

The sitting posture and characteristic of Venerable Ānanda in Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra¹

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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, Mañjuśri, etc. The *Mahāyāna Sūtras* usually begin with “Thus I have heard... At one time the Bhagavān...” (Sk: evam 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 śrāvasti, together with a gathering of great bhikṣus, twelve hundred and fifty in all, and a great numbers of the great bodhisattvas².

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 Amrapāli, in the city of Vaisālī, attended by a great

²evam mayā śrutam| ekasmin samaye bhagavān śrāvastyām viharati sma jetavane'�āthapiṇḍadasyārāme mahatā bhikṣusamghena sārthaṁ trayodaśabhirbhikṣusataiḥ saṁbahulaiśca 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 bodhisattvas³

While, the Prajñā Pāramita Hridaya Sūtra begins with:

Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was staying in Rājagrha at Vulture Peak mountain, together with a great gathering of the saṅgha of bhikshus and a great gathering of the saṅgha of bodhisattvas⁴.

The beginning part of the Bhaisajyaguru Vaidūryaprabhārāja 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 beings⁵.

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

³evam mayā śrutam/ ekasmin samaye bhagavān vaiśālyām viharati sma, āmrāpālīvanemahatābhikṣusaṅghenāsārdhaṁmaṭābhīrbhikṣusahasraiḥ, dvātriṁśatā ca bodhisattvasahasraiḥ... (Vimala 1), see, Sathien Bodhinanda. (1978) Vimalakīrtī Nirdeśa Sūtra. (Bangkok: Mahamakut Educational Council, p 1).

⁴evam mayā śrutam| ekasmin samaye bhagavān rājagrhe viharati sma gṛdhraṅkūṭeparvate mahatābhikṣusaṅghenāsārdhaṁ mahatā ca bodhisattvasaṅghena| (Prajñā Hridaya 1), see, Sujivobhikshu. (1979) Mahāyāna Sūtra, Prajñā Pāramita Hridaya Sūtra and Sukhāvatī vyūha Sūtra. (Bangkok : Mahamakut Educational Council, p 1).

⁵evam mayā śrutam| ekasmin samaye bhagavān janapadacaryām caramāṇo' nupūrvena yena vaiśālīm mahānagarīm tenānuprāpto'bhūt | tatra khalu bhagavān vaiśālyām viharati sma vādyasvaravṛkṣamūle mahatā bhikṣusaṅghena sārdhaṁmaṭābhīrbhikṣusahasraiḥ ṣaṭ-triṁśadbhīśca bodhisattvasahasraiḥ sārdhaṁ rājāmātya brāhmaṇagrha patisarinhatyā devanāgaya kṣagandharvā sura garuḍa kinna ramahoraga manusyā manusya parṣadā ca parivṛtaḥ puraskṛto dharmaṇ desayati sma | (Bhaisajyaguru 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 Rājagṛiha with a large company of thirty-two thousand bhikṣus⁶.



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 nobleminded 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 Śramaṇas and Brahmaṇas with gods,
⁶evam mayā śrutam | ekasmin samaye bhagavān rājagrhe viharati sma
grdhrakūṭaparvate mahatā bhikṣusamghena sārdham dvātriñśatā bhikṣusahasraiḥ,
(Sukhāvatī 1)

men, and fighting spirits, was established in the attainment of the true promise.⁷

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 Vaīḍūryaprabhārāja Sūtra”, Śakyamunī’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.”⁸

In the Mahāyāna Sūtra, Lāmkāvatāra, Śakyamunī’s interlocutor is Mahāmati Bodhisattva, it begins with:

⁷evaṁrūpayānanda praṇidhānasampadā sa dharmākaro bhikṣurbodhisattvo mahāsattvah samanvāgato’bhūt| evaṁrūpayā cānanda praṇidhānasampadālpakā bodhisattvāḥ samanvāgatāḥ | alpakanām caivamrūpānām praṇidhīnām loke prādurbhāvo bhavati parīttānām| na punaḥ sarvaśo nāsti| sa khalu punarānanda dharmākaro bhikṣustasya bhagavato lokeśvararājasya tathāgatasya purataḥ sadevakasya lokasya samārakasya sabrahmakasya saśramaṇabrahmaṇikāyāḥ prajāyāḥ sadevamānuśāsurāyāḥ purata imānevaṁrūpān praṇidhānavišeśānnirdiśya yathābhūtāpratijñāpratipratipratiṣṭhito’bhūt| (Sūkhāvatī 10)

⁸atha khalu mañjuśrīrdharmarājaputro buddhānubhāvenotthāyāsanād ekāṁsamuttarāsaṅgam kṛtvā dakṣiṇām jānumaṇḍalam pṛthivyām pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavāṁstenāñjaliṁ praṇamya bhagavantametadavocat-deśayatu bhagavamsteśām tathāgatānām nāmāni, teśām pūrvapraṇidhānavistaravibhaṅgam | vayaṁ 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.”⁹

An example of the conversation in the Mahāyāna Sūtra, Vajraprajñāpāramitā Sūtra, in which Śakyamuni’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.”¹⁰

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:

⁹atha khalu mahāmatirbodhisattvo mahāsattvo mahāmatibodhisattvasahitaḥ sarvabuddhakṣetrānucārī buddhānubhāveno thāyāsanādēkāṁsamuttrāsaṅgam kṛtvādakṣināṁ jānumaṇḍalam pṛthivyāṁ pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavāṁs tenāñjaliṁ praṇamya bhagavantam gāthābhirabhyāṣṭāvīt utpādabhaṅgarahito lokaḥ khapuspasamnibhāḥ | sadasan-nopaladdhaste prajñā kṛpayā ca te || (Lamkāvatāra 2/1)

¹⁰ atha khalvāyuṣmān subhūtirutthāyāsanādēkāṁsamuttarāsaṅgam kṛtvā dakṣināṁ jānumaṇḍalam pṛthivyāṁ pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavāṁstenāñjaliṁ praṇamya bhagavantam etadavocat- āścaryaṁ bhagavan, paramāścaryaṁ sugata, yāvad eva tathāgatenārhatā samyaksam̄buddhena bodhisattvā mahāsattvā anuparigṛhitāḥ paramenānugraheṇa | (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.”¹¹

From the above statements, it is worth noting the action of the interlocutor of dharma, who is approaching the Buddha as representative 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*”¹²

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

¹¹atha khalvāyuṣmānānda utthāyāsamādekaṁsaṁuttarāsaṅgam kṛtvā dakṣiṇāṁ jānumaṇḍalam pṛthivyāṁ pratiṣṭhāpya yena bhagavāṁstenāñjaliṁ pranamya bhagavantametadavocat-viprasannāni tava bhagavata indriyāṇi, pariśuddhaśchavivarnāḥ, paryavadāto mukhavarnāḥ pītanirbhāsaḥ | (Sūkhāvatī 2)

¹² 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 Vinaiya Piṭaka, Culla Vagga, Part II, Pātimokkhaṭhapanā Khandhaka:

“At that time, the Buddha was staying at the Prāsāda of Migārmārtā, in Pubbārāma, in the city of Sāvatthi. 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...”¹³**

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...”¹⁴

¹³ tena samayena buddho bhagavā sāvatthiyam viharati pubbārāme migāramātu pāsāde tena kho pana samayena bhagavā tadauposathe panṇarase bhikkhusaṅghaparivuto nisinno hoti athakho āyasmā ānando abhikkantāya rattiyyā nikkhante paṭhame yāme uṭṭhāyāsanā ekaṁsaṁ uttarāsaṅgam karitvā yena bhagavā tenañjalim pañāmetvā bhagavantam etadavoca... (Vinai.Cull. 7/447/483)

¹⁴ atha kho aññataro bhikkhu uṭṭhāyāsanā ekaṁsaṁ uttarāsaṅgam karitvā yene bhagavā tenañjalim pañāmetvā bhagavantam etadavoca puccheyyāham bhante bhagavantam kiñcideva desaṁ sace me bhagavā okāsaṁ karoti pañhassa veyyākaraṇāyāti tenahi tvaṁ bhikkhu sake āsane nisīditvā puccha yadākaṁkhasīti... (sañ. khandh. 17/183/121)



Figure 1 The custom sitting posture in Mahāyāna Sutras



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

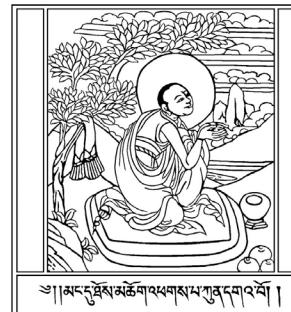


Figure 3 Ananda in Tibetan Art

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 Sutras, 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...”¹⁵

¹⁵ tena bhikkhunā sambahule bhikkhū upasaṅkamitvā ekamsam uttarāsaṅgam karitvā vuḍhānam bhikkhūnam pāde vanditvā ukkuṭikam nisīditvā añjaliṁ paggahetvā evamassa vacanīyo idam me bhante cīvaraṁ dasāhātikkantam nissaggyam imāham āyasmantānam nissajjāmīti ... (Vinai.Mahā. 2/5/4)

Another example from Codanāvatthubhāṇavāra, 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...”¹⁶

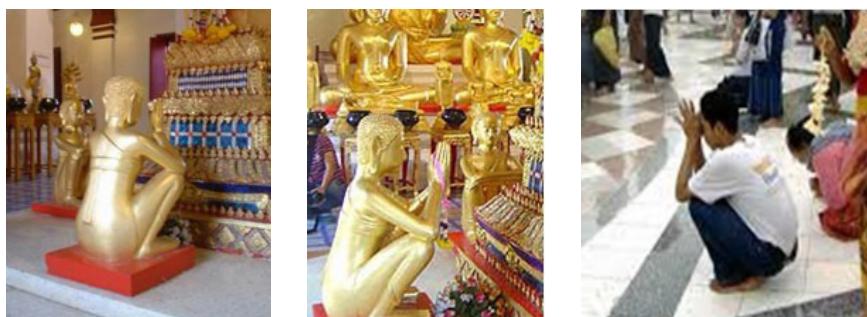


Figure 4 Posture of Kra Yong, squatting on the ground (sitting down on the haunches)

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

16 tena gilānenā bhikkhunā ekam bhikkhunū upasākamitvā ekamṣam uttarāsaṅgam karitvā ukkuṭikam niśiditvā añjalim paggahetvā evamassa vacanīyo chandam̄ dammi chandam̄ me hara chandam̄ 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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