

## The Emergence of the Pure Land Path

In Mahayana teachings, reality is not what we see around us in our everyday vision of the world, which is distorted by attachment to self, but neither is it a static substratum underlying temporal existence. True reality is alive and dynamic, and it realizes itself as each thing in existence through the activity of wisdom-compassion. Further, while transcending all human conceptualization, it accommodates itself to the unenlightened modes of perception that make up samsaric existence, manifesting forms as Buddha, as teachings and practices, and as the bodhisattvas' skilled means of guiding beings to enlightenment. Nevertheless, it is fully apprehended only in the self-awareness of wisdom-compassion—an awareness inseparable from the perception of unenlightened beings entangled in lives of pain. To awaken such awareness is the central aim of all Mahayana ways, including the Pure Land path.

The vision of wisdom-compassion at work in the world was articulated as the bodhisattva career, in which personal attainment of enlightenment is fused with the attainment of all beings. We have seen the crucial elements of this path: initial contact with the world of enlightenment, leading to the awakening of a determined aspiration to attain enlightenment; the resolute vows that inform lifetimes of effort; aeons of practice and discipline to fulfill those vows; the directing of the resultant merit toward realization of Buddhahood and the establishment of a Buddha land, and toward the awakening of other beings; and the tireless activity of bringing beings across to the other shore.

While these elements are common to all bodhisattvas, early in the Mahayana tradition they were developed into their most mature and essential expression—and a method for complete fulfillment of the aspiration to benefit all beings was formulated—in the Vows and enlightenment of Amida Buddha. It is on the basis of Amida's Vows and their efficacy in bringing all beings to enlightenment that the Pure Land path evolved.

The Pure Land path is distinctive in presenting a way by which all people may realize awakening, whatever their moral or intellectual capacities. Other Mahayana paths—other methods of breaking the bondage to the delusional self and realizing wisdom—are based on the six paramitas, and Buddhas other than Amida aid those who practice meritorious deeds or perform meditation and perfect wisdom. Thus, the tested path to awakening in most cases lies in monastic discipline and practice. Aspirants renounce home and family life and abandon social position and values in order to discipline themselves and engage in meditation. Such practice is a means to enlightenment, however, not an end in itself. As we have seen, those who have realized wisdom do not cling to the realm of nirvana, but return to ordinary life and the ordinary world; for them, there is no essential distinction between samsara and nirvana, the world in which we carry on our daily life and the world of enlightenment. Renunciation of life in society, then, may be a method for attainment, but it is no way an aspect of the final goal.

In the Pure Land tradition, a path to the fundamental realization of no-self and to supreme Buddhahood was unfolded that did not require monastic

discipline. It developed as a way by which the Mahayana ideals of compassion and of the attainment of Buddhahood by all beings could be fully actualized. Pure Land Buddhism turns not on observing precepts and undertaking contemplative practices—not, that is, on the realization of nondiscriminative wisdom or emptiness through stripping away self-attachment and objectifying thought—but rather on awakening to the compassion that emerges from the deepest sources of wisdom or reality, the compassion manifested as Amida Buddha.

### *Amida Buddha*

In Sanskrit writings, Amida Buddha has two names—Amitabha (“immeasurable light”) and Amitayus (“immeasurable life”). Light and life are symbols of the essential activity of enlightenment—wisdom and compassion—and their “immeasurability” expresses their complete fulfillment: universality both spatially, being all-pervasive and embracing living things everywhere, and temporally, being timeless and immediate to all beings throughout the history of the world. The name “Amida,” derived from the Chinese transliteration for both Sanskrit names, implies that the Buddha thoroughly embodies these highest ideals of Buddhahood.

It may be noted in passing that while Amida is referred to with masculine grammatical forms in Sanskrit, the Chinese translations that form the basis for the Buddhist tradition in East Asia are on the whole free of such gender-specific reference, and Pure Land Buddhists have not considered masculine gender a significant aspect of Amida Buddha. In fact, the Chinese Pure Land master Shan-tao calls Amida the “compassionate mother,” and in Japan, Shin Buddhists use the term *Oya-sama* (inadequately, “parent”), which expresses the closest of personal relationships with Amida without identifying either gender, or perhaps implying both. English, like Sanskrit and unlike Chinese and Japanese, requires gender-specific reference, and the use of “he” or “his” with regard to Amida Buddha is not easily avoidable. Our usage, however, should be understood to reflect linguistic convention and not a feature of the way Pure Land Buddhists have thought of the Buddha.

Although no reference is made to Amida Buddha in the scriptures of the early, Hinayana tradition, he is mentioned in more than two hundred Mahayana sutras, beginning with the early period of their appearance, and an inscription indicates that statues to him date back to the second century CE. He is thus a Mahayana figure widely recognized from the early period of its development. Most sutra references simply name him as one among the many Buddhas—the Buddha of the western quarter, where his Buddha land is said to be located. His chief significance is revealed in three sutras, which have been regarded as the foundation of the mainstream Pure Land tradition in East Asia since the sixth century. Two of these sutras survive in Sanskrit, both bearing the title *Adornments of the Land of Bliss (Sukhavati-vyuha)*, “Land of Bliss”—or more literally, “Blissful”—being the name of Amida’s Buddha field. These sutras are thought to have their origins in northwest India about the first century CE. Their

order of composition is unknown. Since they differ in length, they are distinguished as the “Larger” and “Smaller” sutras, and are also commonly referred to by the title of their most influential Chinese translations, the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* and the *Amida Sutra*.

The third major sutra of the Pure Land tradition survives only in Chinese: the *Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*. This sutra appears to be of later origin, and may have been compiled in Central Asia or even China. In the following discussion, we will in general refer to the three sutras as the *Larger*, *Smaller*, and *Contemplation Sutras*. The *Larger Sutra* is the central Pure Land scripture, for it relates the entire bodhisattva career of Amida. The other two sutras are also crucial, however, for they provide guidance in interpreting the significance of Amida Buddha and his Vow, and in understanding the nature of the Pure Land path.

### *The Vow of Amida Buddha*

The story of Amida Buddha’s origins is taught in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*. In this sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha relates that aeons ago in the remote past, when a Buddha named Lokeshvararaja appeared in the world, there was a certain king who, upon hearing that Buddha’s teaching, awakened the profound aspiration for enlightenment. He abandoned his throne and became a mendicant monk with the name Dharmakara (“Treasury of Dharma”).

Dharmakara went to Lokeshvararaja Buddha and requested instruction in how to attain enlightenment and thereby establish the most excellent of Buddha lands. Lokeshvararaja enabled Dharmakara to see myriads of Buddha lands throughout the cosmos and explained to him their qualities and the natures of the beings in them. These Dharmakara contemplated for five kalpas, and then declared his aspiration in bodhisattva vows which, upon fulfillment, would result in the establishment of a Buddha land that embraced the finest aspects of all the various Buddha fields. His Vows are therefore said to be supreme and unexcelled.

Dharmakara made forty-eight Vows defining the modes in which his enlightenment would manifest itself. In a narrow sense, only three treat specifically the characteristics of the Buddha that he resolved to become (Amida), and another two the features of the Land of Bliss. All the remaining Vows express ways in which the beings of his Buddha field, and indeed those throughout the cosmos, will be benefited. In fact, the Buddha and his land have as their essence the functioning to enlightenment to awaken all beings; the Buddha is Buddha as the benefiting of beings. In each of his Vows, Dharmakara declares that he will attain highest, perfect enlightenment only on condition that the content of the Vow—that is, the benefiting of beings—is realized. Thus, the form of the Vows itself reveals the basic bodhisattva vision, in which self-benefit (attainment of enlightenment) as inseparable from the benefiting of others.

When Dharmakara finished declaring his Vows before Lokeshvararaja Buddha and a multitude of beings, the universe trembled, flowers showered down, and the prophesy that he would indeed realize highest enlightenment

sounded from the skies. Thus he embarked on a career of practice that extended for countless aeons. Though reborn many times, he dwelled constantly in equanimity and tranquility, completely free of ill-will, greed, pride, or any form of falsity. Practicing the paramitas and guiding others to practice through kind and gentle words, he amassed an immeasurable store of virtue. In his practice he was unrivaled among gods and human beings, and all the Buddhas revered him, rejoicing in his attainments (Shinjin, 22-23).

Finally, ten kalpas ago, he attained Buddhahood and is now dwelling in his Buddha field, the Land of Bliss, trillions of Buddha lands west of this world.