Liberation Through Hearing: Sound and Music in Sukhāvatī¹
Trent Walker

1. Introduction

The bar-do thos-grol is commonly known in English as “The Tibetan Book of the Dead,” but a more felicitous rendering would be “Liberation through Hearing in the Liminal State.” Although the text describes a complex visual journey that the dying person expects to experience, the title implies that liberation (grol) comes through the hearing (thos) of the text. This theme of “liberation through hearing” is not exclusive to the bar-do thos-grol; I contend that it is also a major—and as of yet overlooked—paradigm of the foundational texts of Pure Land Buddhism.

Buddhist studies scholars have commented extensively on the rich visual array of Sukhāvatī, the buddha-field of Amitābha/Amitāyus and the best-known “pure land” (Ch.: jing tu 淨土), as depicted in Sanskrit and Chinese canonical texts and East Asian art. Justifiably entranced by the visual feast of Sukhāvatī, these scholars have neglected its equally sumptuous aural features, which are not only woven throughout the foundational Pure Land texts but are also integral to the realm’s soteriological program. The texts suggest that the mechanisms for liberation in Sukhāvatī involve more than reveling in the sight of jeweled trees and flying palaces. To enter the Pure Land, one must hear the name of Amitābha or, as emphasized in some East Asian traditions, frequently recite his name. And once reborn in the Pure Land, progress along the bodhisattva path is assured by continuously hearing Dharma teachings and praises to the Three Jewels. Liberation, both inside and outside of Sukhāvatī, comes through hearing.

The aural features of Sukhāvatī are not merely part of its paradisiacal appeal, but fundamental to the soteriological program for its inhabitants. Many of the visual aspects of Sukhāvatī—kaleidoscopic arrays of

¹ This paper is a revision of an essay originally written for a seminar taught by Professor Paul Harrison at Stanford in Winter 2010, “Buddhist Visions of Paradise” (Religious Studies 251A).
jewels, displays of measureless luminosity, collapsed distinctions between the appearances of humans and
gods, and magical emanations of birds, flora, and waterways—paint a portrait of Sukhāvatī as a mythic
paradise, similar to some descriptions of Heaven found in Christian texts. Certain aural aspects of
Sukhāvatī, such as stock sonic references common to many Buddhist texts, simply complement its
paradisiacal visual appeal and lack soteriological relevance. But I contend that there are also many unique
aural features that are intended to facilitate (1) quick learning of the Dharma through hearing, (2) sung
praise of all buddhas, (3) constant mindfulness of the Three Jewels, or (4) direct encounter with the Buddha
Amitābha—four crucial aspects of the bodhisattva path.

I support this claim through a close reading and re-translation of key passages concerning the aural
features of Sukhāvatī as presented in five Pure Land texts: (1) a Sanskrit text of the Sukhāvatīvyūha
vistāramāṭrka (hereafter: LSukh) edited by Max Müller and P.L. Vaidya, (2) a Chinese translation of an
Indic text of the LSukh attributed to Saṅghavarman (hereafter: T360), (3) a Sanskrit text of the
Sukhāvatīvyūha saṃkṣiptaṃāṭrka (hereafter: SSukh) edited by Max Müller and P.L. Vaidya, (4) a Chinese
translation of an Indic text of the SSukh attributed to Kumārajīva (hereafter: T366), and (5) the Chinese text,
or possibly a Chinese translation of an earlier Central Asian text, known as the Fo shuo guan wu liang shou
fo jing (佛說觀無量壽佛經) (hereafter: T365). My findings suggest that the soteriological relevance of the
aural features of Sukhāvatī is more pronounced in the SSukh, T366, and T365 than in the LSukh and T360.
It is likely that the emphasis on Sukhāvatī’s liberative aural features developed over time, a claim that
would be strengthened by studying the early Chinese recensions of the LSukh.

Beginning with an examination of the stock and paradisiacal aural features of the LSukh and T360,
this paper goes on to analyze the soteriologically significant uses of sound and music in all five texts. This
paper serves as a small corrective to the overwhelming focus on the visual aspects of Sukhāvatī in academic
literature. Further study of the aural features in these texts may be helpful in understanding the wide array
of Pure Land liturgical music in East Asia.
2. Stock Aural Features in the LSukh and T360: Earthquakes, Offerings, and Marvelous Voices

In this section, I explore four stock elements related to music and sound in the LSukh and T360: earthquakes, standard offerings, bodhisattva’s offerings, and the marvelous voices of buddhas and bodhisattvas. I argue that the former two of these stock aural features have little soteriological significance, the latter two suggest that learning to praise all buddhas is an important aspect of the spiritual development of the bodhisattva inhabitants of Sukhāvatī, a subject I return to in Section 5.

One reason the aural features of Sukhāvatī may have been overlooked is that the LSukh and T360 both contain stock uses of music common to many Buddhist texts. One such stock event associated with music and found throughout Buddhist literature is the earthquake, followed by offerings of flowers, scents, and music. In the LSukh and T360, an earthquake occurs twice: once after Dharmākara’s vows are proclaimed and again at the conclusion of the sūtra. At each occurrence, music is played. In the former occurrence in the sūtra, the Sanskrit text reads, “hundreds of musical instruments resounded in the sky.”

The Chinese parallel to this passage is far less specific, simply reading “spontaneously [there was] music.”

In both of these cases, the music results as a consequence of a religiously and indeed cosmologically important event. As is the case for most Buddhist texts where earthquakes occur, the music plays no other role than signifying that an important event has taken place.

Another stock use of music in the LSukh is its appearance in lists of standard offerings. Four such lists appear in the Sanskrit text, although such lists are entirely absent from the Chinese texts I examined. In the Sanskrit text the typical list is “flowers, incense, lamps, scents, garlands, ointments, powder, robes,

---

2 tūryaśatā gagane’ta samprapteduh, meaning “hundreds of tūryas resounded in the sky” (Vaidya 1961, § 9). Müller and Gómez both render tūrya as “instruments.” This appears to be closer to the Sanskrit term vādyā, used elsewhere in the LSukh. I would suggest that tūrya might also be translated as “bugles,” which is the original sense of the word, or possibly as “orchestras,” which is closer to the Pāli cognate turiya (Barthankur 2003, p. 147).

3 zi ran yin yue (自然音樂). Cf. T360, 12.269c3. Yinyue, the modern term for music, occurs only three times in T360 and does not occur in the T366 or T365. In the only other parallel passage where yin yue occurs, it also is paired with the Sanskrit tūrya. This passage is connected to the second earthquake which occurs at the conclusion of the LSukh. The Sanskrit text reads, “diyamānusyakāni ca tūryāni sampravādītānyabhāvan,” or “human and divine tūryas were caused to sound together” (Vaidya 1961, § 46). The Chinese text, similar to the previous passage, reads “bai qian yin yue zi ran er zuo” (音乐自然而作), meaning “and a hundred thousand [kinds of] music occurred” (T360, 12.279a25). In this passage, yin yue takes on the meaning of “kinds of music,” which could also be used to render tūrya. Such a rendering would collapse the meaning of “musical instrument” and “orchestra” into a single term.
umbrellas, flags, banners, ensigns, and all manner of instrumental and vocal music.” The *LSukh* is hardly the only Buddhist text to emphasize the role of music in making religious offerings, so the appearance of music in such standard lists in the *LSukh* is hardly remarkable. A similar use of music, as an offering made by the devas to a buddha, occurs in T360. The text describes how the devas make various offerings to a buddha, bodhisattvas, and śrāvakas, including “various [kinds of] music.” Again, no soteriological function of sound or music is discernable.

However, in other passages of T360, more soteriologically significant aural features are present. Bodhisattva inhabitants of Sukhāvatī, rather than mere devas, are described as making musical offerings to Amitābha:

All together they play heavenly music
Producing peaceful and elegant sounds
With songs they praise the most Honored One
Making offerings to the Measureless Awakened One.

A similar use of “heavenly music” by bodhisattvas occurs later in the text of the *LSukh*, when it describes how bodhisattvas in Sukhāvatī go off to innumerable other lands to make offerings to buddhas there. The text then indicates that after these offerings are made, the bodhisattvas rejoice and “play heavenly music together in mid-air, praising the buddhas’ virtues in song accompanied by marvelous sounds.” Although similar offerings of music are found in other Mahāyāna sūtras, these passages foreshadow the more

---

4 *puspadhāpadipagandhamālāvilepanacūraṇacīvaracchatradhvajapatākāvajayantītūryasaṅgītīvādayaiḥ* (Vaidya 1961, § 37). The challenge in translating passages like these lies in the last three musical terms, *tūrya*, *saṃgīti*, and *vādyā*. One way to render them is not as separate items but as words that evoke music. Just as the three previous words in the compound, *dhvaja*, *pātāka*, and *vaijanta*, all mean, more or less, “flag,” so too could *tūrya*, *saṃgīti*, and *vādyā* be elided together to simply mean “music.” But that would eliminate the subtle shades of meaning between *tūrya* (bugle, musical instrument or orchestra), *saṃgīti* (music, chorus, concert, or symphony), and *vādyā* (to be sounded, instrumental music, musical instrument). Muller renders this as “music, concerts, and musical instruments,” whereas Gómez writes, “all kinds of instrumental and vocal music” (Gómez 1996, p. 72). In modern Hindi, *saṃgīti* may mean music, whereas *vādyā* means musical instrument (Barthakur 2003, p. 147). *Tūrya* is obsolete in most modern languages, although it persists as a Sanskrit loanword in Khmer and Thai, where it refers to instrumental music.

5 T360, 12.273c21: *zhu yin yue* (諸音樂). Although this passage it not directly parallel to the long compounds in the Sanskrit text discussed above, it does point to a relatively simple way to understand the meaning of *tūryasaṃgītīvādaya* as “various kinds of music,” including vocal and instrumental music.

6 T360, 12.272c23-24. This passage introduces a new term for music that parallels the already-witnessed Sanskrit term for “divine” or “heavenly music,” *divyatūrya*. The Chinese text reads “tian Yue” (天樂), a term that occurs twice in T360 and once in T366.

soteriologically explicit functions of music in Sukhāvatī by highlighting an important aspect of the bodhisattva path: praising all buddhas. These two passages also use richer vocabulary to describe music than the previous examples. In particular, the use of “peaceful and elegant sounds” and “marvelous sounds” suggests that the aural quality of the praises is significant. While these descriptions could be considered as part of the general conditions of wonder and beauty in Sukhāvatī, I propose that the vocal and instrumental skill the bodhisattvas display is a result of their spiritual training in the musically-enriching environment of Sukhāvatī.

A further dimension of the musical training that takes place in Sukhāvatī is revealed in another stock use of sound that occurs several times in the LSukh and T360: the marvelous voices belonging to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Descriptions of the Buddha's voice abound in Mahāyāna literature, and these texts are no exception. A line of verse in the Sanskrit text provides an example: \textit{tathāpi buddhasvaro anantaghoṣaḥ}, meaning “so also the sound (ghoṣa) of a buddha's voice (svara) is infinite.”\footnote{Vaidya 1961, § 4.} A parallel verse is found in the Chinese text: “The Rightly Awakened One’s great voice (yin) resounds in the ten directions.”\footnote{T360, 12.267a24.} Although svara, ghoṣa, and yin are, strictly speaking, terms connected to the speaking voice rather than to music, they highlight the aural quality evoked in these texts. A similar passage occurs in a later verse only found in the Chinese text, which again describes the qualities of the Buddha’s voice: “[The Buddha’s] Brahma-voice shakes like thunder / producing marvelous sounds in eight timbres.”\footnote{T360, 12.273a08.} Although the focus here again is on the Buddha’s preaching voice, the use of \textit{ba yin} (“eight timbres”) shows a distinctly musical way of understanding his voice. The Buddha’s voice is not separate from the overall state of marvelous sounds, musical and otherwise, in Sukhāvatī.

Yet the production of such marvelous sounds are also not only a special skill of Amitābha, but also a skill that the bodhisattvas in Sukhāvatī develop, at least in the Chinese text. One passage in T360 reads, “All those born in that buddha-field are endowed with such pure bodies, with all manner of marvelous

\begin{footnotes}
\item Vaidya 1961, § 4.
\item T360, 12.267a24.
\item T360, 12.273a08.
\end{footnotes}
sounds (*miao yin sheng*), spiritual powers and virtues.” The phrase *miao yin sheng* only occurs once in T360 and not at all in T366 or T365, but its meaning is similar to the passages above about the Buddha’s voice. By the end of their training in Sukhāvatī and elsewhere, all bodhisattvas indeed develop the marvelous voice of a buddha. The uniquely sonically-saturated conditions of Sukhāvatī may also be intended as an aid for bodhisattvas to develop their ability to be continuously mindful of the Three Jewels through music and to praise him with song, eventually developing the “infinite voice” of a buddha.

3. Paradisiacal Aural Features in the *LSukh* and T360: Clouds of Musical Instruments and Jeweled Trees

In this section, I take up a set of aural features unique to Pure Land texts: those that seem to be purely paradisiacal in function and have little relevance to spiritual development along the bodhisattva path. For some of these features, such as clouds of musical instruments, it is especially difficult to discern their soteriological relevance. Clouds of musical instruments, an admittedly awkward translation of the Sanskrit compound *vādyamegha*, appear only in Vow 31 of the *LSukh*: “If, Blessed One, after I have attained awakening, should there not be showers of fragrant jewel-blossoms always raining down and sweet-sounding clouds of musical instruments always playing in my buddha-field, may I not attain the unsurpassed supreme perfect awakening.” The connection between music and showers of blossoms occurs throughout the Pure Land corpus, but *vādyamegha* only occurs once and is thus difficult to comprehend. Regardless of the term’s meaning, the passage presents this aural feature as a purely paradisiacal quality of Sukhāvatī, with indeterminate consequence to the soteriological project of training bodhisattvas.

Another aural feature of Sukhāvatī as described in the *LSukh* and T360, much remarked for their visual qualities, are the jeweled trees. These trees issue forth pleasing music when blown by the wind. On the surface, this music lacks soteriological significance. The description in the Sanskrit text is quite short,

11 T360, 12.271b25-27.
and only occurs once: “And, blown by the wind, a lovely sweet sound (ghoṣa) rises from [the trees], charming and never hard to hear.”\textsuperscript{13} The use of *ghoṣa* in the Sanskrit text for “sound” does not necessarily indicate music; we saw above how the same word is used in connection with the Buddha’s voice. By contrast, the parallel passage in the Chinese text makes clear that the jeweled trees indeed produce music: “when a pure breeze [meets these jeweled trees], they spontaneously resound in harmony with subtle pentatonic scales such as the *gong* and *shang* scales.”\textsuperscript{14} Although terms like *yin yue* or *tian yue* do not appear, the reference to ancient Chinese musical scales indicates that the translator clearly intended to mean that the jeweled trees produced actual music. Other passages in the Chinese reinforce this reading: “At that time breezes in the four directions spontaneously arise and blow through the jeweled trees, producing sounds in pentatonic scales.”\textsuperscript{15} None of these passages cited so far, however, make any connection between the music and the Dharma, again suggesting that their function in Sukhāvatī is merely paradisiacal.

Later passages in T360, without parallel in the *LSukh*, begin to point to a more soteriologically-minded approach to the music of the jewel trees. One such passage reads, “When the breeze wafts over the nets and the various jeweled trees, countless subtle sounds of the Dharma (*fa yin*) are produced.”\textsuperscript{16} The phrase *fa yin* here presumably means the sound of Amitābha or possibly bodhisattvas teaching the Dharma. In this case, the soteriological import is clear: the jeweled trees facilitate the study of the Dharma by making it continuously available across Sukhāvatī.

“Sounds of the Dharma,” however, could also refer to the sound of repeating or memorizing the Dharma, a sound which would have pervaded Indian monastic dwellings.\textsuperscript{17} Given this interpretation, the text implies that the sound of monastics engaged in memorizing texts is pleasing to the ear. Moreover, it suggests that these jeweled trees help make Sukhāvatī a paradisiacal monastic environment, where one is always surrounded by the sounds of *svādhyāya* (i.e. the sounds of monastics reciting to themselves). While

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Vaidya 1961, § 16.
\item \textsuperscript{14} T360, 12.271a1-2.
\item \textsuperscript{15} T360, 12.273c17-18.
\item \textsuperscript{16} T360, 12.272a15.
\item \textsuperscript{17} This interpretation was suggested to me by Paul Harrison, citing the work of Georges Dreyfus in *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping*. Personal communication, March 2010.
\end{itemize}
such an aesthetic may persist in South Asian and Himalayan monastic traditions, in East Asia the highly
developed and elaborate melodies used to recite texts in unison in monasteries suggests that the mere sound
(or cacophony!) of memorization would not be as aesthetically valued as more strictly musical performance.

This leads to a third possible interpretation of fa yin, which follows the modern Chinese meaning of
the term: the unison recitation or performance of Dharma texts. This would suggest that Sukhāvatī is
interpreted by Saṃghavarman as a more organized monastic environment in the East Asian mode.
However, this interpretation conflicts with the naturalistic approach of this passage to sound, which implies
that the sounds of the Dharma arise spontaneously, just like the soughing of the pines (松風, Jp. matsukaze)
celebrated in East Asian literature.

A further passage in T360 about the music of the jeweled trees confirms that these “Dharma
sounds” are best understood as “natural music,” an interpretation that suggests that fa yin might not refer the
sound of Amitābha, fellow monastics, or even unison recitation. Here I will quote from Hisao Inagaki's
translation:

A king of this world possesses a hundred thousand kinds of music. From the realm ruled by a
wheel-turning monarch up to the Sixth Heaven, the sounds of the music produced in each higher
realm are ten million koṭīs of times superior to those of a lower one. The thousands of varieties of
musical sound produced in the Sixth Heaven are a thousand koṭīs of times inferior to one sound
produced from the seven-jeweled trees in the land of Amitāyus. Again, in that land, there are
thousands of varieties of natural music, which are all, without exception, sounds of the Dharma.
They are clear and serene, full of depth and resonance, delicate and harmonious; they are the most
excellent of sounds in all the worlds of the ten quarters.\(^{18}\)

Inagaki’s translation of this passage suggests that the sound of the jeweled trees are “natural music” (zi ran
ji yue 自然伎樂). The passage makes clear that these “sounds of the Dharma” are vastly superior to
ordinary royal music. This comparison suggests that the fa yin may not have any verbal content at all, but
only highly refined and subtle (wei miao 微妙) sounds. No matter which interpretation of fa yin is correct,
the passage translated by Inagaki above suggests that the soteriological functions of the music of the
jeweled trees is not always emphasized in T360. Indeed, the comparison to secular music suggests that such

music heightens the paradisiacal aspect of Sukhāvatī and only secondarily relates to the bodhisattva path.

**4. Liberative Paradisiacal Aural Features in the LSukh and T360: The Bodhi Tree and Rivers**

In contrast to the largely paradisiacal depiction of the jeweled trees, the depiction of the Bodhi tree in the LSukh and T360 emphasizes a host of soteriological benefits that arise from its music. Only one of these benefits could be classified as mundane. This mundane benefit is found in a passage from the Sanskrit text: “And again, Ānanda, the sound and voice of that Bodhi tree, when blown by the wind, reaches immeasurable worlds. And, Ānanda, for those beings whose field of hearing that Bodhi tree reaches, no ear diseases should be expected from now until they reach awakening.”

This benefit appears not to benefit the inhabitants of Sukhāvatī, but rather those in “immeasurable worlds.” Although the benefit appears mundane on the surface, a person with ear diseases would likely not be able to hear the Dharma, thus limiting him from the aural features of Sukhāvatī.

In T360, the liberative function of the Bodhi's tree's sound is made more explicit. Here I quote again from Inagaki's translation:

> When a gentle breeze wafts through its branches and leaves, innumerable exquisite Dharma-sounds arise, which spread far and wide, pervading all the other Buddha-lands in the ten quarters. Those who hear the sounds attain penetrating insight into dharmas and dwell in the Stage of Non-retrogression.

In this passage, the text notes that hearing these “sounds of the Dharma” leads to supramundane “insight” (ren, perhaps better understood as tolerance, Sk. ksānti) and spiritual attainment along the path. A further passage from T360 reinforces the role of hearing these sounds in order to attain “tolerances”: “If humans and gods from that land see this [Bodhi] tree, they attain three Dharma tolerances: first, the tolerance of sonic reverberations [of the Dharma], second, the tolerance of obeying [the Dharma], and third, the tolerance of absolute truth.”

The first tolerance, that of “sonic reverberations” (yin xiang 音響), suggests that the sounds of the Bodhi tree, reverberating across many worlds, awaken living beings to the first steps

---

19 Vaidya 1961, § 32.
of a path that eventually leads to realization of absolute truth.

The sounds of the Bodhi-tree reach many worlds; the sounds of the many rivers in Sukhāvatī reach only the inhabitants there. These sounds are particularly richly described in the LSukh. In this text, the Buddha tells Ānanda that from these rivers,

- a sound arises which is deep, unknown, mysterious, clear, ear-pleasing, heart-touching, charming, sweet, delightful, never tiring or hard to listen to, pronouncing “impermanent, peaceful, not-self,” pleasing to listen to, the same sound as heavenly music played skillfully on an instrument consisting of hundreds of thousands of millions of parts.22

Most of the adjectives used to describe the sound of the rivers carry paradisiacal connotations, except for the key inclusion of “impermanent, peaceful, not-self,” a basic Dharma teaching. The idea that Dharma teachings can arise out of the sound of water occurs again in a later passage from the LSukh. Here I quote from Max Müller's translation of the Sanskrit:

> And, O Ananda, the sound which rises from that water is delightful, and the whole Buddha country is aroused by it. And if beings, who stand on the borders of the river, wish that the sound should not come within their ear-shot, then it does not come within their ear-shot, even if they are possessed of the heavenly ear. And whatever sound a man wishes to hear, exactly that delightful sound he hears, as for instance, the sound “Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, the perfections, the stages, the powers, perfections, freedom from attachment, consciousness; emptiness, unconditioned, free from desire, not made, not born, without origin, not being, and cessation; peace; great love, great pity, great rejoicing, and great forgiveness; resignation to consequences which have not yet arisen, and attainment of the royal stage.”

> And having heard these sounds, everybody feels the highest delight and pleasure accompanied by retirement, passionlessness, quiet, cessation, law, and a stock of merit leading to the perfect knowledge.23

In this passage, a large number of standard Dharma teachings are mentioned as arising from the sound of the water. These teachings are not merely pleasing to listen to; they also lead to “passionlessness,” “cessation,” and “a stock of merit leading to the perfect knowledge.” A parallel passage occurs in T360, with the following passage appended to the end. Here I quote from Inagaki’s translation:

> One is in harmony with the Three Treasures, the Buddha's powers, fearlessness and special qualities, and also with supernatural powers and other methods of practice for bodhisattvas and śrāvakas. Not even the names of the three realms of suffering are heard there, but only Nirvanic

---

sounds of bliss. For this reason, that land is called “Peace and Bliss.”

This passage from T360 highlights how the sounds emerging from the river are not merely paradisiacal, but actually allow for the attainment of “harmony with the Three Treasures,” “supernatural powers,” and other aspects of the bodhisattva path. The passage goes as far to suggest that Sukhāvatī is named as such because it is saturated with these “Nirvanic sounds of bliss.” Thus the aural aspects many rivers, along with the Bodhi tree in Sukhāvatī, are essential to a key soteriological aim of Sukhāvatī: providing universal access to and speedy realization of Dharma teaching.

5. Other Liberative Aural Features in the LSukh and T360: Hearing and Singing the Dharma

The textual passages examined in the previous section demonstrate the various ways in which the aural features of Sukhāvatī serve the soteriological program of its inhabitants. In this section, I argue that the liberative aural features of Sukhāvatī in the LSukh and T360 can be divided into two distinct aspects of the path: hearing the Dharma and singing the praises of all buddhas. Two other aspects will be explored in the following two sections: constant mindfulness of the Three Jewels, and direct encounter with the Buddha Amitābha.

The first aspect of the bodhisattva path supported by the liberative aural features of Sukhāvatī as depicted in the LSukh and T360 is hearing the Dharma or, more specially, the ability to quickly learn basic Dharma teachings via direct aural access to them at all times. This aspect was foreshadowed in Section 3’s earlier discussion of the paradisiacal aural features of Sukhāvatī but most clearly demonstrated in Section 4, with its focus on sounds of the Bodhi tree and the rivers. The roots of this aural feature of Sukhāvatī can be witnessed in Vow 8 and Vow 44 of the LSukh:

If, Blessed One, after I have attained awakening, should living beings born in my buddha-field not all obtain the divine ear, or at least be able to simultaneously hear the true Dharma from hundreds of thousands of millions of buddha-fields, may I not attain the unsurpassed supreme perfect awakening.

If, Blessed One, after I have attained awakening, should living beings born in my buddha-field should not hear, with the arising of thought, exactly the Dharma teaching they wish to hear, may I not attain the unsurpassed supreme perfect awakening.26

These two vows, and in particular the notion that the inhabitants of Sukhāvatī can hear “exactly the Dharma teachings they wish to hear,” highlight the first aspect of the path, hearing the Dharma. Many of the ideas developed in the descriptions of seemingly paradisiacal natural features like the jeweled trees, the birds, the Bodhi tree, and the many rivers appear to stem from these two vows and the notion that Sukhāvatī’s inhabitants have immediate aural access to the Dharma.

The second aspect of the bodhisattva path revealed in a close reading of the aural features described in the LSukh and T360 is the importance of singing the praises of all buddhas. While the previous aspect of the path often uses terms like yin and śabda to talk about sound, this aspect more often uses terms like tian yue, ji yue, tūrya and saṃgīti to address music more explicitly. This was witnessed particularly in Section 2, where I examined the way bodhisattvas make musical offerings and develop marvelous voices in Sukhāvatī.

Another passage in the LSukh enumerates a long list of spiritual attainments easily reached by inhabitants of Sukhāvatī before noting that they are always “delighting in the music of the [seven] factors of awakening, devoted to the the music of the Buddha.”27 The delight and devotion bodhisattva inhabitants take in listening to the Dharma and singing back hymns of praise to all buddhas neatly illustrates how the aural aspects of Sukhāvatī function in at least two liberative ways: making the Dharma and the praises of all buddhas continuously audible. Two further aspects of the path, mindfulness of the Three Jewels and direct encounter with Amitābha and all buddhas, are less prominent aural features in the LSukh and T360, but they are given emphasis in the SSukh, T366 and T365, discussed in the following sections.

6. Aural Features in the SSukh and T366: Birds, Trees, and Mindfulness of the Three Jewels

Unlike the vast array of aural features in the LSukh and T360, a much more narrow focus is present

27 Vaidya 1961, § 38.
in the SSukh and T366. A minor reference is made to “heavenly music” once in each text, but otherwise the texts focus on two aural features: birds and jeweled trees. Birds are discussed numerous times in the LSukh and T360, although only once are they explicitly connected to music. In the SSukh and T366, birds, who have been conjured up by Amitābha, are said to sing six times a day about Buddhist teachings on the thirty-seven wings of awakening, which include the five faculties, the five powers, and the seven factors of awakening. In the SSukh, the text indicate that when the inhabitants of Sukhāvatī hear these birds, they give rise to “reflection” (manasikāra) on the Three Jewels. T366 renders this similarly: the inhabitants become “mindful” (nian 念) of the Three Jewels. In the LSukh and T360, birds appears more as paradisical adornments in Sukhāvatī, and it is the jeweled trees that continuously produce sounds of the Dharma. However, in the SSukh and T366, these two elements are collapsed into Dharma-singing birds whose primarily function is not to teach the basic Buddhist concepts, but rather to encourage mindfulness of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Another aural feature in the SSukh and T366 that aims to encourage mindfulness of the Three Jewels is the music of the jeweled trees. Although this music is a major theme in the LSukh and T360, the passage on the jeweled trees in the SSukh follows the description of the sound of the water in the LSukh: the trees give off sounds like “heavenly music played skillfully on an instrument consisting of hundreds of thousands of millions of parts.” T360 gives the same simile. Both texts then explain that when the inhabitants of Sukhāvatī hear these sounds, they become spontaneously mindful of the Three Jewels. T360


29 Cf. my translation of Vaidya 1961, § 40: “Ajita, do you see those flocks of immortal birds, making the whole buddha-field resound with the Buddha's voice, so that those bodhisattvas are always mindful of the Buddha?”


33 T366, 12.347a15-16.

34 Vaidya 1961, § 7. Gómez (1996, p. 17) inexplicably translates tūrya as “cymbals,” which makes no sense as cymbals typically have no moving parts. He may have been following Müller, who chooses the same word.

35 T366, 12.347a21-22.
expresses this as “mindful of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha in their hearts” (nian fo nian fa nian seng zhi xin 念佛念法念僧之心). The SSukh locates this mindfulness as established in the body instead (buddhānusmṛtiḥ kāye saṃtiṣṭhāti, dharmānusmṛtiḥ kāye saṃtiṣṭhāti, saṃghānusmṛtiḥ kāye saṃtiṣṭhāti), but the effect is similar.\(^{36}\) Hence in both the case of the birds and the jeweled trees, the SSukh and T366 both emphasize mindfulness of the Three Jewels above other aspects of the path, such as hearing the teachings or praising all buddhas. Thus, while many of the aural features in the LSukh and T360 have no direct soteriological relevance, nearly all of the aural features in the SSukh and T366 are directly aligned with a single aspect of the path.

7. Aural Features in T365: Banners and Direct Encounter with Amitābha

Like the SSukh and T366 discussed above, T365 contains few aural elements that might be dismissed as merely paradisiacal in character. In contrast with these texts, however, T365 is much longer and includes many of the rich aural features found in the LSukh and T360, such as jeweled trees, streaming waters, and singing birds. A unique feature found only T365 are the so-called “streamers” of musical instruments. One passage about these streamers emphasizes how they resound with key Buddhist teachings, in a similar way to passages in the LSukh and T360:

Both sides of the platform each have a hundred hundred million flower streamers adorned with countless musical instruments. Eight cool breezes emerge from the radiance and vibrate these musical instruments, which pronounce the sounds of “suffering,” “emptiness,” “impermanence,” and “not-self.”\(^{37}\)

Another passage notes that the music that issues from these streamers encourages mindfulness of the Three Jewels, as witnessed in the SSukh and T366:

Also there are musical instruments suspended in mid-air, which, like the jeweled streamers of heaven, spontaneously resound without being struck. Their various sounds pronounce mindfulness of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha of bhikṣus.\(^{38}\)

Thus T365 uses a single aural feature, musical instruments on streamers, to blend together two aspects of

\(^{36}\) Vaidya 1961, § 7.
\(^{37}\) T365, 12.342a16-19.
\(^{38}\) T365, 12.342c8-10.
the path, hearing basic teachings and mindfulness of the Three Jewels, that remain distinct in the other texts I examined.

Despite the overlap between it and the other texts, T365 uses several other aural features in the service of a different aspect of liberation: direct encounter with the Buddha Amitābha and all buddhas. This aspect is found in passages concerning the “nine grades” (jiu pin 九品) of rebirth in Sukhāvatī. In one passage, the text describes how when a pious person is dying,

Amitābha Buddha, surrounded by bhikṣus and his retinue, will appear before this person, blazing golden rays. [He will] pronounce, “suffering,” “emptiness,” “impermanence,” and “not-self.”39

The phrase “[He will] pronounce, “suffering,” “emptiness,” impermanence,” and “not-self” (yan shuo ku kong wu chang wu wo 演說苦空無常無我) is identical to that used to describe the sounds emerging from the streamers with musical instruments in other passages of T365. The only difference is that the dying person meets Amitābha directly and explicitly hears the sounds directly from him. In other passages on the nine grades, the pious person, once reborn in Sukhāvatī, will hear the same teachings from the trees, birds, and musical instruments there: “[The person will] hear a multitude of sounds proclaiming the wonderful Dharma.”40 After hearing these sounds, the person then meets directly with numberless other buddhas: “Traveling in the ten directions, the person will venerate all buddhas, from whom he will hear the most profound Dharma.”41 These passages imply that the sounds heard in Sukhāvatī are more than just generic teachings of the Dharma or representations of an ideal practice environment. The parallels between Amitābha's pronouncing of “suffering, emptiness, impermanence and not-self,” the hearing of such teachings again in Sukhāvatī, and the traveling off to other worlds to meet directly with all buddhas, suggest that the aural features of Sukhāvatī are not only about learning key Dharma concepts or mindfulness of the Three Jewels, but also as a way to directly encounter Amitābha and all buddhas aurally.

40 T365, 12.345b3.
41 T365, 12.345b3-4.
8. Conclusion: Sonic Soteriology and Implications for Pure Land Liturgical Music

While the five Pure Land texts examined in this paper describe Sukhāvatī as abounding in visual splendor, my readings of these texts demonstrate that sound is a major paradigm of Sukhāvatī. The various aural features of Sukhāvatī are not only numerous and varied, but also highlight four aspects of the bodhisattva path. The aural features of the *LSukh* and T360, even given all of their complex and paradisiacal accounts of sound, focus on making the Dharma and praises of all buddhas effortlessly available. The shorter *SSukh* and T366 focus more narrowly on encouraging mindfulness of the Three Jewels. T365 includes many of the aural features from the other texts, but uniquely emphasizes the importance of direct encounter with Amitābha and all buddhas through the medium of sound.

Liberation inside Sukhāvatī, then, comes through hearing. And even outside of Sukhāvatī, as seen in T365 and in the emphasis placed on hearing Amitābha’s name in the vow sections of the *LSukh* and T360, liberation comes through hearing. In the later development of the Pure Land tradition in East Asia, the sonic and musical aspects of the Pure Land were often highlighted. The Chinese daily service, as established in the Ming dynasty, heavily stresses the recitation of Amitābha’s name and T366.42 Pi-yen Chen, an ethnomusicologist who has studied many aspects of Chinese Buddhist music, remarks that the way music is used in Sukhāvatī reflects the modern practice of engaging musically with Pure Land texts:

> In our Saha world, if people want to achieve salvation, they need to apply music. And no salvation can be achieved without sounds. In addition, music plays an indispensable role in transmitting the dharma, for the liturgical experience and, to some extent, the religious experience are confirmed through musical practice and experience. Each sound made through reciting the text tells the practitioners the state of their body and mind. Through the chanting, more specifically, people experience the conditions of the Pure Land....

Chen’s remarks highlight the need to study the relationship between the aural features of Pure Land texts such as the five I examined and the musical performance of these texts throughout history. The great emphasis placed on sound and music in the canonical Pure Land texts suggests that their authors were deeply concerned with the aural features of Sukhāvatī, features that may have extended into the

---

42 For example, see Buddhist Text Translation Society 2002.
43 Chen 2001, p. 44.
performative life of Pure Land texts in South Asia, East Asia, and beyond. Although there is always the
danger of reading present assumptions and practices into the past, the study of the origins of texts and art on
Sukhāvatī needs to take into account these aural features and implications.

Bibliography


