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The Pure Land Sects of Buddhism

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The Pure Land schools of Buddhism in Japan have sometimes been described as preaching an 'easy path' to enlightenment. They do not require strenuous meditational exercises, as do the Zen sects, or complex and intricate ritual practices, as does the Shingon sect. Nor do they believe that the scholastic learning practised by the Hossō or Tendai sects have any efficacy for us today. They rely rather on a way of faith, complete and self-abnegating faith in the power of Amida Buddha to 'save' all who call on his name. Such faith is in fact not easy to acquire. But the Pure Land schools have nevertheless brought comfort and hope to many people at times when they feel helpless and hard pressed; hard pressed by appalling conditions in this world, by famine, fire or war; or daunted by the conviction that they are hopelessly unable to avoid a terrible rebirth in one of the worse quarters of the Wheel.

Every Buddhist accepts the Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha Sakyamuni repeated again and again were the core of his teaching. These Four Truths state that our ordinary view of the world, the view given by our five senses and our rational faculties, is inadequate, flawed and productive of suffering. It does not give a whole or true view, but the distorted view taken by a sick man. The second truth states that this suffering has a due cause. It derives from the desires and cravings which proceed from the flawed idea of 'myself'. I do not realise that I am 'sick', but take the symptoms of the disease to be real and true.

The third truth states that this cause may be eliminated. We are not condemned for ever to suffer this state of sickness; there is something which may be done to remove the cause and enable us to see aright. And the fourth Truth states that there is a Path which will lead to this elimination.

These Four Truths are couched in the terse form of a traditional Indian medical prescription. You diagnose the patient's disease, state whether it is curable or not, and finally prescribe the correct medicine.

The Buddha's *dharma* is therefore the correct medicine for the sick state in which we find ourselves. The Path which he himself tried, followed and found to be good, he recommended others to follow likewise.

It would lead to an experience which might be inexpressible in ordinary words, but it brought nevertheless enlightenment, bliss, and the extinction of desires and passions which flaw our present state.

Mahayana sects in Japan however are often seen as falling into two broad categories, which differ over the manner in which the medicine is to be administered to the patient. The schools called *jiriki*, 'own strength', insist that it is through my own efforts that I can follow the Path. The Buddha may be the Great Physician who prescribed the cure, but that cure requires a good many efforts on my part. The two sects of Zen are in particular described as *jiriki*; the difficult spiritual exercises they prescribe are now well known to many western Buddhists.

The other category is called *tariki*, or Other Power. These schools believe that for various reasons we are no longer capable of helping ourselves to the enlightenment the Buddha preached. We are no longer capable of following for ourselves the Buddha's prescribed Path, and need more help from an 'Other' source. The Great Physician, we must believe, will come to our aid at this time, and give us the further help we need to arrive at our proper salvation.

The Pure Land schools in Japan belong unequivocally to this second category. The Indian scriptures on which the doctrines are founded, the Patriarchs who propagated them in China and Japan, all preached the same clear message. We are too spiritually weak and degenerate at this present time to carry out the earlier disciplines. We lack the energy, the inspiration, the aspiration to follow the Path for ourselves. The original medicine no longer works with us. Meditational exercises, scholastic learning, intricate rituals of movements and words, all are now nugatory.

For alas, we are now in the last stage of the Great Cycle, when such degeneracy is predicted in the sutras, and when our only hope of escaping a terrible rebirth in one of the hells is to trust utterly in the Other Power of Amida Buddha. He it is who will guide us after death to his Paradise in the West, where we shall meet no hindrances, in such surroundings, to bar our further search for enlightenment.

Two questions at once suggest themselves.

First, what is this Last Stage of the Cycle, known in Japanese as *mappō*? That time moves not in any linear progression, but in a series of great cycles, is a doctrine propounded in several Mahayana sutras. These cycles, they declare, proceed in three distinct stages or periods.

During the first stage, known as *Shōbō* or the True Law, the Buddha's

precepts were properly taught and practised, and their practice led to enlightenment. Noble spiritual teachers passed on the *dharma* to disciples, who thereby achieved supreme enlightenment. The patient's sickness was easily cured.

During the second stage, known as *Zōbō* or the Image of the Law, the *dharma* was taught and practised. But the practices no longer led to enlightenment. The medicine in its old form seemed to have lost some of its efficacy. The patient's sickness was more intractable.

During the third and final stage, *Mappō*, or the End of the Law, things were much worse. The *dharma* was taught, but the precepts were neither put into practice nor led to enlightenment. The patient was dangerously ill, and a drastic change in the prescription was required.

For Japan in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the signs seemed obvious that the dreadful Last Stage had begun. Famine, war and pestilence were upon them, the old medicine seemed no longer to work, and the threat loomed ever more terrible of a rebirth lasting kalpas of time in one of the hells, hot or cold, or in the Realm of Hungry Ghosts, *gaki-dō*, where the miserable inhabitants endured foul and filthy sufferings for similar aeons.

To meet this threat, and to bring comfort to those who despaired of finding salvation by their 'own powers', the two schools arose who taught that the only recourse was faith in the saving power of Amida Buddha and the repetition of his name.

Our second question now presents itself. Who is Amida Buddha, and what connection has he with Sakyamuni, the Buddha who in historical times propounded his Four Truths in India?

The faith proclaimed by the Patriarchs of the Pure Land schools is founded on a myth; a myth in the religious sense of a 'story' which gives a viable framework to the world, until we can discover the ultimate truth which cannot be put into words. This story is told in the first of the three Indian sutras which are the basic scriptures of the Pure Land sects. The Large *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra* opens to reveal the Buddha preaching to a large company of sages and monks. I am the last of a long line of Buddhas, he announces, stretching back into the past innumerable kalpas of time. During the reign of one of these earlier Buddhas there was a monk called Dharmakara, who was so infused with aspiration to become a Buddha that he solemnly made a series of Forty-eight Vows. He vowed that he would, after strenuous efforts over aeons of time, become a Buddha; that he would then create a special

Land in the West, pure and paradisaal, a refuge where conditions would be ideal for anyone wishing to attain enlightenment. Further, in his Eighteenth Vow, he promised that anyone who simply called on his Name ten times would be reborn in this Pure Land without any fear of any hell or Hungry Ghosts. And in his Nineteenth Vow he further promised to come in person to meet anyone who called on his Name, and conduct them to the distant place in the West where his Land lay.

Dharmakara did indeed fulfil all his promises, the Buddha continued. He attained Buddhahood, and he created his Pure Land in the West. It was full of exquisite trees and flowers and birds, and musical instruments playing of their own accord, where he himself, now called Amida Buddha, would welcome newly reborn people and show them the path to enlightenment.

The basis of the Pure Land faith, therefore, is absolute trust in the efficacy of Amida's Forty-eight Vows. Amida may have existed in the inconceivably remote past, but his Pure Land in the West still exists, and his Eighteenth and Nineteenth Vows have by no means lost their efficacy. Do not worry any longer about a terrible rebirth in hell because you find you cannot carry out daunting spiritual practices, or understand the scholastic complexities which earlier Buddhist sects draw from the *Lotus Sutra* or the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*. Simply put your trust in Amida's Vows, repeat his Name on your death-bed, and you may be very sure that he will come down to meet you, with a retinue of *bodhisattvas* playing exquisite music, and will conduct you to his own Pure Land. And the invocation of his Name is not difficult; it is only the six syllables *Namu Amida Butsu*, known as the *nembutsu*.

The two great teachers in Japan who propagated these doctrines – not unknown before, but their message hardly recognised in a mass of scholastic learning – were Hōnen (1133–1212), and his disciple Shinran (1173–1262).

Hōnen, a saintly figure who founded the *Jōdo* sect, emphasised that one should recite the *nembutsu* at least ten times but in fact as many times as possible. Even a million times, *hyakumanben*, was not too much. Shinran, on the other hand, who later founded the *Jōdo-Shin* sect, declared that only one calling was enough, provided that your utterance was made with complete and unwavering faith. In fact, Shinran's 'once calling' was not the travesty of Buddhist practice that it might appear. His complete and unwavering *shinjin*, heart of faith, implies an ecstasy of devotion in the *bhakti* mode that leaves all trace

of self and its attendant desires far behind.

The new teachings met with violent opposition at the time when they were first preached. Though Emperors and Retired Emperors and Ministers of high court rank were converted to the faith, both Hōnen and Shinran were banished for a time from the Capital; accusations of immorality were hurled at them; two of Hōnen's disciples were executed. But the response from all quarters proved overwhelming. Ordinary farmers and fishermen, as well as Ministers of the Court, delivered from their fears of what might happen in this world, and of what might await them in the next, found their faith in Amida, and the easy practice of the *nembutsu*, a comfort and inspiration proof against all odds. To this day there is a whole area along the coast of the Japan Sea where Shinran's Pure Land sect is the sole form of religion practised. And to this day too, when so many new sects and cults claim believers by the thousand, the Pure Land sects retain more faithful than any other of the older sects of Buddhism in Japan.

A distinctive school of art soon arose from the Pure Land beliefs, with genres of painting to be found nowhere else. Take the paintings known as *Amida-raigōzu*, for example, which depict the Buddha Amida 'coming to meet' a dying person and conduct him safely to the Pure Land. The famous example in the Chion-in temple in Kyoto shows a brilliant golden Amida, surrounded by a retinue of twenty-five *bodhisattvas*, floating down on a white cloud to a house where a dying person lies inside. The *bodhisattvas* play musical instruments to announce their coming. In some examples there is a five-coloured string attached to the hand of Amida, the other end of which would be put into the hand of the dying person as he gazed at the glorious scene. Such devices ensured that his concentration on Amida at his final moments was complete.

Another genre of painting distinctive to the Pure Land schools are the Jōdo-Mandalas, or more correctly *Jōdo hensōzu*. These paintings, the prototypes of which were executed in China by the noble and wise patriarch Shan-tao, give us a likewise brilliant depiction of the Pure Land itself. Here we see all the wonders and beauties of the paradisaical landscape, as described in the three Pure Land sutras. Here, high and lifted up, is Amida Buddha on a lotus throne, with the *bodhisattvas* Kannon and Seishi on either side. In the sky above the Triad flock white birds, kalavinka birds with human heads, and musical instruments playing of their own accord. Here before the Buddha is a lake, full of



lotus flowers and birds, and spanned by a vermilion bridge. A miraculous fountain, where the water gushes from a magic mani-jewel, stands in the middle of the lake, and a few of the newly reborn *ōjōnin*, pale and naked children, float happily on lotus flowers.

Lower down on this paradisaal scene are rows of green and white trees, white geese, herons and peacocks, all by their singing proclaiming the *dharma*, while an orchestra of lutes, harps and syringes give out music with no help from any hand.

Some examples of such Pure Land mandalas achieve a well-nigh incredible intricacy of construction. The celebrated Taima Mandala is perhaps the largest and most intricate of all, featuring in its borders the



Two scenes of the Pure Land as depicted in the Amida Sutra Mandala.

LEFT Upper portion of the Scroll: The Buddha Amida, with Bodhisattvas on either side, welcomes a newly-reborn person to his Paradise.

ABOVE Lower portion: Amida sits on a Lotus throne, surrounded by golden radiance, his hands in the mudra called Midajōin, while flowers rain down from the sky, and bodhisattvas and *śrāvakas* pay him homage.

Photographs from the Amida Sutra Mandala in the collection of the late Harold Stewart, edited by Dr. Hisao Inagaki, Kyoto, 1995, and reproduced here by kind permission of Dr Inagaki.

Thirteen Visualisations which the Contemplation Sutra prescribes for those who aspire to behold the Pure Land.

Indeed, vision and visualisation in the Pure Land teachings are of an importance second only to the recitation of the Name. In the early stages of the doctrine, visualisation of the Pure Land in all its brilliant detail was considered an important aid towards 'wisdom at death'. We are certainly right to see the Amidist beliefs as a kind of *bardo*; they provide help at the mysterious and momentous crisis of death. The Tibetans have made a special study of this mystery. In Japan, too, we may be helped to die in a state of utter peace and joy if we can visualise the figure of Amida, the moon behind him, coming to welcome us, take us by the hand and conduct us to his paradise. There we may be sure that there is no fear of hell, or of any back-sliding down once more to the Wheel and its realms of painful incarnation. We are safe at last from eschatological perils.

Visions too have played a crucial, not to say initiatory role for many Pure Land faithful. Hōnen experienced momentous visions of the Bodhisattva Fugen on his white elephant, and of the dragon god who guarded the Lotus Sutra in his cave. Also for the former Chinese patriarch Shan-tao, which confirmed him in his faith. Once he came home after a short walk to find Amida himself in his house with his two attendant bodhisattvas. Shinran likewise during a hundred-day seclusion in the Rokkakudō temple in Kyoto, experienced on the 95th day a vision of the Buddhist sage Prince Shōtoku who told him, 'Go to Hōnen'. To Hōnen he accordingly went, and there his faith was restored and confirmed.

Nor is this tradition of holy vision a thing of the past. Not many years ago a Japanese friend who had been depressed, beset by anxieties and fears, suddenly became radiantly happy and carefree. I asked her what had happened to bring about the change. Amida had appeared to her, she replied, suddenly and unheralded, radiant and resplendent. How long she had beheld this bright figure she did not know, but it had left her with a marvellous sense that 'all was well'. Her vision, like that of Hōnen and Shinran, had proved a turning point in her life. It brought the gift of faith which, for all that its opponents may say, is not easy to acquire; in the end it must be given, and the *nembutsu* is not recited by us but by Amida.

A third genre of painting distinctive to the Pure Land sects is that known as *Niga-byakudō*, the White Path between Two Rivers. Here we

see a man journeying westward in the hope of finding the paradise of Amida. Suddenly he sees to his left a river of raging flames, and to his right another river of raging waters. Between the two lies a white path, so narrow that the flames from the left leap over it, and are not quenched by the waves washing from the right. Behind him, he now realises, the way is blocked by swarms of robbers and fierce wild beasts. In desperation he steps on to the White Path. At once he hears a voice from the western shore, calling him forward and promising protection. It is the voice of Amida. At once he takes courage, safely traverses the White Path to the western shore, where no fire or water or robbers can harm him.

This parable originally appeared in Shan-tao's famous Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra. It was often quoted by Hōnen to disciples wavering in their faith, and paintings of the scene too, from the thirteenth century onwards, have reassured people who fall into doubt about the efficacy of Amida's Vows.

Few Western Buddhists tend to be drawn to the Pure Land sects. Zen, Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism have proved more congenial paths for those who leave Christianity for Buddhism. The Amidist faith, they say, is too similar to Christianity to tempt them away; they might as well remain Christians. Those who have found their true path in Amida and his *nembutsu*, however, often declare that it is the form of Buddhism best suited to the times in which we live. For we are now indubitably in the last state of the Law, call it *mappō* or Kali Yuga or the Eleventh Hour, or what you will. We have to recognise, they continue, that we are less capable now of following the Buddha's Law by our own efforts than were our ancestors in the earlier stages of the cycle. As René Guénon memorably described the symptoms of the Reign of Quantity, our access upwards to celestial help is blocked, while the 'fissures in the Great Wall' below open the way for invasion by inferior subtle influences from the lower domain. The multiple states of being are forgotten, and truth is seen as mechanised, solidified and reduced to the lowest material level of the hierarchy. In such times it is much more difficult to 'do it ourselves' successfully; we would be well advised therefore to throw ourselves on the grace and mercy of Amida and his compassionate Vows.

Namu Amida Butsu is all that we have to repeat, they say, and in time we shall find that it is not we who are repeating the invocation, but Amida himself.