

# Sanskrit Lesson

## Amitabha Sutra

By Bhikshuni Heng Hsien

एवं पश्चिमायां दिश्यामितायुर  
नाम तथागतो ऽमितस्कन्धो  
नाम तथागतो ऽमितध्वजो  
नाम तथागतो महाप्रभो नाम  
तथागतो महारत्नकेतुर्नाम  
तथागतः शुद्धरास्मिप्रभो नाम  
तथागतः

EVAM PAŚCINĀYĀM DIŚY-AMITĀYUR NĀMA TATHĀGATO  
'MITASKANDHO NĀMA TATHĀGATO 'MITADVAJO NĀMA  
TATHĀGATO MAHĀPRABHO NĀMA TATHĀGATO MAHĀRATNA-  
KETUR NĀMA TATHĀGATAḤ ŚUDDHARAŚMITPRABHO NĀMA  
TATHĀGATA°

"In the same way, in the Western direction there is the Thus Come One named Limitless Life, the Thus Come One named Limitless Skandha, the Thus Come One named Limitless Banner, the Thus Come One named Great Light, the Thus Come One named Great Jewelled Appearance, and the Thus Come One named Pure Beams of Light."

This lesson introduces the *pāścima* "Western" direction, citing the names of representative Buddhas. The West is the Lotus Division, whose Dharma Host is Amitābha "Limitless Light" Buddha, also known as the *tathāgata* "Thus Come One" *amitāyus* "Limitless" (*amita*) "Life" (*āyus*). Consult VBS issue #123 for make-up of the name. That lesson also explains the sound changes when *tathāgata*—another title for "Buddha"—combines with the following *a-* of *amita*, as happens in the name of the Buddha (*a*)*mita-skandha* "Limitless Skandha," and that of (*a*)*mita-dvaja* "Limitless Banner" Buddha. The masculine noun *skandha* means literally "shoulder." By extension of the idea of main branching from a central trunk, *skandha* also means "bough," "section," "troop," "heap," "aggregate," and so forth. It is the same word that refers to the five constituent elements of being, the Five Skandhas which are *rūpa* "form," *vedanā* "feeling," *saṃjñā* "thinking," *saṃskārāḥ* "formations" and *viññāna* "consciousness."

Refer back to the introduction of the Eastern direction in VBS #141 and of the Southern direction in VBS #146 for explanation of the grammar and the phrasing.

*mahā* "great" and *prabhā* "light" combine to make *mahāprabhā* in that Buddha's name. *mahā* + *ratna* "jewel" and *ketu* "appearance/brightness" form the name of the next Buddha. *śuddha* "pure/purified" + *raśmi* "cord/beam/ray" + *prabhā* add up to make "Pure Beams of Light" Buddha. The Chinese for this text after Great Light Buddha has "Great Brightness" Buddha, and then Jewelled Appearance Buddha, so it has seven Buddhas while the Sanskrit has six. Perhaps the names in Sanskrit were originally *mahāketu* "Great Brightness" Tathāgata before *ratnaketu* "Jewelled Appearance" Thus Come One (no *mahā*). The two names in which *ketu* appeared with two different meanings could have been combined by accident in the course of manuscript recopying. Fortunately the Chinese Buddhist tradition remains unbroken to this day. The Chinese translations were made at dates earlier than the oldest surviving Sanskrit manuscripts. Therefore, the Chinese texts are used to correct errors that are found in the Sanskrit.

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