

# Buddhist Caves and the Practice of Visualizing the Buddha

## 佛教石窟和觀想念佛的修行

A Dharma Talk by Bhikshuni Jin Zheng at the Buddha Hall of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas on June 19, 2025

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牟乙中譯

Today, I'd like to share with you a topic that has long fascinated me—the development of Buddhist caves in the early history of Chinese Buddhism, and how it might inspire us to think about the future of the Buddhadharma in North America.

Let's begin with an imaginative pilgrimage along the Silk Road, that ancient route which once closely linked the Kushan Empire and the Kingdom of Kucha with China's Han, Northern Wei, and Tang dynasties. Even two thousand years ago, Buddhism was already very international!

In 67 CE, two Venerable Dharma Masters, Venerable Kāśyapa Mātāṅga and Venerable Dharmaratna (also known as Gobharana), arrived in China from Central India, and established the first Buddhist monastery in China—the White

今天，我想和大家分享一個一直以來令我很感興趣的話題——中國佛教早期歷史中，石窟的發展，以及它如何啟發我們思考佛法在北美的未來。

讓我們從一段想像中的朝聖之旅開始，沿著古老的絲綢之路——這條曾經緊密連結貴霜帝國、龜茲王國與中國漢朝、北魏、唐代的古道。早在兩千年前，佛教就已經非常國際化了！

公元67年，兩位大師——迦葉摩騰尊者和竺法蘭尊者從當時的中天竺來到中國，在洛陽建立了中國第一座佛教寺院——白馬寺。而隨後的幾個世紀中，一個令人驚嘆的文化現象沿著這條路展開：數以百計的佛教石窟與寺院相繼開鑿，從甘肅敦煌的莫高窟，到山西的雲岡石窟，再到河南的龍門石窟，綿延不絕，成為佛教信眾修行與禮佛的重要場所。

佛教對當時的中國人是全新的、陌生的。石窟中莊嚴的佛像、壁畫與經變圖不僅令人肅然起敬，也大大幫助了修行者觀想佛像、稱念佛名。

當我研讀佛教早期歷史時，發現了一個非常有趣的事實：在西元二世紀末至四世紀期間，有兩位大師的著作——支婁迦讖尊者與龍樹菩薩的著作——分別從印度不同地區傳入中國。



Mogao Caves in Dunhuang 敦煌莫高窟



Longmen Grottoes 龍門石窟

Horse Monastery in Luoyang. In the centuries that followed, a fascinating phenomenon began to unfold along this route: hundreds of Buddhist caves and temples were gradually carved out, stretching from the Mògāo (莫高) Caves in Dūnhuáng (敦煌), Gansu Province, to the Yúngǎng (雲岡) Grottoes in Shanxi, the Lóngmén (龍門) Grottoes in Henan. These caves became important places for spiritual practice and for paying respect to the Buddha.

At that time, Buddhism was completely new and unfamiliar to the Chinese people. The majestic Buddha statues, murals, and transformation tableaux (depicting scenes from the scriptures) inside the caves not only inspired awe, but also greatly supported practitioners in visualizing and reciting the Buddha's name.

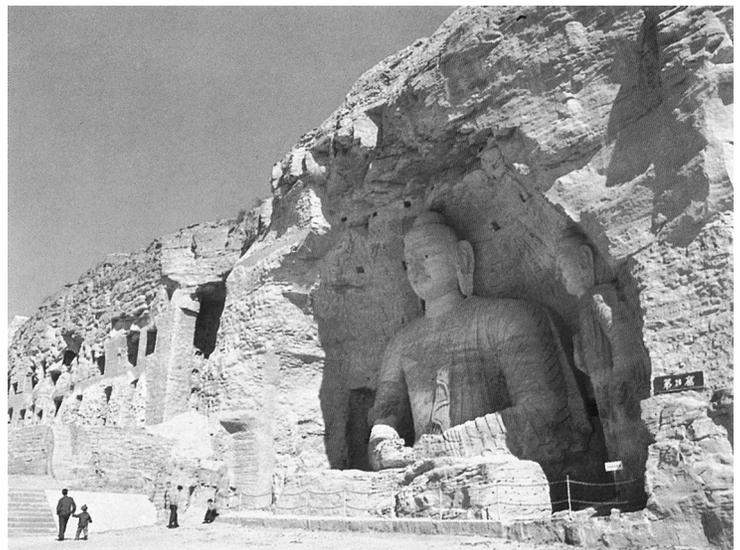
While studying the early history of Buddhism, I came across a fascinating fact, concerning the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra* (般舟三昧經). From the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century to 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, two great masters' works by Venerable Lokakṣema and Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna appeared in China. Venerable Lokakṣema came to Luòyáng (洛陽) China from the Kushan Empire in the north during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna, also famous for retrieving the *Avatamsaka Sutra* from the Dragon King lived much further south, in the lower part of Central India, where he dwelled in Amaravati, also in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

支婁迦讖尊者在二世紀自北方的貴霜帝國來到中國洛陽，將佛典譯為漢文。而龍樹菩薩則生活在更南方的中印度——阿摩羅伐底 (Amaravati)。同樣是在二世紀。他因取華嚴經於龍宮而廣為人知，並在印度撰寫了《般舟三昧經》的注解，這部注解在當時廣為流傳。這部注解於四世紀末被鳩摩羅什尊者帶至中國並譯為漢文。

也就是說，這部經典——《般舟三昧經》——的中文譯本與注解，分別在相近的時期由兩位大師在中印兩地完成，最終都傳入了中國，成為了佛教在中原大地發展的重要里程碑。

雖然這兩位大法師很可能素未謀面，但他們在相近的時期都在弘揚同一部經典——《般舟三昧經》——這顯示出《般舟三昧經》在當時的大乘法師心中的重要地位。這部經的教導與「觀想念佛」的修行法門有關。《般舟三昧經》指導行者尋找一處寂靜無擾之地，專心一意地觀想佛陀。經中詳述了具體的禪修觀想方法，指導誠心修持這個法門的弟子能夠親見佛陀，親聞法音。

今年五月，我們非常高興地接待了保羅·哈里森教授 (Professor Paul Harrison) 蒞臨法界佛教大學，為我們講



Yungang Grottoes 雲岡石窟

Venerable Lokaksema translated the text into Chinese in China, while Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna wrote a widely read commentary on the same text, at about the same time, in India that was later brought to China, and translated into Chinese in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century by Venerable Kumarajiva.

It is possible these two great Dharma Masters never met in person, but they were propagating one of the same sutras in the same time frame. This points to the significance of this sutra to early Mahayana Dharma Masters during that period. Its teachings are related to the practice of mindfulness of the Buddha through visualization. The *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra* instructs practitioners to find a quiet and solitary place, where they can single-mindedly visualize the Buddha. The sutra offers detailed methods for meditative visualization so that sincere disciples can actually see the Buddha and hear his teachings.

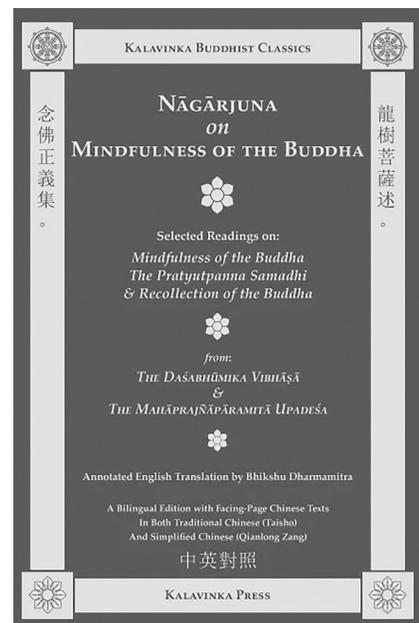
In May, I was delighted when Professor Paul Harrison, who has translated the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra* into English, came to Dharma Realm Buddhist University to give a lecture on this very sutra. As I was reading in preparation for his lecture, I recalled why the name of the sutra sounded so familiar, even though it is not one that we usually read at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. A while ago, I had read a commentary on the *Pratyutpanna Samadhi* written by Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva, *Nāgārjuna on Mindfulness of the Buddha*, which was compiled and translated by Bhikshu Heng Shou (授) (aka Dharmamitra) of Kalavinka Press. Then I paused because Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva and Venerable Lokaksema are from places that were quite distant from each other in the ancient world, yet they were both propagating this sutra and its specific samadhi in the same time frame, and historically are considered to be among the earliest of those whom we consider Mahayana, rather than one of the earlier schools.

Looking back at the history of Mahayana Buddhism, especially the tradition that integrates both Chan (meditative) and Pure Land practices, we see these practices integrate over a few generations of the earliest Dharma Masters in China and their disciples. Venerable Buddhacinga (232-348 CE), who was also known in China as Master Fotu Cheng (佛圖澄), emphasized meditation, especially mindfulness of the breath.

解他用英文翻譯的《般舟三昧經》。在為聆聽講座作準備時，我一邊閱讀資料，一邊回想為什麼這部經的名字聽起來這麼耳熟——畢竟在萬佛聖城，我們平時並不常讀這部經。原來就在不久前，我就曾閱讀過這部《般舟三昧經》的註解——名為《龍樹菩薩念佛正義集》——由迦陵頻伽出版社的恒授比丘（亦名法友比丘）編譯而成。當時我不禁停下來思索：龍樹菩薩與支婁迦讖尊者在古印度中，分處遙遠的地區，卻都弘揚這部經及其所說的特定三昧；而從歷史角度看，這兩位尊者都被視為最早期的大乘行者，而非某些宗派的傳承者。

回顧大乘佛教的發展歷史——尤其是融合禪修與淨土念佛的修行傳統，我們看到佛圖澄尊者強調禪定與念住呼吸，修習安般之法。他的學生道安大師，不僅致力於僧團的制度化、戒律的修持及主持譯經大業，據說也與彌勒菩薩有極深的因緣。

道安大師的弟子慧遠大師，被尊為淨土宗初祖，他引導許多修行人修習阿彌陀佛念佛三昧（專注於佛號與佛像的觀想）。



*Nāgārjuna on Mindfulness of the Buddha*, which was compiled and translated by Bhikshu Heng Shou (aka Dharmamitra) of Kalavinka Press.

《龍樹菩薩念佛正義集》，由迦陵頻伽出版社的恒授比丘（亦名法友比丘）編譯而成。

Master Dàoān (道安), the student of Venerable Buddhacinga and the teacher of Master Huìyuǎn (慧遠), was known for organizing the Sangha, cultivating the precepts, and overseeing translation projects. He was also known to have a great affinity with Maitreya Bodhisattva. Master Huìyuǎn becomes the First Pure Land Patriarch teaching his disciples to be mindful of Amitabha Buddha. Many disciples drew near him, and continued his teachings.

Many of the earlier Indian and Chinese Dharma Masters involved in building the caves oversaw the construction of large images of Vairochana Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva before the practice of being mindful of Amitabha Buddha became more widespread. Many of those early Dharma Masters seem to have been reading this sutra or contemplating this samadhi. We can see that the method of mindfulness of the Buddha through visualization was deeply rooted in Chinese Buddhism from close to the very beginning (as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), and we can also see when we look at the teacher-disciple lineage that there were practices that emphasized both meditation on the breath and mindfulness of the Buddha. The cave temples provided a serene, solemn environment that was especially conducive to long-term meditative visualization for these early Dharma Masters and their disciples.

The establishment of the Dharma takes a very long time. The Dūnhuáng (敦煌) caves, for example, were carved continuously from the Former Qín (秦) (of the Sixteen Kingdoms) through the Táng (唐) dynasty—a span of over five-hundred years, with additional caves added over the next five-hundred years. They took over a millennia to “complete.” The Yúngǎng (雲岡) and Lóngmén (龍門) grottoes also were built over a period of two centuries or more. These monumental projects were not completed in a few years or even a few decades; they were the fruit of many generations’ collective effort.

In every place where Buddhism once flourished, traces of cave temples can be found. These places served as enduring places for Dharma propagation, education, and spiritual practice inspiring generations upon generations of cultivators. The large Buddha images were focal points of cultivation that gathered in countless practitioners.

So let us ask a question: If Buddhism is to continue for the next two thousand years on the North American continent, what kind of causes should we be planting today?

在早期的中國佛教中，許多參與石窟開鑿的印度與中國高僧，參與了監督建造毗盧遮那佛和彌勒菩薩的佛像建造，那時對阿彌陀佛的專修念佛法門尚未廣泛流行。從現存的歷史經典記載來看，許多早期的法師似乎都曾讀誦《般舟三昧經》或修習其中所說的觀想三昧法門。由此可見，透過觀想來修習念佛的法門，從很早的時候，約公元二世紀（東漢時期）起，就已經扎根在中國佛教中。

同時，從師承脈絡來看，這一傳統中既重視呼吸觀（數息觀）的禪定，也強調對佛的觀想與憶念。當時的石窟寺院環境莊嚴寂靜，為這些早期的大師及他們的弟子提供了極為理想的修行空間，特別適合長時間進行觀佛三昧等內觀修行。

佛法的建立是一項極為長遠的事業。以敦煌石窟為例，從（五胡十六國的）前秦到唐代，持續開鑿了五百多年，之後又陸續增建，前後歷時超過千年，才逐漸形成我們今日所見的規模。雲岡與龍門石窟的開鑿也歷經兩百年以上的時間。這些宏偉的工程，並非數年或數十年便能完成，而是歷代人們共同努力、代代相傳的成果。

我們在凡是佛教曾經興盛過的地方，幾乎都能看到石窟的痕跡。石窟裏的佛像不只是裝飾，它們更是真正長久弘法、教育與修行的載體。

因此，我們不妨思考一個問題：如果佛教要在北美洲延續兩千年，我們今天應該種下什麼樣的因緣？

我們當下所種下的每一個因、每一個願、每一分發心，都可能成為後人修行成道的助緣。

帶著這樣的想法，我不禁想問：



Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky  
肯塔基州猛獁洞國家公園

Every cause we plant today, every vow and aspiration we bring forth, could become a supporting condition for future generations to cultivate the Way.

With that in mind, I can't help but wonder: Does North America need its own Buddhist cave temples?

Interestingly, the United States already has many natural caves and cavern systems. For example, Mammoth Cave National Park in Kentucky is currently the longest known cave system in the world, stretching over 426 miles—roughly the distance from Ukiah, California to Los Angeles.

These caves are not only awe-inspiring in scale, but they also possess several qualities that make them remarkably suitable for spiritual practice:

- Stable temperature year-round
- Profound silence—quiet enough to hear one's own breath and heartbeat
- Natural acoustic resonance—ideal for chanting and reciting the Buddha's name
- Capable of preserving sutras, audio recordings, and other Dharma treasures for centuries
- Naturally occurring rock formations resembling niches or shrines—almost like temples formed by nature itself.

If one day we could establish sacred sites in these natural caves—installing Buddha images, enshrining scriptures, and creating spaces for practitioners to recite the Buddha's name, meditate, and chant sutras—such places could potentially benefit countless generations of living beings.

We are entering an era of rapid and dramatic change—artificial

北美是否也需要自己的佛教石窟？

有趣的是，美國本身就有許多天然的石窟與洞穴系統。例如位於肯塔基州的猛獁洞國家公園（Mammoth Cave National Park），目前是世界上已知最長的洞穴系統，全長超過426英里——大約是從加州瑜伽市到洛杉磯的距離。

這些洞穴不僅規模壯觀，同時也具備許多特質，非常適合作為修行的道場：

- 全年氣溫穩定
- 寂靜深遠，靜到能聽見自己的呼吸與心跳聲
- 天然回音共鳴，非常適合誦經、念佛
- 能夠長久保存經典、音頻錄音及其他法寶，歷久不壞
- 自然岩壁形成如佛龕般的結構，宛如天地生成的天然道場

如果有一天，我們能在這些天然石窟中建立道場——安奉佛像、保存經典，並開闢念佛、禪修與誦經的空間——那麼這些道場將可能利益無量無邊的眾生，綿延世代。

我們正步入一個劇烈變化的時代——人工智慧、太空探索、基因工程、虛擬實境……人類的科技正以驚人的速度飛躍發展，幾乎讓人無法跟上。我們甚至已經開始規劃在月球上建立人類居住地。

面對這樣的未來，我們身為修行人，該如何保持內心的寧靜？又該如何繼續專注不移地修行念佛法門？也許正如博格登·斯塔斯澤斯基教授（Professor Bogden Staszkeski）在今年六月善財暑期禪修營中所介紹的——現代最根本的物理理論之一，量子力學，正開始探討宇宙是否主要是以「意識」為基礎——這一觀點，早在兩千多年前的佛經與唯識經典中就已有清晰闡述。也許

intelligence, space exploration, genetic engineering, virtual reality...Human technology is advancing at an astonishing pace, almost too fast to keep up with. We are even beginning to plan for human settlements on the moon.

In such a future, how can we—as practitioners—maintain our inner stillness? How can we continue to recite the Buddha's name with unwavering focus? At DRBU Extension's Sudhana Summer Retreat this June, Professor Bogden Staszkeski said that the field of quantum mechanics, which deals with the most fundamental forces of the physical world, is starting to consider whether the universe is primarily based on consciousness rather than matter, something clearly explicated in Buddhist sutras and Yogacara texts more than two millennia ago. Can we allow ourselves to be inspired not just by ancient Buddhist philosophy, but practices as well?

Perhaps we too need Buddhist caves that we can use for creating fine Buddha images that will enable us to practice mindfulness of the Buddha (whether it be Amitabha, Shakyamuni, Medicine Master, Vairochana, or any and all of the ten thousand Buddhas) as places of cultivation, pilgrimage, and even as archives (where are we going to put all of our old sutras and lecture notes, and other Buddhist sacred items). I like to think that much like the joy the discoveries of Dunhuang and other cave monasteries built in those early times when Buddhism first came to China from India have given to Buddhist practitioners, scholars, and historians of this era, we can give a similar joy to those who cultivate a millennia or more from now in the Americas.

We can give them first a place to practice for centuries, and then perhaps centuries after that, when they become ancient places to those generations of the future, a glimpse into our Buddha images, sutras, and practices, in a relatively climate controlled time capsule from when Buddhism first began in the Americas. I am only an amateur historian, but I very much enjoy studying the period of time when Buddhism first went from India to China. Any mistakes are my own, and I hope you will all kindly correct any errors.

May the thoughts and aspirations we hold today become the starting point for the flourishing of Buddhism in North America for the next two thousand years. ❀



我們不僅可以從古老的佛教哲學中獲得啟發，更應從實際的修行法門中汲取力量。

也許我們如今也需要屬於我們的佛教石窟——能夠建造莊嚴的佛像、作為幫助我們念佛修行的場所（無論是阿彌陀佛、釋迦牟尼佛、藥師佛、毗盧遮那佛，或十方萬佛），也能成為朝聖的場所，甚至是保存佛教法寶的檔案庫（畢竟我們總得有地方安置舊經本、講義筆記，以及各種佛教聖物）。我常想，正如敦煌與其他早期佛教石窟的發現，為現代的修行人、佛教學者與歷史學家帶來無比的喜悅與驚嘆，我們也可以在美洲大陸為未來一千年乃至更久的修行人留下同樣的法喜與啟發。

我們可以為他們留下一個可以修行數百年的道場；而數百年之後，當這些地方對未來世代而言也變成了「古蹟」，他們仍能從中一窺我們時代的佛像、經典與修行方式，猶如一個氣候控制穩定的時間膠囊，封存著佛教在美洲初傳時期的歷史與精神。

我並非專業歷史學者，只是一位業餘愛好者，但我非常喜歡研究佛教從印度傳入中國的那段時期。若我所說有所錯誤，尚祈各位慈悲指正。

願我們今天的想法和發願，成為未來佛法在北美弘傳兩千年的起點。 ❀