

Pure Land Buddhism

The Buddha has always been seen as possessor of incomparable powers and as the incomparable teacher of the Dharma.

For earliest Buddhism, the actual person of the Buddha is no longer directly accessible after his final parinirvāṇa, and devotion to the Buddha centred on the worship of his relics, the recollection of his qualities (buddhānusr̥ti/buddhānussati), and perhaps also visualization. Such practices clearly were felt to bring one in some sense closer to the presence of the Buddha.

Early Buddhism also knew of Maitreya/Metteyya, the next buddha, who at present waits in the Tusita heaven; the aspiration to be reborn at the time when Maitreya will teach the Dharma may have become part of Buddhist practice early on.

With the rise of the Mahāyāna came the idea that buddhas are at present teaching in other parts of the universe in their own special 'buddha fields' or 'pure lands' where the conditions for the practice of the Dharma are extremely favourable. With this came the aspiration to be reborn in these pure lands.

The inspiration for Chinese and Japanese 'Pure Land' Buddhism is provided by three sūtras: the larger and the smaller *Sukhāvatī-vyūha* ('Vision of the Realm of Happiness') and the *Amitāyurd-hyāna* ('Meditation on the Buddha of Boundless Life'). The two former are of Indian origin, while the last may have been composed in central Asia or China. These sūtras tell of the pure land of the Buddha Amitābha (Boundless Light) or Amitāyus, known in Japanese as Amida.

The particular focus of East Asian Pure Land Buddhism became the vow of Amitābha in the *Sukhāvatī-vyūha* to bring to his pure land after death any one who sincerely calls on his name. The characteristic practice of Pure Land Buddhism, advocated in the writings of such masters as T'an-luan (476–542), Tao-cho (562–645), and Shan-tao (613–81), is known as *nien-fo* (Japanese *nembutsu*), calling on or uttering the name of the Buddha.

Also associated with the school is a preoccupation with the old Indian idea that the practice of the Buddha's teaching must pass through successive periods of decline and eventually disappear.

This led to an emphasis on the futility of expecting to be able, by one's own efforts, to develop the good conduct and meditation necessary for awakening in the final days of the Dharma (*mo fa/mappō*); better to aspire to rebirth in Amitābha's pure land.

The eventual development in Japan was a doctrine of grace associated above all with the figure of Shinran (1173–1262), founder of the 'True Pure Land School' (Jōdo Shinshū): it is not 'one's own power' (*jikiri*) but the 'power of the other' (*tariki*)—the grace of Amitābha—that is effective in bringing one to his pure land.

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