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Pure Land Buddhism as Practiced in Asia

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Pure Land Buddhism: One of the core traditions at the heart of Buddhism in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. In Japan it has been the most dominant form of the religion since the 16th century, but it was also very influential in China. The name comes from the conception that the presence of a buddha naturally purifies that environment, hence a realm where a buddha resides is a "pure land". The core of this form of faith is focused on the Buddha Amitābha (aka Amitāyus), Amituofo in Chinese, Amida in Japanese who resides in an idealized land called Sukhāvatī located to the West of our world. Amitābha's land can be accessed temporarily in meditative trance, but most people aspire to be reborn there in their next lifetime. Amitābha set up his land to create an environment where anyone could attain nirvana: it is peaceful and joyous, and the buddha provides personal guidance to all, making the goal complete liberation a certainty. The Pure Land is generally conceived of as a postmortem goal but it is an intermediate goal because rebirth there is to enable further practice aiming at eventually attaining buddhahood, and returning to this world to help others. Its representative practice is *nianfo* in Chinese*,* J. *nenbutsu*, K. *yeombul*.

Geography: Although the cult surrounding Amitābha Buddha began in India, and there is evidence that it was informed by Persian thinking, perhaps even originating there. There was widespread practices and artworks depicting Amitābha, but no organized Pure Land "thought" in South or Southeast Asia. The social movement within Buddhist communities that self-identified as Pure Land Buddhism began in China in the 6th century, and became particularly widespread in Tang dynasty (618-900). *Nianfo* practice was and is widespread in China but it is only in Japan that we begin to see separate sectarian organizations calling themselves Pure Land Buddhist, beginning ~1200. Sectarian Pure Land Buddhism continuously grows thereafter and by the end of the 16th century, it is largest form of Buddhism in Japan.

Doctrine: Mahayana began to emerge as a reform movement within Indian Buddhism in the 1st c. BCE, asserting new doctrines such as Emptiness, the importance of compassion commensurate with wisdom, the simultaneity of many buddhas, and the bodhisattva ideal; bodhisattvas do not require monasticism but must make vows of what they will do should they succeed in becoming a buddha. The term "Pure Land" is a Chinese invention, emerging when historical consciousness of inevitable decline suddenly took hold within the professional Buddhist community in the late 6th century after a massive persecution of Buddhist monasteries. Although all buddha-lands are pure lands, focus on Amitābha Buddha grew from
~550 to ~1100. The core doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism comes from two texts with the same name, *Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtra* (distinguished as *Larger* and *Smaller*), both translated repeatedly into Chinese from the 3rd century onward, that lay out the mythic story of the monk Dharmakara who then became Amitabha Buddha, affirming his promise to set up a realm where people can escape their physical and mental limitations and complete their progress on the path to nirvana in his idealized environment.
Another text central to this history is the *Contemplation Sutra,* appearing in China in the 5th century; it does not have any traceable Indic roots and is thought to have been written somewhere in Central Asia. Whereas the *Sukhāvatīvyūha* sutras offer a fairly normative view promoting good karma and practice that will get the believer into the Pure Land, the *Contemplation Sutra* centers around a crisis narrative focused on Queen Vaidehi, wife of a Buddha-supporting king, both of whom are imprisoned by their son Ajatasatru so he can accede to the throne quickly. This sutra delineates 9 grades of human spirituality and describes which practices are appropriate for each, but in the section on the lowest grade, the question is raised about people who lead a bad life and are unable to concentrate, and the answer is that these people should recite the phrase, *namo e-mi-tuo fo* (J. *namu amida butsu*)*,* meaning "I pay homage to Amitābha Buddha" and if they can do this 10 times, even they can achieve rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land. This phrase signifies "**taking refuge in the Name**" of the buddha, and its promise of salvation had a huge impact in East Asia. One of many commentaries on the sutra was written by the monk Shandao (613681), who identifies this vocalized phrase with "buddha-mindfulness" or *nianfo* practice in the

Sukhāvatīvyūha. Shandao displays his expertise in meditative practices but also declares himself to be at this 9th stage, akin to those who are corrupted and cannot concentrate; he is thus an "ordinary person". He emphasizes that Vaidehi was also an "ordinary person" and yet she was able to obtain visions of the Pure Land due to the power of Śākyamuni's, meaning we should recognize that although most people are now in the low status of "ordinary person", by relying on the help of buddhas they can be liberated. Shandao's was one of many interpretations in China, but in Japan he was seen as a buddha who appeared at that moment in order to clarify the Pure Land teachings, hence his perspective was unassailable. In this way the **name** of the buddha was seen as having special power.

Practice: Just as "seated Chan/Zen meditation" is the orthodox practice for the Chan tradition (which originates in China at the same time as Pure Land Buddhism), *nianfo* 念佛 in Chinese (*nenbutsu* in Japanese) is the orthodox practice for Pure Land. Amitabha extols the power of "hearing his name" to effect spiritual change in people, and this led to reciting the phrase *namo e-mi-tuo fo* in Chinese, *namu amida butsu* in Japanese becoming the normative practice. Of the two words in *nian-fo,* the first word *nian* has multiple meanings, with *fo/butsu* designating "buddha". *Nian* translated a variety of different words, most commonly *smṛti* or *anusmṛti,* "to [recall and] hold in mind" or *manasikāra,* "to focus one's attention on something", thus *nianfo* means "buddha mindfulness" of one sort of another. There is no implication of vocalization in the original use of the *nianfo* in translation, but many scholars in China began to conflate the recitation practice in the *Contemplation Sutra* using the word *namo* with the buddha-mindfulness practice of *nianfo*, developing into one line of reasoning that saw *nianfo/nenbutsu* as referring to the *recitation* of a phrase expressing homage and taking refuge in the Name of a buddha. Shandao's view was that this was given to us by the Buddha precisely because *anyone* can do it, even if the person's mind is not focused. In this view, recitation *nianfo* is the ideal Buddhist practice because it is universal, producing karmic merit and gaining the attention of Amitābha Buddha, affirming that we can reach his Pure Land after we die.

Visual Forms: There are basically four forms of Buddhist art that we identify as Pure Land Buddhist:
(1) statues of Amitābha Buddha, sitting or standing, either alone (see B60S10+, B60S338) or Amitabha depicting Western paradise with bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (B60P142).
(2) paintings of Amitābha Buddha, with or without bodhisattvas, in a variety of different locales. Examples are a seated Buddha Amitabha (B60D114), a Taima Mandala where the buddha sits before a huge audience (B61D11+), Amitabha standing on a lotus, in the sky, or a Descent of Amitabha (*raigo*) in which he and his attendants come to greet someone practicing *nianfo/nenbutsu* when they die (B64D7). (3) paintings of activities surrounding patriarchs of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition in Japan, such as traveling, speaking, dancing, etc., or illustrating doctrinal points such as the parable of the White Path. (4) paintings of the recitation phrase *nianfo/nenbutsu* (aka *nembutsu*) coming out of medieval Japan where various forms of the wording of *nenbutsu* are painted as if standing on a lotus flower like a buddha.

Suggested Readings:
J. Okazaki, *Pure Land Buddhist Painting.* Kodansha International (1977)
G. Halkias, R. Payne, *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts.* Hawai'i (2019)
Z. Zhou, L. Li, "Vision and Site: Revisiting a Pure Land Cave of Dunhuang". *Religions* 15 (2024)
F. Kanda, "Honen's Senchakushū Doctrine and his Artistic Agenda". *Journal of Japanese Religious Studies* 31 (2004)
E. Sano, *Heaven and Hell: salvation and retribution in Pure Land Buddhism.* San Antonio Museum of Art (2017).
M. Blum, *Origins and Development of Pure Land Buddhism.* Oxford (2002)
M. Blum, "Morphing Icons: Radiant Iconotext Paintings in Medieval Jōdo Shin Buddhism" in Susmita Majumbar, ed., *Transcending Boundaries: Pre-Modern Cultural Transactions Across Asia—Essays in Honour of Professor Osmund Bopearachchi,* Primus Books, Delhi (2024).