

Amida Buddha, The Central Symbol of Pure Land Teaching

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The central symbol of Pure Land teaching, Amida Buddha, emerged in Mahayana Buddhism from among the multitude of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, or other Indian divine beings, to become the primary expression of Unconditional Compassion and Universal Wisdom, eclipsing all other figures. Amida's western Pure Land where he is said to reside has been described in detail in the Larger Pure Land Sutra and the Smaller Amida Sutra, attracting the devotion of the masses through the centuries in East Asian societies. His Land was the most accessible, through the easy practice of reciting his name. Consequently, Amida Buddha became the object of worship-reverence, inspiring a host of teachers and followers in every stream of Mahayana tradition and permeating the whole of East Asia. More people probably have invoked the name of Amida than any savior figure in history. Wherever there is personal tragedy or disaster or hope for a better afterlife, the name of Amida will be intoned for the welfare of the people involved. But how should we understand Amida?

Over the years that I have been teaching, the question has been frequently raised by inquirers whether or not Amida Buddha is a God comparable to God in Christianity. The story of Amida in the Sutra contributes to the question by recounting how Bodhisattva Dharmakara became Amida Buddha, the universal, cosmic saviour of all beings. According to the Sutra account, a king in an unnamed land and world renounced his throne to seek enlightenment and open the path to an ideal world. All who were born there would be assured of gaining enlightenment and finally Buddhahood in a beneficial, supportive environment, in an ideal spiritual world.

Dharmakara practiced under the guidance of Lokeshvararaja, the fifty-third Buddha. The renunciant king made forty eight vows to establish his Pure Land. The Sutra story relates vividly that the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, the religious name of the king-monk, attained the status of Buddhahood replete with infinite virtue to share with all beings. He reached perfection, transcending all limits of passion-ridden sentient beings. In effect, Dharmakara became god-like as the source of salvation. In the story the king is a human being. However, as Buddha, he appears as a transcendent glorified figure who is revealed in the Sutra through Sakyamuni Buddha's meditation-visions in our space-time world.

Initially, the narratives were the object of contemplation for monks. They tried to realize visions of the Pure Land in their own minds by contemplating all its details, thereby confirming their own eventual enlightenment and Buddhahood. Accompanying the meditations there were ceremonies with worship, offerings, repentance, etc. to prepare for the practice of meditation-contemplation. At a later time, since very few people could leave society to seek their enlightenment in the monastery, teachers promoted the practice of reciting his name for ordinary people. It was taught that Amida completely invested his virtue in his name, making it spiritually potent. Later popular belief stressed that his name was available as the means for birth in his Land anytime and anywhere to believers of any ability or status who recite it in faith. Many narratives grew up describing the virtue of Amida and wondrous births into his Pure Land in China and Japan. Consequently, the worship of Amida spread widely, exalting him as a primary divine figure.

Western people, conditioned by centuries of Christian theology, emphasize the existence of a "theistic" self-subsistent, personal God and, therefore, generally view Amida as also a God. Theism highlights the will and intentionality, as well as the power, of God. Christian

followers question whether Amida created the world, as well as provided a way of salvation. Creation and salvation are intimately connected in Christianity, and assumed to be so in other religions. Also God stands alone in his transcendent, monotheistic solitude, separate from both nature and man.

The issue becomes blurred when Buddhists also speak of Amida in personalistic, "theistic" terms comparable to "god-talk" in Christianity. However, Buddhists have never attempted to prove the existence of Amida nor claimed that he created the universe. There are no four philosophical arguments (cosmological, contingency, moral, and teleological) for the existence of Amida Buddha as there have been for the existence of God in the West. Despite similarities in so-called "god-talk" in the two faiths, they are really different philosophically and "theologically."

In order to understand the character of "god-talk" in Mahayana Buddhism, we can observe the concepts of Buddha represented in the theories of Two Bodies or Three Bodies of a Buddha. In the case of two bodies there is the distinction between the realm of Absolute Spiritual Truth, i. e. the Body of Truth, which cannot be conceived or expressed by our ordinary language or human thought, and Mundane or Conventional Truth, i.e. the Body of Compassionate Means, using our ordinary language and imagery.

Three Bodies of the Buddha consist of the Body of Truth, the Body of Reward-Enjoyment and the Body of Transformation or Manifestation. The Body of Truth is the Absolute. The Body of Reward-Enjoyment and Body of Transformation are Mundane truth. The Reward Body represents the result of the Bodhisattva fulfilling his vows to become Buddha, as related in the story in the Sutra. According to the Sutra, it took Dharmakara five aeons to complete his vows and it is ten aeons since that time. He will go into Nirvana after forty-two aeons. Amida in the Sutra is involved in time. The Transformation Body represents the historical time-space dimension where Sakyamuni Buddha in our world is the manifestation of the Reward Body to reveal the teaching and path to salvation depicted in the Sutra. The different dimensions relate to the different forms of Buddha in the literature and tradition.

In any case, the distinctions within these two perspectives may be called the realm of Truth-as-it-is (Suchness) and the Truth-for-us. Whatever has form or is expressed in language is the mundane dimension and thereby included in the world of delusory understanding. Amida with form, as presented in the Sutra, is the Body of Compassionate Means and, as Shinran notes in the Jinen honi sho text, the medium by which we know the formless, colorless, inconceivable Body of Truth. It is real/true so far as it communicates or opens truth to us. However, it is empty and without substance, because it is not a self-existing entity apart from our minds. Amida Buddha has no objective existence as most western Christians assume of God's existence in the universe.

As a consequence, "god-talk" in Buddhism does not represent the deepest or ultimate understanding of reality. It is a mode of speaking rooted in our unenlightened human nature. In terms of salvation, we ultimately attain Buddhahood, becoming one with reality, though because of our unenlightened nature, we speak of birth in the Pure Land and becoming Buddha. From the Absolute dimension, we attain the "birth of no-birth," beyond any conceivability, therefore Nirvana, while on the popular level, people think of meeting their loved ones in the Pure Land.

When Buddhists speak of attaining Buddhahood, or the Bodhisattva's return to the world to save beings, they are referring to the compassionate meaning of Buddhism. The goal is for all to become one with the saving power, symbolized by Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light

and Eternal Life. The name Amida means Infinite; he is the ultimate context of our lives. The reality of Buddha's compassion becomes observable whenever life is enhanced, fulfilled or conveyed to us through the deeds and care of friends. We see Amida whenever we see the healing powers of the body, or creativity and growth in our life and world. We experience it in the thrill of new life, or the peculiar beauty in people and in nature. It is the interdependence, the totality of our relations, that sustains life and enables our activities. Amida Buddha is the relation of all relations. It is the wonder that inspires us and awakens us to our own responsibility to life. The power of Amida, a la interdependence, is realized when we take interdependence and mutuality seriously in the affairs of life.

The symbolic or mythic story is like a window through which we view the vast reality that embraces our lives and stirs our reverence and trust. Amida is, therefore, not a God and the reverence toward him expressed in our temples is really reverence for reality, an acknowledgement of the mystery of existence. As a result, there is no petitionary prayer, requesting things from the Buddha or expectation of miracles. All is entrusted to the compassion that we believe is at the heart of reality and evident in the life-giving and supporting life of nature. Rather, there is acceptance and trust in the working of reality; it is not resignation but inspiration as one perceives the power of Life enabling us to live positively with the limitations that define our lives. It is not competitive or individualist, because it binds us together in mutual respect and support. It offers the basis of a broad community which Shinran calls Equal companions on the path (dobo-dogyo). Essentially, Buddhism has a reality concept (a picture/image of reality), rather than a god-concept or belief.

Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism, was born into the milieu of Mahayana Buddhism in Japan represented by the several schools of Nara Buddhism, Tendai Buddhism on Mount Hiei and the esoteric Shingon school on Mount Koya and Nara. There was a multitude of approaches to the Buddhist path to enlightenment. Anxious for his own salvation, he entered Honen's community in Yoshimizu in Kyoto. Separated from Honen never to meet again, Shinran forged a distinctive interpretation of the Pure Land teaching out of his varied experiences as a monk, a student of Honen, and a defrocked monk propagating Buddhism in the distant provinces. He was deeply influenced by Tendai thought. The diverse influences on Shinran combined to provide the basis for his understanding of the dynamic working of Amida Buddha as the expression of reality itself, the Buddha nature in all things, reality beyond God. This working becomes real in the experience of true entrusting that forms the essence of Shin personal religious experience and motivates the nembutsu of gratitude as a way of life.

However Amida is understood, he will always be a spiritual refuge for hosts of people from the difficulties of life and hope for our deepest personal fulfillment. Beyond that, in our modern world, the interpretation of Amida must also provide a context for intellectual, scientific and social-cultural involvement. It must inspire participation on every level, Only the broadest and deepest understanding of Amida will suffice for participating in the contemporary religious culture. Shinran's thought offers significant potentiality to contribute to the modern search for meaningful spirituality.