare not harm the person.

When people recollect a buddha, that buddha will bear them in mind too, and as a result of relying on the protection of a buddha's power they will avoid calamities and gain peace. This is clearly an indication of "reliance on others' powers." It would appear much more logical to use this reason to explain why recollecting the buddha allowed the merchants to avoid the tragedy with the makara king. Is that not so?

In the development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, the skilful means of the easy path largely transformed into the practices that rely on others' powers. These practices include not only recollecting the buddhas, but also recollecting the bodhisattvas. For example, in the *Daśabhūmi-vibhāsā*, after the teaching about the recollection of the ten buddhas in the ten directions, it is said that "those who single-mindedly recite the names of Amitābha and the other buddhas, as well as all the great bodhisattvas will be able to attain the stage of non-regression." The great bodhisattvas are those who have attained the level of deep understanding of the truth regarding non-origination and higher. In the *Mahāyāna sūtras*, most of the great bodhisattvas come from other worlds. Some are from our world and they, too, are bodhisattvas who are unfathomable, and their existence is known through faith-based practices.