

# ***Introduction to Pure Land Tradition***

**by Dr. Alfred Bloom, Professor Emeritus, University of Hawaii**

## **Introduction**

The Pure Land teaching is a generally popular aspect of Mahayana Buddhist history which had its most distinctive developments in China and Japan.

While it has permeated the Buddhist tradition in those countries, it had its roots in India, though there never was an organized movement there.

What we know as the Pure Land tradition focuses on Amitabha Buddha-Omitofu-Amida Butsu and his Pure Land to the West. However, we should understand that every Buddha has his own Pure Land where he resides in his Body of Enjoyment which is one category of the concept of Trikaya or Three Bodies of the Buddha. This concept systematizes various concepts of the Buddha that grew up in Mahayana thought. Generally speaking, the highest level is the Law-Body, which metaphysically is formless, absolute reality, Reward Body which is the mythological form of the Buddha, and Transformed Body which is the historical manifestation of the Buddha.

The name Amitabha or in its alternate form Amitayus means Infinite light and Eternal Life respectively. The name is generally used in its transliterated form based on the Sanskrit. The Pure Land may be viewed as kind of paradise. However, it does not have the sensuous features found in other concepts of heaven or paradise. In the Pure Land the sounds of the dharma pervade and the dharma is constantly proclaimed. Bodhisattvas travel from worlds to worlds delivering the suffering. Nevertheless, there is no suffering in the Pure Land. It is bliss and tranquility. In some interpretations it is the launching place for attaining Nirvana because there is a perfect environment centered on Amitabha Buddha. In some interpretations it is a symbolic expression of Nirvana itself. Once born there one never returns to the vale of suffering.

We shall concentrate in this lecture on the developments that led to the formation of the popular tradition centered on Amitabha Buddha.

### ***I. The textual basis for Pure Land Teaching***

There are several hundreds of texts related to the Amitabha Pure Land tradition in China, as well as Korea and Japan. However, three texts formed the foundation for the teaching. These are The Larger Pure Land Sutra, The Sutra of the Contemplation on the Buddha of Eternal Life and The Amitabha Sutra or The Smaller Pure Land Sutra.

The Larger Pure Land Sutra is a lengthy text which is important because it relates the story of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara who had been a king. Dharmakara renounced his throne and sought enlightenment in order to create an ideal realm where all suffering, ignorance and evils would be abolished. This was the Pure Land. He practised the Bodhisattva disciplines for 5 kalpas aeons and became Amitabha Buddha, residing in his Western Pure Land millions of miles from this world. It now ten kalpas since that time when Sakyamuni Buddha is portrayed as revealing this teaching.

As the basis of his discipline and creation of this pure realm, Dharmakara made forty eight vows which establish the contents of the land, the people residing there and how to gain entrance. Among the Vows the 18, 19, 20th Vows became the basis for the popular formation of the tradition. The 18th Vow indicates that if people sincerely believe, and think on the Buddha for as few as ten thoughts and desire to be born in his land, that person will

be born there, except for those who commit the great sins or defame the dharma. The concept of ten thoughts came to be defined in various ways.

It could mean meditation-visualization, reciting the name of the Buddha, or faith. These interpretations developed during the evolution of the tradition. The practice of reciting the name which became the central practice of the popular tradition came to be called Nien-fo or Nembutsu in Chinese or Japanese. The term Nien or Nen has been interpreted in various ways throughout the centuries. The 19th Vow specified that with the practice of mortality and meditation, the Buddha would meet devotees and escort them to the Pure Land at their death. The 20th was defined as specifying the recitation of the name of Amitabha as the means of cultivating the root of virtue. In general the 18th Vow was regarded as the central Vow in the popular tradition, especially when it was identified with the means of reciting the name.

The second important text is the "Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Eternal Life." This text was most probably composed in China and is a manual of meditations designed to cultivate visionary experiences of the Pure Land. The context of the practices is a story of a wicked Prince Ajatasatru who imprisoned his mother and his father, Bimbisara, and brought about his death. At the mother's request Buddha taught a series of meditations. The text is in two parts with the latter part indicating that through the recitation of the name of Buddha even on the death bed, will bring about the purification of eons of sins and birth into the Pure Land. This teaching provided the practical warrant for popular Pure Land doctrine.

The "Smaller Pure Land Sutra" or "Amitabha Sutra" gives a description of the Pure Land and also advocates the recitation of the name of Buddha.

It should be noted that the practices authorized in these texts were generic, except in these texts they were applied to Amitabha Buddha, rather than other Buddhas.

## ***II. Major Teachers of Pure Land Tradition***

There were numerous teachers who made commentaries on one or other Pure Land text. Some scholars detect various lines of transmission. However, an overall historical lineage did not really appear as we may find in Zen Buddhism. Because the Pure Land teaching became a subsidiary teaching of other schools or lines of thought, scholars in various lineages wrote commentaries interpreting the teaching in terms of the philosophical perspective they represented.

The Meditative-monastic stream of Pure Land is generally represented by Lu-shan Hui yuan (334-416). He is sometimes called the founder of Chinese Pure Land, but this may be an overstatement. Recently, our Prof. Tanaka, a graduate of U.C. Buddhist Studies program, has studied Ching ying Hui yuan (523-92) and has shown a very early treatment of "The Sutra of Contemplation."

The popular formation of the tradition draws attention to three focal figures. These are T'an luan, Tao ch'o, and Shan tao. T'an luan is interesting because he drew upon the philosophy of Nagarjuna, an important Indian Buddhist philosopher, Vasubandhu, an Indian Buddhist teacher and aspects of Taoist religion.

T'an luan (476-542), according to his biography, was seeking for eternal life or longevity, as the result of an illness, in order to have more time to develop his Buddhist studies. However, he met the Indian Buddhist teacher, Bodhiruci, who converted him from his Taoist pursuits. He maintained that true eternal life could only be found through Buddhism. T'an luan burned his Taoist texts and studied Buddhism which was the Pure Land teaching. He wrote commentary to a Pure Land work of Vasubandhu and interpreted the doctrine from the standpoint of Nagarjuna.

Nagarjuna's philosophy was the Madhyamika teaching which has become a basic feature of Mahayana Buddhism. This teaching attacks the dualism implicit in human thinking and the objectivistic way of perceiving the world and believing that things have their own self or independent natures. He applied the principle of Dependent Co-origination to all things and even ideas. Everything is a composite set of relationships which are essentially empty or void of essence. In effect there are two levels of truth, the absolute which we may experience through meditative practice and the conventional level which we require for communication but are not themselves the truth. They provisionally exist as means to forward our spiritual development or in other ways to obstruct it, if taken as the truth.

With respect to Pure Land teaching, Nagarjuna was believed to have written a commentary on the Bodhisattva stages and one of these chapters was called the section on easy practice. A contrast was made between difficult practices and easy in the training of bodhisattvas. T'an luan used these terms to distinguish the more difficult routines of monastic practice and the way of reciting the name of Buddha for the ordinary person.

Vasubandhu provided the Pure Land tradition with a framework of practice involving meditations, worship, praise, offerings, recitations etc. as means to gain visualization of the Pure Land. Based on these teachings, T'an luan also introduced the distinction of self-power and other power. Self power was like riding a donkey a road to get to a destination, while other power was to ride a boat or to be borne in the sky by a great wheel rolling king (chakravartan). These terms became basic to Pure Land vocabulary. The Buddha's power became embodied in his name whose merit became ours through the recitation. This was seen as based in the Buddha's Vow.

In order to justify such distinctions, T'an luan indicated that as we get further in time from the Buddha, the capacities of people to attain enlightenment decrease and require an easier way for the masses of people.

The second teacher, inspired by T'an luan, was Tao ch'o who gave further justification to the teaching through the concept of Mo fa (Chinese) or Mappo (Japanese). according to this teaching based on a variety of Buddhist texts, Buddhism declines with the passing of the Buddha. The true teaching lasts about 500 years. Here there is teaching, practice, and realization. This period is followed by the period of Semblance or Seeming Dharma where there is teaching and practice but no realization. In the last period, Mappo, there is only teaching, no practice or realization. For this last period, only the way of Pure Land teaching and the recitation of the name is assured. Tao ch'o distinguished Sage Path teaching, the way of the capable and the Pure Land gate.

The third teacher was Shan tao who had been a student of Tao ch'o. He contributed greatly to the development of Pure Land teaching by focusing it more clearly on Amitabha as the chief Buddha with the promise of rebirth in the Pure Land. Though he maintained the traditional stress on the monastic, meditative practices, he also presented the recitation of the Buddha's name as the meaning of the Buddha's Vow where it teaches ten thoughts.

Along with these several teachers there were numerous other exponents of Pure Land who helped either to develop the thought, or to create worship ceremonies. The meditative stream continued.

### ***III. Japanese Development of Pure Land***

In Japan Pure land teaching arrived early, during the 6th century, and Amitabha Buddha quickly gained a prominent position as an object of worship. There were some notable exponents such as Kuya (903-72) who is called the Saint of the Market Place. He advocated the recitation of the name among the people in the Heian period. Also in this period was Genshin (942-1017) who wrote among other things the Ojoyoshu, The Essentials of Rebirth which compares to Dante's Divine Comedy in its presentation of heavens and hells. It

became a manual for street preachers. He also worked with aristocratic lay people encouraging Pure Land faith.

There were numbers of Nembutsu hijiri, wandering monks who taught the recitation of the name. As well, there were compilations of stories relating miraculous births into the Pure Land or tales of woe for unbelievers. These stories traveled from China to Japan and were designed to encourage faith.

With the great transition in Japanese society that came with the shift from the aristocratic Heian age to the warrior Kamakura period (1175-1332) some new trends developed in Pure Land. Honen initiated what became the first independent movement of Pure Land. He emphasized the sole practice of Nembutsu and the virtual exclusion of all other practices. His later followers, some 6 in number, disagreed over the extent of this exclusion. Some employed what they considered subsidiary practices as an augment to the Nembutsu. Others held more strictly to the recitation as the only practice suitable for the last age in the demise of dharma.

The teaching came to be regarded by the established sects such as Tendai and Shingon which had great monasteries and land holdings as subversive to religion and society through its emphasis on the common person, a more egalitarian viewpoint, and a more simple and individualistic approach to deliverance, rendering unnecessary the great pageantry and ceremonies of these sects. Honen and his disciples were sent into exile and a few were executed. Pure Land teaching appealed more to the lower classes and the dispossessed.

One of Honen's disciples was Shinran (1173-1263). He opened a distinctive path in Pure Land through his emphasis on faith alone. Shinran varied from other such teachers by holding that the true cause of deliverance is faith, endowed by the Buddha. The practice of Nembutsu was, therefore, not a purifying practice, but a matter of gratitude for the compassion of the Buddha which assures deliverance. Shinran's emphasis was more on attaining deliverance in order to be able to deliver others.

Shinran was not well-known in his own day, but through the efforts of the 8th Abbot Rennyō, Shinran's teaching which became known as Jōdo Shinshū, the True Teaching of the Pure Land, became a formidable social body in later medieval times. It became one of the largest of Buddhist denominations and the major tradition of the immigrant Japanese who came to America near the end of the 19th century.

A disciple of a disciple of Honen was Ippen. He is important because of the approach to deliverance which he brought to the Pure Land. In his view the deliverance of Amitabha is so sure that one need not even have faith. He went about the country having people sign a scroll and giving tickets to the Pure Land. With these one might be assured of rebirth into the Land. Conclusion

Pure Land teaching as it was presented in East Asia appears to be a mass teaching for those unable to undergo the more rigorous monastic life. It was considered a secondary teaching, an upaya, as a means of giving hope to ordinary people. However, with Honen and Shinran, the teaching became more exclusivistic and theologically developed. In general the teaching is otherworldly, where the Pure Land contrasts with the corruption and evils of this world. Some have regarded it as negative and pessimistic, because it views people as passion-ridden and incapable on their own to attain enlightenment as taught by the Buddha Sakyamuni. In Shinran's thought, the teaching was redirected to this life through the experience of faith. Deliverance was secure in this world. Therefore, followers were freed from fears of afterlife, as well as fears of evil deities and spirits.

Efforts are being made today to revitalize the teaching and to apply it more meaningfully in modern society.