

# **The sitting posture and characteristic of Venerable Ānanda in Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra<sup>1</sup>**

Sudaporn Khiewngamdee

*Pali and Sanskrit Program, Department of Oriental Language, Faculty of  
Humanities, Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand  
Corresponding author: sudaporn\_khiewngamdee@hotmail.com*

## **Abstract**

Venerable Ānanda was well known as one of the Buddha's principal disciples. He was regarded as an excellent listener and the Śākyamuni Buddha's brother. In Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra, one of Mahāyāna Sūtras in the famous school of Pure Land, it narrated about the Pure Land of Amitābha with Ānanda in the role of a hearer of the story of the Sukhāvatī realm from Śākyamuni Buddha. Perhaps, most readers are interested in the teaching of the scriptures. However, the author has some suspicions about some characters that appeared in the Sūtra. Other than the role of Ānanda who asked the Buddha to tell the story of the Pure Land, another interesting role is the sitting posture and characteristics of Ānanda at the beginning of this story, and in other Sūtras. There is some doubts that the author has observed about his personal character. Thus, the purpose of this article is to study the posture of Ānanda while approaching the Buddha as it appeared in this Sūtra when compared with other Sūtras.

The result of this study reveals that in the Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra, the role in the beginning of Ānanda or other great disciples as an interlocutor of the dharma with the Buddha in other Mahāyāna Sūtras, were narrated with similar styles of writing influence by other older texts, as well as by the traditional decorum in approaching the Buddha, which comprised three steps: 1. uncovering uttarāsaṅga from the right shoulder, 2. placing the right knee

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on the ground, and 3. joining the palms together with respect. The sitting postures of the disciples are particularly interesting because the Mahāyāna sect is likely to create stranger postures than primitive Buddhism. In a comparative study of a traditional decorum for approaching the Buddha of the Theravāda sect, the Tripitaka described only two steps by omitting the sitting postures. However, something is doubtful, when the junior Bhikṣus approached the senior Bhikṣus, it described the sitting postures in three steps: 1. uncovering uttarāsaṅga from the right shoulder, 2. squatting on the ground, 3. joining the palms together with respect.

**Keywords:** The sitting posture; Mahāyāna Sūtras; Ānanda

## Introduction

In the Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra of the Sukhāvatī sect has 5 main characters: Śakyamunī (the story teller), Reverend Ānanda (the main interlocutor), Lokeśvararāja (a companion), Bhikṣu Dharmākara or Āmitābha (the most important character), Ajita Bodhisattva (another interlocutor). But in this article, the researcher focuses merely on analyzing the role of Ānanda.

## Story's Beginning

In most Mahayana sutras, the beginning narrates about the place where the Śakyamunī stayed before preaching, with the number of disciples and Bodhisattvas. Then He tells stories for the disciples, after that some chief disciples go and squat in front of Him how to solve asking problems. The most famous disciples who became His interlocutors are: Ānanda, Śāriputra, Subhūti, Mañjuśrī, etc. The Mahāyāna Sūtras usually begin with “Thus I have heard... At one time the Bhagavān...” (Sk: *evaṃ mayā śrutam, ekasmin samaye bhagavān...*). This is the most popular sentence of several sutras whose owner is Ānanda, the well versed, for he had been given a boon from the Buddha that if the Buddha preaches where Ānanda is absent, He would tell him again. Ānanda had the most retentive memory, and it is accepted that he is the store of the Buddha's teachings. He also has a duty for answering the dharma. Thus he narrates the sutras that he had heard.

An example of this popular sentence in the beginning of the Vajra Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra:

Thus I have heard: One time the Buddha was staying at the garden retreat of Anāthapiṇḍada, in the Jeta Grove near śrāvastī, together with a gathering of great bhikṣus, twelve hundred and fifty in all, and a great numbers of the great bodhisattvas<sup>2</sup>.

Another example from the beginning of the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra:

Thus have I heard at one time. The Buddha was staying in the garden of Amrapālī, in the city of Vaisālī, attended by a great

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<sup>2</sup>*evaṃ mayā śrutam| ekasmin samaye bhagavān śrāvastyāṃ viharati sma jetavane'nāthapiṇḍadasyārāme mahatā bhikṣusaṃghena sārthaṃ trayodaśabhirbhikṣuśataiḥ sambahulaiśca bodhisattvairmahāsattvaiḥ|* (Vajra 1), see, Sathien Bodhinanda.(1982) Vajra Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.(Bangkok: Mahamakut Educational Council,p. 1).

gathering of bhikṣus there were eight thousand, and thirty-two thousand bodhisattvas<sup>3</sup>

While, the Prajñā Pāramita Hridaya Sūtra begins with:

Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was staying in Rājagṛha at Vulture Peak mountain, together with a great gathering of the saṅgha of bhikṣus and a great gathering of the saṅgha of bodhisattvas<sup>4</sup>.

The beginning part of the Bhaiṣajyaguru Vaiḍūryaprabhārāja Sūtra is as follows:

Thus have I heard: Once the Buddha was traveling through various lands to teach the Dharma. When he arrived in Vaisālī, he rested under the Tree of Music, accompanied by eight thousand great bhikṣus and thirty-six thousand Bodhisattvas and Mahāsattvas, as well as Kings, Ministers, Brahmins, Laymen, Laywomen, Gods, Nāgas, Yakṣas, Gandharvas, Āsura, Garuḍa, Kinnaras, Dragons and other human and non-human beings<sup>5</sup>.

The Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra begins with the similar text, as found in other Mahāyāna Sūtras:

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<sup>3</sup>evaṃ mayā śrutam/ ekasmin samaye bhagavān vaiśālyāṃ viharati sma, āmrāpālīvanemahatābhikṣusaṅghenasārdhamāṣṭābhīrbhikṣusahasraiḥ, dvātriṃśatā ca bodhisattvasahasraiḥ... (Vimala 1), see, Sathien Bodhinanda. (1978) Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra. (Bangkok: Mahamakut Educational Council, p 1).

<sup>4</sup>evaṃ mayā śrutam| ekasmin samaye bhagavān rājagṛhe viharati sma grḍhrakūṭeparvatemahatābhikṣusaṅghenasārdhammahatācabodhisattvasaṅghena| (Prajñā Hridaya 1), see, Sujivobhikṣu. (1979) Mahāyāna Sūtra, Prajñā Pāramita Hridaya Sūtra and Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra. (Bangkok : Mahamakut Educational Council, p 1).

<sup>5</sup>evaṃmayāśrutam| ekasminsamayebhagavānjanapadacaryāṃcaramāṇo' nupūrveṇa yena vaiśālīm mahānagarīm tenānuprāpto'bhūt | tatra khalu bhagavān vaiśālyāṃ viharati sma vādyasvaravṛkṣamūle mahatā bhikṣusaṅghena sārdhamāṣṭābhīrbhikṣusahasraiḥ ṣaṭ-triṃśadbhiḥca bodhisattvasahasraiḥ sārdham rājāmātyabrāhmaṇagṛhapatisamhatyā devanāgayakṣagandharvāsūragaruḍakinnā ramahoraga manuṣyāmanuṣyaparśadā ca parivṛtaḥ puraskṛto dharmam deśayati sma | (Bhaiṣajyaguru 1), see, Minh Thanh (2001) Sutra of the Medicine. (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, p 17).

Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying on the Vulture Peak in Rājagriha with a large company of thirty-two thousand bhikṣus<sup>6</sup>.



The scene in this story begins with narration of the place of the Buddha's preaching, Vulture Peak (sk: gridhrikūṭa). He sits as the principal surrounded by the large number of disciples. In other Mahāyāna Sūtras also begin with this scene, but with different places for preaching.

### Commencement of conversation and actions

After the beginning, the important role is narration of the Śākyamunī, who describes things in the Sūkhāvatī Lokadhātu, and the Amitabha's history to Ānanda and other disciples. When suspicion arises, Ānanda is the chief disciple to ask those questions, and Śākyamunī would answer by reckoning the interlocutor's name always as a matter of courtesy. After that, He begins the content in detail, namely, reckoning "O Ānanda!" (sk: Ānanda) The following is from the Sūkhāvatīvyūha Sūtra, when the Buddha answers Ānanda on Pranidhāna Viśeṣa :

That Bhikṣu Dharmākara, the noble-minded Bodhisattva, O Ānanda, was possessed of this perfection of prayers. And a few Bodhisattvas only, O Ānanda, are possessed of such a perfection of prayers. There is on this earth an appearance of a few only of such prayers. Of a few, however, existence cannot be denied. 'Then again, O Ānanda, this Bhikṣu Dharmakāra having recited these prayers before the Bhagavat Lokeśvararāja, the Tathāgata, and before the world including gods, Mara, and Brahman, and

before people consisting of Śramanas and Brahmanas with gods,

<sup>6</sup>evaṃ mayā śrutam | ekasmin samaye bhagavān rājagṛhe viharati sma grdhrakūṭaparvate mahatā bhikṣusamghena sārddham dvātriṅśatā bhikṣusahasraiḥ, (Sukhāvatī 1)

men, and fighting spirits, was established in the attainment of the true promise.<sup>7</sup>

Generally, the commencing part of the Mahāyāna Sūtras is alike, as if in imitation of each other. They begin with description of place, events, and numbers of the audience. Thus, the interlocutor or the asker arises from the seat, covers the cloth on the shoulder, kneels on the direction of the Buddha, and pays reverence. After that, the conversation of dharma begins.

The following is from the Mahāyāna Sūtra “Bhaiṣajyaguru Vaiḍūryaprabhārāja Sūtra”, Śākyamuni’s interlocutor is Mañjuśrī:

At that time, the Bodhisattva Manjusri, Prince of the Dharma, receiving the awesome spiritual power of the Buddha, rose from his seat, adjusted his robe to bare his shoulder and knelt on his right knee. He bowed deeply, and with palms joined, respectfully addressed the Buddha: “World-Honored One, may I please request you to explain the various names and titles, the great, past vows and the superlative virtues of the Buddhas, so that those who are listening to you will be freed of karmic obstructions, while in the future, sentient beings in the Dharma Semblance Age will also derive great benefit and joy.”<sup>8</sup>

In the Mahāyāna Sūtra, Laṃkāvatāra, Śākyamuni’s interlocutor is Mahāmāti Bodhisattva, it begins with:

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<sup>7</sup>evamrūpayānanda praṇidhānasamṣadā sa dharmākaro bhikṣurbodhisattvo mahāsattvaḥ samanvāgato’bhūt| evamrūpayā cānanda praṇidhānasamṣadālpakā bodhisattvaḥ samanvāgatāḥ | alpakānāṃ caivamrūpāṇāṃ praṇidhānāṃ loke prādurbhāvo bhavati parīttānāṃ| na punaḥ sarvaśo nāsti| sa khalu punarānanda dharmākaro bhikṣustasya bhagavato lokaśvararājasya tathāgatasya purataḥ sadevakasya lokasya samārakasya sabrahmakasya saśramaṇabrāhmaṇikāyāḥ prajāyāḥ sadevamānuṣāsuraṇāṃ purata imānevamrūpāṇ praṇidhānaviśeṣānniridīśya yathābhūtapratijñāpratipattiḥ’bhūt| (Sūkhāvatī 10)

<sup>8</sup>atha khalu mañjuśrīrdharmarājaputro buddhānubhāvenotthāyāsanād ekasamuttarāsaṅgaṃ kṛtvā dakṣiṇaṃ jānumaṇḍalaṃ pṛthivyāṃ pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavāṃstenāñjaliṃ praṇamya bhagavantametadavoca-deśayatu bhagavaṃsteṣāṃ tathāgatānāṃ nāmāni, teṣāṃ pūrvapraṇidhānavistaravibhaṅgaṃ | vayaṃ śrutvā sarvakarmāvaraṇāni viśodhayema paścime kāle paścime samaye saddharmapratirūpake vartamāne sattvānāmanugrahamupādāya | (Bhaiṣajyaguru 1)

At that time Mahāmati the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva who had visited all the Buddha-lands, together with all the Bodhisattvas, rose from his seat by the power of the Buddhas, drawing his upper garment over one shoulder, placing his right knee on the ground and with folded hands, turning in the direction of the Bhagavān, respectfully saluted him, and praised him with the following verses: “As thou reviewest the world with thy transcendental knowledge and compassion, it is to thee like an ethereal flower, of which one cannot say whether it is born or destroyed, as [the category of] being and non-being is inapplicable to it.”<sup>9</sup>

An example of the conversation in the Mahāyāna Sūtra, Vajraprajñāpāramitā Sūtra, in which Śākyamunī’s interlocutor is Bhikṣu Subhūti, is as follows:

At that time, the venerable Subhūti was amidst the great congregation. He then rose from his seat, adjusted his robes to one shoulder, and with his right knee touching the ground. With palms joined in reverence, he addressed the Buddha: “Extraordinary, World Honored One, is the Tathāgata’s skillful mindfulness of the bodhisattvas, and his skillful entrustment to the bodhisattvas.”<sup>10</sup>

While in the Sūkhāvatīvyūha Sūtra, the interlocutor is Ānanda, who acts towards the Buddha in the same way, and the commencing part is similar to most of the Mahāyāna Sūtras:

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<sup>9</sup>atha khalu mahāmatirbodhisattvo mahāsattvo mahāmatibodhisattvasahitaḥ sarvabuddhakṣetrānucārī buddhānubhāvenotthāyāsanādekāmsamuttrāsaṅgaṃ kṛtvādakṣiṇaṃ jānumaṇḍalaṃ prthivyāṃ pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavāns tenāñjalim praṇamya bhagavantaṃ gāthābhirabhyastāvīt utpādabhaṅgarahito lokaḥ khapuspasamaṇibhaḥ | sadasan-nopaladdhaste prajñyā kṛpayā ca te || (Lamkāvatāra 2/1)

<sup>10</sup>atha khalvāyusmān subhūtirutthāyāsanādekāmsamuttrāsaṅgaṃ kṛtvā dakṣiṇaṃ jānumaṇḍalaṃ prthivyāṃ pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavānstenāñjalim praṇamya bhagavantametadavocāt āścaryaṃ bhagavan, paramāścaryaṃ sugata, yāvad eva tathāgatenārhatā samyaksambuddhena bodhisattvā mahāsattvā anupariḡhītāḥ paramaṇānugraheṇa | (Vajra 1) see, Dhyana Master Hsuan Hua (1974) The Diamond sutra. (San Francisco: The Sino-American Buddhist Association,p 70).

At that time the Venerable Ānanda rose from his seat, bared his right shoulder, prostrated himself, kneeling his right knee on the ground, and joining his palms in reverence to the direction of the Buddha, said to Him, “World-Honored One, today all your senses are radiant with joy, your body is serene and glorious, and your august countenance is as majestic as a clear mirror whose brightness radiates outward and inward.”<sup>11</sup>

From the above statements, it is worth noting the action of the interlocutor of dharma, who is approaching the Buddha as presentative of the saṅgha for asking questions. It is Mahayana manners for approaching and making reverence to the Buddha in 3 steps : lowering the upper garment over one shoulder, kneeling the right knee on the ground, and joining the palms to the direction of the Buddha. All the three steps show reverence and physical purification.

It is also well known that the upper garment should be covered neatly outside the temple. While, approaching the elder bhikṣus, the upper garment should be covered on the (left) shoulder (keeping the right shoulder open). If that was not so, it is considered as betraying the tradition and not showing respect. The manner of covering this robe may be influenced by the orthodox Theravāda, for it is said clearly in the Theravāda Tipiṭaka, in Sekhiyavatra, that “*It should be recognized to cover the body neatly... do cover the navel and knees neatly, do arrange the both rims equally, do cover readily, in making reverence or doing vinaiya kamma, **having arranged uttarāsaṅgha over the one shoulder***”<sup>12</sup>

For the sitting posture of the disciples while approaching the Buddha for asking questions, most Mahāyāna scriptures designate the sitting posture as, kneeling the right knee on the ground, and joining the palms, heading to the direction of the Buddha. It's not clear why this posture is used. It might be influenced from a manner of paying respect to the highest ruler as

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<sup>11</sup>atha khalvāyusmānānda utthāyāsamādekāṁsamuttarāsaṅgaṁ kṛtvā dakṣiṇaṁ jānumaṇḍalaṁ pṛthivyāṁ pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavāṁstenāñjaliṁ praṇamya bhagavantametadavocat-viprasannāni tava bhagavata indriyāṇi, pariśuddhaśchavivarnaḥ, paryavadāto mukhavarṇaḥ pītanirbhāsaḥ | (Sūkhāvatī 2)

<sup>12</sup> Mahā.Dutiya. 2/1-9/1-7 [Version: Thai]



emperor in the Eastern Culture. The posture of paying respect to the Chinese emperor in the ancient Chinese culture is in the same posture. Whatever the reason is, it can be concluded that this sitting posture is the Mahāyāna custom of paying reverence to the Buddha. While in the Theravāda Tipiṭaka, the description of approaching of the Buddha tells merely of covering the upper garment, and joining the palms heading to the Buddha direction, without any description of the sitting posture as in the Mahāyāna Sūtras. For example, the seventh Vinaya Piṭaka, Culla Vagga, Part II, Pātimokkhaṭṭhapana Khandhaka:

“At that time, the Buddha was staying at the Prāsāda of Migārmārtā, in Pubbārāma, in the city of Sāvattthi. On the Uposatha, full moon day, the Buddha rounded by the saṅghas. **Ānanda, in the middle of the night, the first watch passed, rose from the seat, having arranged the upper robe over one shoulder, joining the palms, heading to the Buddha, said...**”<sup>13</sup>

An example from the seventeenth Suttanta Piṭaka, Puṇṇama Sutta, in the Saṃyuttanikāya, Khandhavāravagga, is as follows:

“At that time, **a bhikṣu rose from the seat, covered the upper robe on one shoulder, joining the palms, heading to the Buddha**, said to Him that O the Bliss One, may I ask a question, if you give me a chance to solve the problem for me. The Buddha answered that, O bhikṣu, if so, should you sit there on your own seat, ask your question as you intended...”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> tena samayena buddho bhagavā sāvattthiyaṃ viharati pubbārāme migāramātu pāsāde tena kho pana samayena bhagavā tadahuposathe paṇṇarase bhikkhusaṅghaparivuto nisinnō hoti athakho āyasmā ānando abhikkantāya rattiyaṃ nikkhante paṭhame yāme utthāyāsanaṃ ekamsaṃ uttarāsaṅgaṃ karitvā yena bhagavā tenaṇjaliṃ paṇāmetvā bhagavantaṃ etadavoca... (Vinai.Cull. 7/447/483)

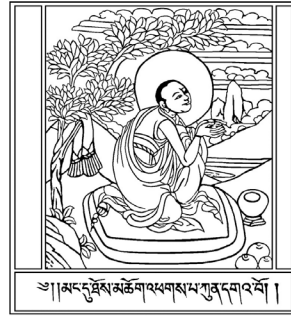
<sup>14</sup> atha kho aññataro bhikkhu utthāyāsanaṃ ekamsaṃ uttarāsaṅgaṃ karitvā yene bhagavā tenaṇjalimpaṇāmetvā bhagavantaṃ etadavoca puccheyyāhaṃ bhante bhagavantaṃ kiñcideva desam sace me bhagavā okāsaṃ karoti pañhassa veyyākaraṇāyāti tenahi tvaṃ bhikkhu sake āsane nisīditvā pucchāyadākaṃkhasīti... (saṅ. khandh. 17/183/121)



**Figure 1** The custom sitting posture in Mahāyāna Sūtras



**Figure 2** Bhikṣu Subhūti's sitting posture while conversation in front of the Buddha, in the Vajra Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra



**Figure 3** Ananda in Tibetan Art

It is concluded that the manner of approaching the Buddha in order to listen to dharma in the Theravāda Tipiṭaka does not describe the sitting posture as in the Mahāyāna Sūtras, but describes only covering of the robe and joining of the palms. It is important to note that the sitting posture in the Tipiṭaka, there is a description of the younger bhikṣus approaching the elder ones, it also describes the sitting posture, called in Thai “Nang Krayong” (squatting on the ground), which is different from the description of approaching to the Buddha, omitting the sitting posture. For example, in the Cīvaravagga, the third item, Vinaiya Piṭaka Vol. II, Mahāvibhaṅga, Part II:

**“That bhikṣu should approach to several bhikṣus, having arranged the upper robe over one shoulder, prostrate himself at the elders’ feet, squatting on the ground, joining palms, and said that, Elders, this untimely robe is possessed by me. Its possession passes the period of ten days. It must be discarded. I hereby give it up to all of you...”<sup>15</sup>**

<sup>15</sup> tena bhikkhunā sambahule bhikkhū upasaṅkamitvā ekamsaṃ uttarāsaṅgaṃ karitvā vuḍḍhānaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ pāde vanditvā ukkuṭṭikaṃ nisīditvā añjaliṃ paggaḥetvā evamassa vacanīyo idaṃ me bhante cīvaraṃ dasāhātikantaṃ nissaggiyaṃ imāhaṃ āyasmantānaṃ nissajjāmīti ... (Vinai. Mahā. 2/5/4)

Another example from Codanāvattthubhāṇavāra, Vinayapiṭaka Vol. IV , Mahāvagga, Part I, is as follows:

“The sick bhikṣus should approach to another bhikṣu, having arranged the upper robe over one shoulder, squatting on the ground, joining palms, and said that, I would give consent, please take my consent from me.” “I express my consent, please accept and inform the Saṅgha. The receiver bhikṣu can accept it either bodily or verbal or with both expressions. By this means, the consent of a sick bhikṣu has been already admitted...”<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 4** Poṣture of Kra Yong, squatting on the ground (sitting down on the haunches)

## Conclusion

The commencement of the Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra is as described in most Mahāyāna Sūtras, beginning with the popular statement of Ānanda, who is well versed in the sutras, “Thus I heard, at one time, the Buddha...” The scene in the beginning of the Sutra is alike, except for the place and the chief disciples who are the interlocutors of the Buddha. The important aspect is the manner of approaching the Buddha in the way of Mahāyāna, in commencement of the conversation. There are three actions as tradition: covering the upper garment on the (left) shoulder, kneeling and heading to the Buddha, and joining the palms to pay reverence. It is believed that this manner is a custom for

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16 tena gilānena bhikkhunā ekaṃ bhikkhuṃ upasaṅkamitvā ekaṃsaṃ uttarāsaṅgaṃ karitvā ukkuṭikaṃ nisīditvā añjaliṃ paggaḥetvā evamaṣṣa vacanīyo chandaṃ dammi chandaṃ me hara chandaṃ me ārocehīti kāyena viññāpeti vācāya viññāpeti kāyena vācāya viññāpeti dinno hoti chando...(Vinai.Mahā. 4/182/237)

paying reverence to the Buddha by the Mahāyāna disciples, which is different from the Theravāda. The researcher notices that the manner of covering the upper robe on the left shoulder when approaching the elder bhikṣus might be influenced from the Theravāda. But the origin of the sitting posture, kneeling only with the right knee on the ground for conversation with the Buddha is unknown, and no reason is found why it should be so. The researcher also believes that it may be the eastern culture to show humbleness and loyalty to their masters.

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