In this paper I discuss a distinctive approach to the removal of sins that appears in the stream of Buddhism we call ‘Esoteric’ Buddhism. The idea that the recitation of spells, typically called dhāraṇīs, results in the removal of sins is mentioned frequently in Esoteric Buddhist scriptures. Sins in this context are understood as the karmic residue of evil deeds committed in the course of an innumerable number of past lives. Recitation of dhāraṇīs is at the heart of Esoteric Buddhist rituals, but the removal of sins was not always the goal of such practices. In its initial stages spell-recitation centered on worldly benefits. Nonetheless, the removal of sin became a fairly constant theme relatively early in the evolution of these Esoteric rituals, as can be seen from the fact that it occupies a very conspicuous place in many early dhāraṇī texts. My hypothesis is that as dhāraṇī recitation gained popularity, it began to be seen as the means to achieve not only worldly benefits but also soteriological goals, for which the removal of sins was thought to have been essential.

I offer here a case study of the challenges that resulted when dhāraṇī recitation came to take the place of other normative Buddhist practices as the means to eradicate sin and achieve salvation. I focus on one scripture in detail, the Dafangdeng tuoluoni jing大方等陀羅尼經. This dhāraṇī scripture was translated by a Northern Liang monk Fazhong 法眾 at Gaochang 高昌, near Turfan, during the Yong’an period 402–413 AD. In this text we can clearly see the efforts that were made to secure a place for dhāraṇī recitation within the larger framework of Buddhist doctrine and monastic practice. I will argue that the sometimes uneasy relationship between dhāraṇī recitation and removal of sin that we see here is also the key to understanding this complicated and often obscure sūtra.

The basic scenario for removal of sins through dhāraṇī practice is that as a person recites the dhāraṇī over and over, a vision occurs in which the practitioner sees the deities, in many cases all the Buddhas from their Buddhhalands in all the (‘ten’) directions. The Buddhas extend their arms and rub the head of the practitioner. This visionary contact with the Buddhas removes the sins from an innumerable number of past aeons or kalpas;
it nullifies their karmic effects, and in many cases allows the practitioner to achieve attainments of various kinds, such as supernatural knowledge or the 'fruits' along the path to the ultimate attainment of Buddhahood. Sometimes specific *samādhis* or visions are also named.

This is a distinctly soteriological scenario. In early accounts such soteriological scenarios appear alongside rituals in which the recitation of the *dhāraṇī* brings about what we would consider to be more this-worldly goals, such as cures from sickness and the defeat of enemies. We need also to keep in mind that Esoteric sources often present the soteriological scenario of *dhāraṇī* practice as a distinctive and competing path, separate from, and even more efficacious ('quicker') than the conventional path of observing monastic precepts and engaging in other practices that result in enlightenment, such as meditation.

In what follows I begin with a review of early sources on *dhāraṇī* practice that are preserved in Chinese translation. The specific scenario for removal of sins just described appears repeatedly in these sources. These early accounts often describe the outcome of the repeated recitation of *dhāraṇīs* in terms of this-worldly goals. My general assumption is that this was the earlier and simpler understanding and the basic ritual. Rituals that focused on less tangible soteriological goals would have appeared later. It is not possible to determine the date of this development. The scriptures that I examine no doubt co-existed before they were translated and the order of translation may not reflect the order of their original composition. Different types of practices also co-existed throughout the history of the Esoteric Buddhist tradition. An early date of a translation can only confirm that the particular practices described in that scripture existed by that date.

For example, the earliest datable source, Zhi Qian’s *Wuliangmen weimichi jing* 無量門微密持經, T. 1012, in the first half of the third century, focuses on the soteriological scenario exclusively and does not mention any this-worldly benefits. In contrast, the soteriological scenario appears to be absent in the *Daiyi shenzhou jing* 大吉義神呪經 T. 1335, translated in 462. In the *Tuolinnipo jing* 陀隣尼鉢經, T. 1352 *dhāraṇī* practice is largely directed to this-worldly goals, though the soteriological concern that goes beyond this world or this life, also appears to surface in one important detail. The practice produces the supernatural knowledge of past lives. The *Qifo bapusa suoshuo da tuoluoni shenzhou jing* 七佛八菩薩所說大陀羅尼神咒經 T. 1332, from the Eastern Jin period (317–420 AD) offers examples in which both tangible this-worldly goals and more developed accounts of soteriological goals appear side by side.