

The Buddhist Perspective on Human Fulfillment: The Pure Land

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Every major religion of salvation has a vision of paradise, the destination of the faithful. In the early tradition of Buddhism the goal was inconceivable Nirvana. Nirvana as a term meant to blow out, that is, blowing out or extinction of the winds of passions, delusion and greed; transcendence of karma. It was not a place to go, but more a state of being or condition beyond description or conception. The Buddha, upon his enlightenment, attained partial Nirvana because he willed to stay in the world to share his teaching. However, he was beyond karma and transmigration based on good deeds. Though the Buddha voluntarily remained in the world, he was not of the world, stained by its impurities. When he died, Buddha attained perfect or complete Nirvana and was beyond conceptions such as being or non-being. He was totally released from all the passions, discriminations and attachments that mark life in this world. Yet he was not in a "place."

This understanding also goes back to the Buddhist view that there is no abiding essence in things or what we would call a soul. Rather, beings are temporary configurations of elements called skandha. The skandha which are bound by karma disperse when the karmic bonds are broken, and in the case of the Buddha, purified of all karmic taint. In early Buddhist art, the Buddha was represented by an empty chair, indicating that he is indefinable in the nirvanic state.

This conception of Buddha's destiny is naturally difficult to understand and has been a problem to convey to the general public through the centuries. People are generally concerned for personal survival after death, as we have pointed out in other essays. They expect to survive death in a new realm and there meet their loved ones and friends. I am reminded of a story told to me by a monk from Sri Lanka. He recounted to my students who were studying Buddhism the story of an old woman who once came to his temple and overheard a monk trying to explain Nirvana to a group of people as a kind of nothingness and nowhere. When she heard that, she was dismayed and complained that if Nirvana was nowhere, she did not want to go there. My monk friend explained to the woman that Nirvana was really like their village with its river and green trees. It was quite like home. Assured and satisfied, she continued to come to the temple.

Because of the difficulty of understanding the more abstruse concepts of Buddhism, popular Buddhism took over and modified Indian mythology of afterlife which taught that there were various levels of transmigration: hell, hungry ghost, animal, human being, angry spirit and heavens with deities. People are reborn as a result of their good or evil karma. To be born into a heaven of a god was most desirable. One would reside there for aeons of time before undergoing repeated transmigration until Nirvana is achieved and transmigration transcended.

Mahayana Buddhism, which developed in India in about the 2nd century BCE, expanded the Buddhist vision of reality, the universe and human destiny. The concept of the Buddha expanded from belief in the Buddha Sakyamuni to numerous Buddhas of the past and of the future. Eventually there were Buddhas and worlds in every direction of the universe, filling the cosmos from macro to micro worlds. The immensity of the universe became inconceivable. Every Buddha resided in his own land where he nurtured beings to attain enlightenment. Every land was pure and peaceful.

Further, in the course of its historical development, Buddhism experienced the problems of all institutions and the realization of its ideals became more and more difficult to fulfill, if not

impossible. A theory of the decline of Buddhism was expressed in the form of prophecy attributed to the Buddha. When the Buddha was present in the world, attainment of enlightenment was easy, because of his spiritual influence and support. After the passage of time, and the loss of the influence of Buddha in the world, the teaching continued to be propagated together with the practices but without fulfillment. At the lowest point of decline there is only teaching but no practice or fulfillment. Buddhism became a shell. This "theological" view of Buddhist history was reinforced by upheavals in Chinese and later Japanese societies.

Along with the theory of decline of Buddhism, the teaching of the Western Pure Land of Amida Buddha emerged from the great variety of Buddhas and their lands to become the goal for ultimate spiritual release which could not be found in this world. In the teachings about the heavens of gods, it is noticeable that they are not permanent, but are still subject to karma. Birth in the Pure Land of Amida meant complete release eternally from the terrors of aeons of repeated births and deaths.

Initially birth into the Pure Land came about through forms of meditation and visualizations by adept monks. However, sacred texts, designated Pure Land Sutras, appeared, claiming to be the teaching of Sakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha of this world system. They taught that Amida Buddha's Vows promise that all beings could achieve enlightenment in his Pure Land through trust in his Vows and practicing various forms of practice, depending on the level of their capacity. These practices included meditation, visualization, offerings, chanting of the Buddha's name etc.

In China, these texts inspired the development of popular Pure Land teaching designed for ordinary people. Numbers of teachers wrote commentaries on the Pure Land sacred texts, defending the reliance on the practice of chanting the Name of Amida Buddha as the chief means to be born into the Pure Land. It could be practiced anywhere, even in the field.

The theory behind this teaching was the widespread belief in the power of spells and chants to affect reality and bring benefits. Accordingly, Amida Buddha had invested his infinite store of merit through aeons of sincere and devoted practice for Buddhahood into his Name. The recitation of the Name brought the merit and power of the Buddha to the aid of the person, and his birth into the Pure Land. Faith and the chanting of the Name of Amida Buddha would provide the merit to purify ordinary human beings of their defilements and enable their birth into his Pure Land.

Pure Land teaching pervaded China and later Korea and Japan, becoming an important feature in all major Buddhist sects. It was a source of hope for ordinary people who, locked into their social roles, lacked opportunity to enter a monastery and devote their lives to the search for enlightenment. Usually only the nobility or upper classes could leave society for the monastery when they desired to or their worldly fortunes changed.

For modern people a major question is what is the nature of the Pure Land and where is it? Is it an objective existence some where "out there"? The Sutras place it so many million "miles" to the West and undoubtedly there are many people who interpret the Sutra literally as a concrete destination where people go after death. The detailed descriptions of the Pure Land in the Sutras depict it as a realm of perfect peace, freedom and bliss where trees, birds and breezes proclaim the teaching. The Pure Land contrasts with this world of suffering and hard labor.

As a development within the larger Mahayana tradition, Pure Land teaching shares the view that individuals destined for Buddhahood (bodhisattvas), out of compassion for the suffering masses, put off their entry into Buddhahood or Nirvana in order to remain and work in this world to rescue all beings. Accordingly, those who are born in the Pure Land return to this

world from the Pure Land to work for the salvation of all beings. Returnees may appear in many guises, perhaps even as one's enemy. The teaching encourages us to learn from all our relationships and experiences of life and to see value in others as bodhisattvas who are constantly working to enhance our lives. Religious faith is not to be selfish, but realize compassion in our relationships.

There are also other interpretations which suggest that Pure Land is within our own minds. If our minds are pure, this world is pure and so the Pure Land is this world if we have the spiritual eyes to see it. Contemporary Western people are more inclined toward the more mystical, spiritual understanding that we are already in the Pure Land. We are already potentially Buddhas. Further, all beings have Buddha-nature which we may realize through spiritual discipline and contemplation such as practiced in the Zen tradition. The Pure Land is the realm of truth, Nirvana, beyond and behind our delusory existence in this world, which is rooted in our blind passions.

Pure Land teaching entered Japan along with the earliest transmissions of Buddhism. It was an aspect of all Buddhist schools, particularly the Tendai school on Mount Hiei. When Japan began to experience social upheavals with the overthrow of the aristocratic Taira clan by the warrior Minamoto clan in the twelfth century, Pure Land teaching became more prominent through the establishment of an independent Pure Land sect by the famous monk Honen (1133-1212). He stressed that monks and lay people could only be saved in this final decadent age through faith in the Nembutsu (chanting the Name of Amida). Opposed by the leading sects, he eventually went into exile with his major disciples.

Among Honen's disciples was a monk Shinran (1173-1263). Experiencing religious despair at his failure to maintain the purity of mind and spirit required to fulfill Tendai religious ideals, he left the monastery and sought out Honen from whom he received spiritual release. Honen taught that through reliance on Amida's Vow and chanting his Name even the most defiled person would gain the assurance of birth in the Pure Land and ultimate enlightenment. Banished to exile along with his teacher, Shinran continued his spiritual development, formulating a distinctive interpretation of the Pure Land teaching based on faith alone.

Both Pure Land traditions associated with Honen and Shinran became the largest, most popular Buddhist sects in Japan and later in the western world. Over a century ago Japanese immigrant workers came to the sugar plantations in Hawaii and farms on the mainland United States. They appealed to their Japanese head temples to send teachers. Temples were established throughout the islands and on the west coast of the mainland U.S. Today the Jodo Mission of Hawaii represents the teaching of Honen, while the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii and the Higashi Hongwanji Mission represent the teaching of Shinran.

The Pure Land teaching offers us a vision of universal, compassionate reality, constantly working to fulfill and enhance our lives by providing a deeper understanding of spiritual reality. It offers a perspective in which gratitude and compassion are truly the essence of life and religious faith.