

## The Nature of Amida Buddha

Two interlocking questions concerning the teaching of Amida Buddha in the *Larger Sutra* have defined the central issues of the Pure Land tradition. First, what is the nature of Amida Buddha? Second, what is the significance of being born in his land, and how can one attain birth there? We will consider these questions in turn.

### *Concepts of Buddha-Body*

We may approach the question of the nature of Amida Buddha from a general Buddhist perspective by considering once more the concept of various Buddha-bodies. For the early tradition, Sakyamuni Buddha represented the model and exemplar of Buddhahood. He was profoundly venerated as the “Awakened One,” the sage who had fulfilled the highest human goal by breaking the bonds of samsaric existence and attaining nirvana, and by guiding others to nirvana. His personality was surely a decisive influence in the lives of his followers. After his death, however, it became clear that he had been the revered Buddha not simply because of his personality and the historical circumstances of his existence, but because of the reality to which he had awakened. He himself had taught, “Those who see dharma see me; those who see me see dharma” (*Samyutta Nikaya*). That is, to perceive dharma (true reality) is to perceive Sakyamuni who, as the “Awakened One,” has come to manifest it, and genuinely to encounter Sakyamuni is to encounter the realization that makes him Buddha.

Thus, distinct aspects of Buddhahood came to be perceived, and to refine the notion of Buddha, the early tradition developed the idea of various “Buddha-bodies” or modes of Buddhahood. First, a concept of two bodies of Buddha was evolved: dharma-body (“reality-body,” *dharma-kaya*) and physical body (*rupa-kaya*). Sakyamuni was of course a human being who carried on daily life in the world. But in attaining enlightenment, he also realized dharma-body, that which is true and real. While his physical body could be perceived and one could listen to his teaching, the dharma-body that he realized was not the object of our senses and could not be conceptualized through the words that he uttered. Further, while his physical body underwent the process of birth, sickness, aging, and death, the dharma-body was transcendent and eternal. As the concept of these two Buddha-bodies developed and the sense of Sakyamuni Buddha’s physical presence faded after his death, increasing weight came to be given the timeless aspect, the dharma-body, as the essence of his Buddhahood.

It is common to see Sakyamuni as simply a historical figure, a person of ancient India who attained a religious experience under the bodhi-tree and then, for forty-five years, taught his realization to others. In this view, the content of his religious awakening is his own, personal experience, and though his teaching has been transmitted through his efforts and those of generations of followers, it has come down to us only with much adaptation and alteration. The Buddhist tradition, however, developed a fundamentally different perspective in the

concept of the Buddha-bodies. For Buddhists, Buddha is not only—and not chiefly—the individual of the Sakya clan name Gautama who lived 2500 years ago; it is above all the wisdom or reality that rose to awareness in the history of our world through Sakyamuni's awakening.

For Buddhists, the historical experience of Sakyamuni is based on that which transcends time and history. Thus, between the historical (physical body) and transhistorical (dharma-body) there lies a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, through his meditative practices, he awakened to dharma-body and thereby became Buddha, one who has touched true reality, which lies beyond all conceptual frameworks, including time. On the other hand, through his awakening, that which is true and real—Buddha as dharma-body—emerged in human history in his awareness and in those who, guided by him, have also attained awakening and maintained the Buddhist tradition in different ages and cultures.

To his direct disciples, Sakyamuni was himself the sole Buddha-body; in him, the aspects of dharma-body and physical body were one. With the increasing historical distance from him and the growing importance given to the transcendent dharma-body, however, these two concepts lost their integrating center. The abstract concept of dharma-body, disembodied from the concrete existence of the Buddha, failed to give a satisfactory account of the nature of Sakyamuni's Buddhahood, and he gradually came to be attributed with various supernatural features and powers that expressed the virtues of his enlightenment. This tendency—often seen as the idealization of Sakyamuni—was further developed as the “concretization” of Buddhahood in the Mahayana tradition, which rejected the earlier ideal as a merely quiescent nirvana and emphasized, out of a deep insight into the tenacity of blind passions, the activity of wisdom-compassion.

As we have seen, at the heart of the Mahayana tradition lies a radically nondualistic wisdom or reality (suchness or dharma-body) that is characterized by sameness with all human beings and all of nature. Based on their own awakening to this reality, Mahayana Buddhists assumed that countless human beings in the past had already attained dharma-body and realized Buddhahood, and since these people were considered to possess Buddha-bodies, it was natural also to conceive of Buddha lands throughout the cosmos in which they carried on their activities. These Buddhas all followed the same pattern of attainment that Sakyamuni manifested, having made and fulfilled bodhisattva vows to attain enlightenment and establish their world as a Buddha field. Thus, they each have their own “form”—the characteristics they have vowed to attain—and they adorn their lands in various ways according their vows.

Such Buddhas came to be recognized as a third kind of Buddha-body. They are called “fulfilled” or “recompense” Buddha-bodies, meaning that they have arisen as the result of the fulfillment of their vows, achieved through aeons of practice and meritorious action. They are also called Buddhas as “enjoyment bodies” (*sambhogika-kaya*), for they take delight in the fruit of their long practice by adorning themselves with marks of their enlightenment and exercising their powers by teaching dharma to the beings of their lands.

Thus, a scheme of three Buddha-bodies was developed. Bodhisattvas, through their practice, realize dharma-body, which is reality itself and completely transcends any spacial or temporal conceptualization. Having attained dharma-body, they become able to manifest two other kinds of Buddha-bodies; their enjoyment body, which is the form with which they appear to bodhisattvas in their lands, and transformed or accommodated bodies (*nirmana-kaya*), which are temporary appearances as living beings in the historical time of samsaric existence, such a Sakyamuni. These three kinds of bodies do not indicate different Buddhas; every Buddha is said to possess all three bodies. The foundation of Buddhahood is dharma-body (true reality), but since this Buddha-body is formless, it must manifest the other bodies in order to carry on the work of wisdom-compassion in samsara. Although the other two kinds of Buddha-body are manifested, those bodies are always, in their foundation, the formless dharma-body.

### *Amida Buddha as Fulfilled Body*

When the classification of Buddha-bodies is applied to Amida, he is said to be a “fulfilled” or “enjoyment body” Buddha, manifesting the perfect enlightenment achieved through the accomplished of his bodhisattva vows (this was asserted by Tao-ch’o, 562-645). But while Amida accords with the basic Mahayana thinking about Buddha-bodies, in the functioning of his wisdom-compassion he reveals a special nature that distinguishes him from other enjoyment-body Buddhas.

In the three-body classification, dharma-body is without form, but it accommodates itself to the perceptions of unenlightened beings by assuming “transformed bodies” that possess the characteristics of beings in samsaric existence. In addition, it manifests an enjoyment body, which is also said to have form. Enjoyment-body Buddhas are therefore often depicted in word and image. Their characteristics, however, are not the forms of samsaric life and cannot be apprehended by ignorant beings. They may be said to stand in a temporal framework in that their features originate in bodhisattva vows, but those features are the manifestations of enlightenment and of the virtues achieved through fulfilling practices; hence, they differ fundamentally from the forms of samsaric existence arising as a result of defiled karma. The essence of the enjoyment body is the formless and timeless true reality perceived by wisdom and the nondualistic wisdom itself. While possessing form, it is in fact empty and formless.

Like dharma-body, then, the enjoyment body stands essentially beyond human perception and conceptualization. It appears directly only to those who have entered into profound contemplative states—that is, into the realm of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Through such manifestations, Buddhas support those whom they have vowed to aid—people who discipline the mind and body, perform meritorious deeds, or practice meditation.

The essential quality of Amida Buddha, however, is the ability to become present to all living beings of the world—wherever they are, whatever point in

history at which they exist, and whatever their capacities for religious practice—and to dispel their ignorance and awaken them to that which is true and real. He is, then, the form of Buddhahood realized specifically to bring all beings, without exception, to enlightenment.

The nature of Amida Buddha is illuminated by T'an-luan (476-542), the early Chinese master who did much to clarify the Mahayana foundations of the Pure Land teachings:

All Buddhas and bodhisattvas have dharma-bodies of two dimensions: dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as compassionate means arises from dharma-body as suchness, and dharma-body as suchness emerges [into human awareness] out of dharma-body as compassionate means. These two dimensions of dharma-body differ but are not separable; they are one but cannot be regarded as identical. (Realization, 17)

Adopting the terms of T'an-luan's explanation, we may say that Amida Buddha is dharma-body as compassionate means. Although T'an-luan speaks of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas here, his concept of "dharma-body as compassionate means" reveals an emphasis not found in other Buddhist schools of thought, and it clarifies in particular the nature of Amida. There are two points to be noted.

First, Amida is called here dharma-body. Drawing on basic Mahayana thinking about Buddhahood, T'an-luan points to the fundamental nature of Amida as transcendent reality. While Amida is said to emerge from true reality or dharma-body as suchness, he always remains nondifferent from this reality.

Second, at the same time that he is dharma-body, he differs from suchness in that he has taken on particular forms and activities in order to approach unenlightened beings. Other Mahayana schools stand squarely on the nonduality in which form is itself formlessness and each instant of time is itself timelessness. T'an-luan's concept of the two dimensions of dharma-body, however, presents a unique development of the Buddha-body theory. While dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means are inseparable, in addition dharma-body as compassionate means (Amida) manifests a movement in which the formless and timeless enters into form and time in the samsaric world as Amida Buddha's presence to unenlightened beings. The ability to lead beings to the realization of Buddhahood arises from Amida's foundation in suchness or nirvana, but the liberation of *all* beings requires in addition the capacity to become active in the lives of the ignorant and not simply aid those are able to purify their own minds. This concept of the formless dharma-body actively approaching unenlightened beings by becoming dharma-body as compassionate means is found only in the Pure Land tradition.