

A Study of the Faith in the Lotus Sutra in Biography of Bhikshunis

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Abstract: The Lotus Sutra is a highly significant Mahayana Buddhist scripture that has been compiled and established since the first century. Then it spread to China with the propagation of Buddhism and underwent numerous translations by eminent monks. Particularly, the translation of Kumarajiva had solidified the Lotus Sutra's prominent position among Buddhist scriptures. During the Eastern Jin and Northern & Southern Dynasties, the Lotus Sutra attained widespread attention and reverence. It was extensively chanted and adhered in the monastic community and secular society. Until Northern & Southern Dynasties, the number of eminent monks who studied and chanted the Lotus Sutra surged dramatically. And there were as many as 44 monks closely associated with the Lotus Sutra during the early Northern & Southern Dynasties in the Biography of Eminent Monks written by Huijiao. The practice of the Lotus Sutra was also prevalent among Bhikshunis at that time, which was clearly revealed in the Biography of Bhikshunis. The biography shows that the Bhikshunis during Six Dynasties period actively put into practice the teachings in the Lotus Sutra, such as chanting and offering of their bodies as a form of devotion. This paper, based on the Biography of Bhikshunis, investigates the relationship between Bhikshunis and the Lotus Sutra during the Six Dynasties period.

Keywords: the Lotus Sutra, biography of Bhikshunis, Avalokitesvara devotion

1. Overview of the Biography of Bhikshunis

During the Southern & Northern Dynasties period, the development of Daoist philosophy challenged the traditional status of Confucianism. The social atmosphere was relatively open, leading to the elevation of women's social status. Additionally, with the long-term development of Buddhism in China, female monasticism gradually became a common practice, and the Bhikshuni Sangha (community of Buddhist nuns) began to take shape. By the time of Southern Dynasties, a considerable community of Bhikshuni had been established, among which Buddhism in the Liang Dynasty was particularly prosperous. It was during this period that Master Shi-Baochang wrote the first and only comprehensive biography of Bhikshuni. This work chronicles the deeds of 65 Bhikshunis over a span of approximately 156 years, from the year 357 to the Tianjian era of Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty (502-519).

2. The Practice of Bhikshunis Regarding the Lotus Sutra During the Eastern Jin and Six Dynasties Period

In the Biography of Bhikshunis, there are a total of 13 Bhikshunis (with an additional one mentioned in the appendix) from the Eastern Jin Dynasty, 23 Bhikshunis from the Liu Song Dynasty (with 11 in the appendix), 15 Bhikshunis from the Southern Qi Dynasty (with 10 in the appendix), and 14 Bhikshunis from the Liang Dynasty (with 9 in the appendix) recorded in the Jin Dynasty period. From their biographies, we can see that there are lots of individuals who studied scriptures and even learned Bhikshunis who annotated scriptures. And the relevant Bhikshuis' practices concerning Lotus Sutra are listed as follows.

Table 1: Practices of Bhikshunis in the Jin Dynasty.

No.	Dharma Name	Native Place	Monastery	Practice Method
1	Zhixian	Changshan	Zhixian	In the middle of Jin Taihe era, aged over 70, chanted the Lotus Sutra day and night.
2	Kangminggan	Gaoping	Jianfu Monastery	During the Jianyuan period, she suddenly encountered a monk and requested the Five Precepts, which were still taught in the Guanyin Sutra
3	Zhudaoxin	Taishan	City East Monastery	Chanted the Lotus Sutra, Vimalakirti Sutra, and other sutras.
4	Lingzongni	Gaoping	Unknown	Chanted Guanyin Bodhisattva (a paragraph in the Lotus Sutra)
5	Daoyi	Yanmen	Hehou Monastery	Chanted the Lotus Sutra, Vimalakirti Sutra, and other sutras.

Table 2: Practices of Bhikshunis in the Song Dynasty.

No.	Dharma Name	Native Place	Monastery	Practice Method
1	Huiyu	Chang'an	Niumu Monastery	Fully ordained, engaged in missionary activities, studied and contemplated sutras and treatises continuously, chanted the Lotus Sutra and other sutras.
2	Daoyuan	Danyang	Jianfu Monastery	Proficient in Tripitaka studies.
3	Daoshou	Unknown	Qihuans Monastery	Diligent and disciplined, chanted the Lotus Sutra three thousand times.
4	Xuanzao	Wujun	Taixuan Monastery	Chanted the Lotus Sutra and maintained a vegetarian diet.
5	Huiqiong	Guangzhou	Nan'an Monastery	Lectured on the Lotus Sutra.
6	Puzhao	Bohai	Zhangguo Monastery	Unable to move, repented while lying in bed, chanted three volumes of the Lotus Sutra daily.
7	Huimu	Beidi	Zhugecun Monastery	Recited two volumes of Lotus Sutra daily, well-versed in various sutras.
8	Fasheng	Unknown	Nan Monastery	Entrusted someone to continue reciting the Lotus Sutra during illness.

Table 2: (continued).

9	Sengduan	Guangling	Yong'an Monastery	Requested the Lotus Sutra and could recite it in two days.
10	Pujing	Unknown	Yong'an Monastery	Renowned for ascetic practices and chanted the Lotus Sutra.
11	Puyao	Unknown	Yong'an Monastery	Renowned for ascetic practices and chanted the Lotus Sutra.
12	Yeshou	Pengcheng	Dongqingyuan Monastery	Proficient in Mahayana, skilled in explaining profound principles, and especially adept in meditation and chanting.
13	Falin	Unknown	Unknown	Extensively knowledgeable in sutras and precepts, remained committed to learning in old age.
14	Huijun	Shanyin	Zhuyuan Monastery	Proficient in both external and internal vinayas, recited scriptures meticulously.
15	Fajing	Jiangbei	Puxian Monastery	Deep contemplation and profound research on sutras.

Table 3: Practice of Bhikshuni in the Qi Dynasty.

No.	Dharma Name	Native Place	Monastery	Practice Method
1	Fayuan	Dongguan	Unknown	Chanted and expounded sutras day and night.
2	Tanche	Unknown	Unknown	Desired to grasp the profound meanings of the Dharma, studied sutras and treatises before becoming fully ordained, mastered the Vinaya after full ordination.
3	Sengjing	Kuaiji	Chongsheng Monastery	Read hundreds of volumes of scriptures and had profound understanding.
4	Sengmeng	Nanyang	Qiming Monastery	Systematically observed various sutras, continuously lectured and expounded, tireless in heart, and well-versed in sutras and Vinaya.
5	Miaozhi	Henei	Huayan Monastery	Proficient in understanding Dharma characteristics, invited by Emperor Wu of Qi to lecture on the Vimalakirti Sutra .
6	Zhisheng	Chang'an	Jianfu Monastery	Previously listened to the Nirvana Sutra, studied the Vinaya, and composed dozens of volumes of Yi Shu (the only known written work by a Bhikshuni, but has not been handed down through verification).
7	Faquan	Danyang	Dongqingyuan Monastery	Extensively knowledgeable in various sutras and profound teachings of Mahayana, could expound on them all.
8	Jinghui	Jiankang	Puxian Monastery	Became a master of the precepts after ten years of full ordination, invited by Prince Jingling to lecture on the Vimalakirti Sutra.

Table 3: (continued).

9	Jinggu	Jinling	Fayin Monastery	Profoundly knowledgeable in sutras and Vinaya.
10	Chaoming	Qiantang	Qiming Monastery	Before becoming a Bhikshuni, she had read the Five Classics and was good at literature and art. After becoming a Bhikshuni, she listened to various scriptures and studied the principles of righteousness ordination, was skilled in literature and arts. After ordination, listened to various sutras and studied their meanings.
11	Dele	Piling	Qixing Monastery	Deeply studied sutras and precepts, elegant in speech.
12	Daoji	Unknown	Unknown	Chanted the Lotus Sutra.

Table 4: Practice of Bhikshuni in the Liang Dynasty.

No.	Dharma Name	Native Place	Monastery	Practice Method
1	Jingxiu	Anding	Chanlin Monastery	Proficient in calligraphy, once wrote sutras by herself, set up a scripture platform to place the sutras she wrote, invited monks to recite the Lotus Sutra at home.
2	Sengnian	Taishan	Chanlin Monastery	The older, the more devoted, chanted the Lotus Sutra.
3	Fengni	Chengdu	Changle Monastery	Chanted the Nirvana Sutra three times every three days.
4	Huisheng	Pengcheng	Unknown	After receiving full ordination, lectured on the Lotus Sutra.
5	Baoyong	Unknown	Unknown	Lectured on the Lotus Sutra.
6	Jingxing	Unknown	Zhuyuan Monastery	Studied the Avatamsaka Sutra, Vimalakirti Sutra, Nirvana Sutra, Huayan Sutra. When invited lecturers, hundreds of people attended.
7	Linghui	Unknown	Nan Jinling Monastery	Chanted the Lotus Sutra, Vimalakirti Sutra, and the Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala.
8	Sengshu	Pengcheng	Xianju Monastery	Wrote and transcribed over a thousand volumes of sutras and Vinaya, specialized in the Ten Recitations section.
9	Miaoyi	Jiankang	Xiqingyuan Monastery	Lectured on the Nirvana Sutra and Lotus Sutra more than thirty times.
10	Huihui	Qingzhou	Lean Monastery	Read the Nirvana Sutra, chanted the Lotus Sutra, and listened to lectures on the Tattvasiddhi and Nirvana Sutra etc..
11	Daogui	Chang'an	Top Mountain Monastery	Chanted the Infinite Life Sutra day and night without interruption.
12	Faxuan	Shan	Zhaoming Monastery	Proficient in chanting the Lotus Sutra from beginning to end and explaining its meanings.
13	Taiqing	Unknown	Unknown	Chanted Guanyin Sutra.
14	Huashou	Unknown	Unknown	Chanted the Lotus Sutra.

Based on the data collected from the Biography of Bhikshunis, the main scriptures studied by Bhikshunis during the Six Dynasties period are as follows: Lotus Sutra (22 individuals, including Guanyin Sutra by 2 individuals, and Sutra of Universal Gate by 2 individuals), Nirvana Sutra (7 individuals), Vimalakirti Sutra (5 individuals). In chronological order, The Lotus Sutra and its subsidiary text Guanyin Sutra are the only scriptures practiced by Bhikshunis in the Jin Dynasty. In the Song Dynasty, these two scriptures were still the main Buddhist scriptures studied by nuns, while other scriptures such as the Great Prajnaparamita Sutra and the Shurangama Sutra also appeared. During the Southern Qi Dynasty, the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, and the Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala were equally prominent along with the Lotus Sutra, accounting for a similar proportion in the practice of Bhikshunis. By the Liang Dynasty, the Lotus Sutra took an absolute dominance (with the Sūtra of Universal Gate starting to be studied by nuns), followed by the Nirvana Sutra, Sūtra of the Ornament of Clear Realization, and Vimalakirti Sutra. Additionally, the sutra of Avatamsaka Sutra (Land of Bliss) held by the later Pure Land School was also being disseminated among nuns. The flourishing of Buddhist doctrines in the Liang Dynasty directly influenced the nuns' studies, and during this period, some nuns began studying exegetical texts such as Satyasiddhi and Abhidharma. Due to the extreme lack of information, we cannot ascertain the educational situation of nuns during the Chen Dynasty.

According to this statistical analysis, the primary scripture studied by Bhikshunis during the Six Dynasties period was the Lotus Sutra, accounting for over half of their studies in various scriptures. This indicates that the Lotus Sutra was widely embraced by the Bhikshunis. Furthermore, according to our research on inscriptions related to Bhikshuni during the Six Dynasties period, the proportion of inscriptions concerning the images of Sakyamuni Buddha and Prabhutaratna from the Lotus Sutra remains significant. [1] In Master Daoxuan's preface to the Exegesis on the Lotus Sutra, he described the prevalence of the Lotus Sutra in the Central Land as follows: "The words in this scripture are incredibly beautiful, symbolizing the distant wisdom. Being able to lift people from the depths of great sorrow and relief, and pull them out of the stagnant and drowning currents. An extremely compassionate heart saves the loss of consciousness. From the Han Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty for over 600 years, with a total of over 4000 scrolls of historical records, there is nothing more worthy of reading than this scripture." From this, we can infer that the practice of the Lotus Sutra by Bhikshunis, as depicted in the Biography of Bhikshunis, is a microcosm of the prevalence of the Lotus Sutra in the Central China.

3. The Practice of Bhikshunis in the Faith of the Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra is one of the most frequently mentioned scriptures in the Biography of Bhikshuni, and also the most crucial scripture for Buddhist practitioners during the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties (Song, Qi, and Liang periods). According to the Biography of Bhikshunis, the Lotus Sutra had widespread dissemination among Bhikshunis of the Six Dynasties, and they actively put into practice the teachings found in the Lotus Sutra, such as chanting, self-immolation to offer to the Buddha, and faith in stupas.

3.1. Chanting the Lotus Sutra

The widespread dissemination of the Lotus Sutra is not only reflected in its teachings being expounded but also in the chanting of the scripture by both monks and nuns. According to the records in the Biography of Bhikshunis, during the Two Jin and Southern Dynasties, there were 21 Bhikshunis who engaged in chanting scriptures, among whom 13 nuns recited the Lotus Sutra, accounting for 66% of the total. This situation was not exclusive to the Bhikshunis. In the Biography of Eminent Monks of the Liang Dynasty (chanting of Scriptures), among the 21 eminent monks listed, an

overwhelming majority of 16 individuals were known for their chanting of the Lotus Sutra, constituting 76% of the total. For instance, Bhikshuni Huijin vowed to chant the Lotus Sutra and gathered alms to produce 100 copies of the sutra to repent her past hindrances. After the completion of the sutra, her illness improved, and she felt content with the fulfillment of her wish. The practice of chanting the Lotus Sutra greatly strengthened her determination. [2]

The practice of chanting the Lotus Sutra took various forms. Some Bhikshunis exclusively focused on chanting the Lotus Sutra, while others combined it with the chanting of other scriptures.

3.1.1. Exclusive Chanting of the Lotus Sutra

According to the records in the Biography of Bhikshunis, Bhikshuni Zhixian, Kangminggan, Daoxin, Lingzong, Daoyi, and Sengnian exclusively chanted the Lotus Sutra. Among them, Zhixian, despite being seventy years old, diligently chanted the sutra day and night. [3] Sengnian, in her old age, continued chanting the Lotus Sutra day and night for seven rounds. [4]

Many Bhikshunis who chanted the Lotus Sutra also practiced meditation simultaneously. For instance, Bhikshuni Sengnian chanted the Lotus Sutra while also engaging in meditation and strict vegetarian practices and penance. Bhikshuni Huihui, residing at Le'an Monastery, continued unceasingly expounding and chanting while remaining in meditation. This kind of practice was quite popular at that time.

3.1.2. Simultaneous Chanting with Other Scripture

During the Two Jin and Southern Dynasties, many monks and nuns who chanted the Lotus Sutra also simultaneously chanted other Prajna sutras. The commonly practiced scriptures included the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Nirvana Sutra, the Great Prajnaparamita, the Diamond Sutra, the Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala, and the Golden Light Sutra. And there were practitioners who chanted the Ten Grounds Treatise and Hinayana sutras, etc.. In general, monks and nuns would chant two or three Mahayana Buddhist scriptures simultaneously during that time. According to the Biography of Bhikshunis, Bhikshuni Zhudaoxin resided at Chengdong Monastery in Luoyang both chanted the Lotus Sutra and the Vimalakirti Sutra. Niumu Monastery Bhikshuni Huiyu chanted the Lotus Sutra and the Shurangama Sutra, and Bhikshuni Linghui chanted three scriptures: the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakirti Sutra, and the Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala.

3.2. Self-Immolation as a Devotional Practice

There were considerable practitioners of The Lotus Sutra during the Eastern Jin and Southern & Northern Dynasties, and the practice of self-immolation inspired by the teachings of the scripture was widely publicized, which greatly influenced the way monks and nuns in China pursued Buddhist practices. The Chapter on the Original Practices of Medicine King Bodhisattva in the Lotus Sutra records the act of Medicine King Bodhisattva offering his own body:

At that time, the Sun and Moon were pure and virtuous, and the Tathagata was pleased to see Bodhisattva and other Bodhisattvas for all sentient beings, as well as to hear disciples delivering speeches on the Dharma Sutra. This sentient beings are pleased to see that Bodhisattva enjoys practicing asceticism. Inspired by the Dharma of the Sun and Moon Pure Virtue Tathagata, he practices diligently and wholeheartedly to seek the Buddha's fruit. After 12000 years, the Zen meditation power of all forms has finally been demonstrated. After obtaining this kind of meditation, all sentient beings rejoice greatly in the heart of the Bodhisattva, and thus say: I am able to obtain the power of meditation to transform all forms and bodies because I have heard the power of the Lotus Sutra. I should now support the Sun and Moon Pure Mingde Tathagata and the Lotus Sutra. Therefore, he immediately entered meditation and scattered like mandala flowers, large mandala

flowers, and fine black sandalwood incense from the void, covering the entire void like a dense cloud. And like rain, it sprinkles the incense of Bangtan. This incense is so valuable. The six baht incense is equal to the value of the Saha. All living beings like to see Bodhisattva to support the Sun Moon Pure Virtue Buddha.

After completing these offerings, all sentient beings rejoiced in the Bodhisattva's meditation and thought to themselves: Although I have provided the Tathagata with divine power, I still feel insufficient. It is better to provide the Tathagata with my body. They use various spices, such as sandalwood, incense, musk, nard and frankincense, and drink perfume oil. After 1200 years, they anointed their bodies with balm, wrapped them in heavenly robes, and poured the balm on their bodies. After 1200 years, he applied sesame oil to his body and wrapped his body in a heavenly robe. Then, he poured various types of sesame oil and burned his body with the power of God and his will in the face of the Pure Virtuous Buddha of the Sun and Moon, emitting a light that shone throughout the world of 8 billion Ganges sand.

All the Buddhas in these worlds exclaim in unison: Perfect! A good man, this is true refinement, which is called the true provision of the Tathagata through the law. Even if we provide with flowers, incense, banners, and the fragrance of plum sandalwood on this shore of the sea, all kinds of these things cannot compare to the merit of providing with our bodies. Even giving in terms of territory, cities, as well as wife and son, also cannot be compared to the merit of giving in person. A good man, this method is called the first alms, which is the most noble among all alms, because it is for the sake of providing for such beings through the law. After saying these words, everyone remained silent, such as Lai and Bian. All sentient beings are pleased to see the flame of Bodhisattva burning his body to support the Tathagata lasted for 1200 years. Then, all of his body was completely burned down. [5]

The Lotus Sutra also highlights the benefits that Medicine King Bodhisattva has brought to female devotees:

If someone hears about the Chapter on the Original Practices of Medicine King Bodhisattva in the Lotus Sutra, they can also obtain boundless merits and virtues. If a woman can receive this Chapter on the Original Practices of Medicine King Bodhisattva after hearing it, then, after the end of this female life, she will never be a woman in her next life. If a woman hears this scripture and practices according to the Dharma during the 500 year old period of the Dharma era after the extinction of the Tathagata, then, she can return to a peaceful Buddha land after the end of this period of life. In that land, Amitabha Buddha is surrounded by many great Bodhisattvas. He is born from a lotus flower and sit down on his throne. He is no longer annoyed by greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, jealousy and other dirt. He has gained the power of Bodhisattva and show no tolerance for life. After achieving this state of no living method and tolerance, his eyes become pure and spotless. With these eyes, he could see the 720 billion Tathagata, who are numerous in his Ganges [6].

The devotion of the Medicine King Bodhisattva to self-immolation profoundly influenced the Bhikshunis during the Six Dynasties. Many of them were deeply moved by his spirit and chose to emulate him. According to the Biography of Bhikshunis, during the Liu Song period, the virtuous Bhikshuni Shanmiao wrapped herself in cloth and set her body on fire, and admonished other Bhikshunis: I have offered my body in alms twenty-seven times. This one body will lead me to the attainment of the First Fruition. [7] The Biography of Bhikshunis records that there are seven Bhikshunis who practiced self-immolation, including two during the Liu Song period: the virtuous Bhikshuni Shanmiao and the Bhikshuni Huiyao, three during the Southern Qi period: the Bhikshuni Tanjian, Bhikshuni Jinghui, and Bhikshuni Tanyong, and two during the Liang period: the Bhikshuni Tanhui and Bhikshuni Fengni.

3.3. Belief in Stupas

The Lotus Sutra contains numerous passages that emphasize the sacredness and significance of stupas,

such as:

Wow! Good men and good women, whether sitting, standing, or walking, should build stupas. All heavenly and human beings should pay reverence to these stupas as they would to a Buddha [8].

And:

Medicine King Bodhisattva, everywhere that when speaking, reading, chanting, writing, or where the sutra scrolls are kept, stupas should be erected. These stupas should be adorned with the finest and most exquisite treasures, without the need to contain relics. Why is this so? Because the entire body of the Buddha is already present in them. These stupas should be adorned with all kinds of flowers, incense, necklaces, banners, canopies, pennants, music, and hymns, and to be worshiped, respected, and praised. If anyone sees this stupas, worships, provides offerings, and knows the highest level of wisdom and enlightenment [9].

The stupas mentioned in the sutra is actually the representations of the Buddha, so no needs to place actual relics. Therefore, the practice of circumambulating stupas was adopted by Bhikshunis. There are monks and nuns lived frugally in the monastery during their lifetime, wishing to diligently observe the precepts, offering incense, and respectfully worshipping the stupas, with palms together and heads bowed, they forget to eat while immersed in worship [10]. Circumambulating stupas was not only a part of Bhikshunis' daily life but also symbolized transcendence beyond this worldly existence. For example, Bhikshuni Zhangguo dreamt of a stupa on the seventh day before her death at the ZhangGuoSi temple in Nanpi. She chanted the Lotus Sutra three scrolls a day. Suddenly, she ceased to exist in the middle of the second month of the nineteenth year. For a moment, she regained consciousness and said that she saw a stupa on her way. She asked the monk inside the stupa how far it was from a certain temple. The monk replied: Five hundred million miles away. On the journey, there were grass and travelers, but none were recognizable. The wind and clouds were high and clean, particularly clear in the west. She wanted to proceed, but the monk refused to allow it [11].

Stupas were also used as the final resting place for the bodies of Bhikshunis. When Bhikshuni Huiqiong from Nan'an Temple died in Kuaiji, her disciple Huilang buried her remains in front of Gaozuo Temple and erected a stupa on the grave [11]. Similarly, after the passing of Bhikshuni Daoji in Wuxing during the Liang dynasty, a stupa was built to house her entire body [12]. In the Lotus Sutra, the devotion to stupas presents a scene of creating a Pure Land on earth. The records in the Biography of Bhikshunis also demonstrate the significant role of stupas in the practice of Bhikshunis.

4. Conclusion

Through the study of the Bhikshunis' devotion of the Lotus Sutra in the Biography of Bhikshunis, we can see that the Lotus Sutra was widely propagated among Bhikshunis during the Eastern Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, and many of them actively practiced the teachings mentioned in the Lotus Sutra. Based on Dunhuang manuscripts of the Lotus Sutra, Professor Fang Guangchang conducted a statistical analysis of its distribution. he says: Based on my incomplete statistics, the number of copies of the Lotus Sutra exceeds 5,000 among these 30,000 Dunhuang manuscripts, which accounts for more than one-sixth. Most of these copies of the Lotus Sutra were written during the Southern & Northern Dynasties and the flourishing Tang Dynasty, which is consistent with the popularity of the sutra during that time [13]. Fang Guangchang's data in his research paper also indicates that the thought of the Lotus Sutra was the mainstream Buddhist thought during the Eastern Jin and Southern & Northern Dynasties. Therefore, we can conclude that the Bhikshunis' practice of the Lotus Sutra in the Biography of Bhikshunis is a microcosm of the widespread influence of the Lotus Sutra in the central China during that period.

References

- [1] *According to the collected inscriptions of Bhikkhuni statues, there are 17 examples of statues depicting Shakyamuni Buddha, Prabhutaratna Buddha, and Avalokitesvara, which are equivalent to the statues of Maitreya Bodhisattva.*
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- [5] *"Taisho Tripitaka," Volume 9, p. 53.*
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- [8] *"Taisho Tripitaka," Volume 9, p. 45.*
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