

Practice in the Pure Land Tradition

As we have seen, Amida is one of countless Buddhas throughout the cosmos, and each Buddha maintains a sphere of activity, a Buddha land. The prominence of Amida lies in the nature of his Vows, which delineate a path by which all people may attain enlightenment. The precise nature of this path, however—how one should perform practice, its significance, and why it is effective—was clarified only gradually through the developments of a long tradition in various cultures, and it may be said that it is in the works of Shinran, more than a millenium after the Pure Land sutras took written form, that the path stands most fully disclosed. Throughout the Pure Land tradition, the central questions were how and when one enters into the working arising from Amida's fulfillment of his Vows.

The Eighteenth Vow

According to the Pure Land sutras, the practice that enables a person to break the bondage of samsara by attaining birth in the Pure Land is the *nembutsu*, which literally means to think on or be mindful of (*nen*) the Buddha (*butsu*). In early Buddhist tradition, a form of “thinking on the Buddha” was practiced focusing on Sakyamuni Buddha. It included elements of remembrance of the Buddha's features, trust, and worship. Later, it came to embrace contemplation on other Buddhas as well. It was in the Pure Land tradition, in which *nembutsu* is taught as the means to birth in Amida's Pure Land, that it had its major development.

The central text concerning Pure Land practice is found in Amida's forty-eight Vows. Among the Vows, there are three—the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth—that set forth ways by which “the sentient beings of the ten quarters” can attain birth in the Pure Land. From the beginning of the Pure Land tradition, the Eighteenth Vow—which presents the simplest requirements for practitioners—has been understood to be fundamental and central. It states:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters who sincerely entrust themselves and aspire to be born in my land, performing even ten *nen*, should be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.

Here, it is stated that all people will attain birth in the Pure Land who 1) sincerely entrust themselves to the Vow and aspire for birth there and 2) perform “even ten *nen*.” *Nen* has been understood to imply *nembutsu* and interpreted to mean either “to think on” Amida Buddha and his Pure Land or “to say the Name.” Thus, the ten *nen* in the Vow may mean literally that one must concentratedly entrust oneself to or be mindful of the Buddha for ten thoughts; or it may mean, as has been held from Shan-tao on, that one must say the Name of Amida at least ten times.

Why should such practice have the power to bring about one's birth into the sphere of enlightenment? In India, two seminal figures of the Mahayana tradition, Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, delineated frameworks for understanding the Pure Land path as forms of Mahayana.

The Path of Easy Practice

Nagarjuna was the first great systematizer of the teachings expressed in the Mahayana sutras. In his *Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages*, he states that the initial problem for the Buddhist aspirant is reaching the first bodhisattva stage, the stage of non-retrogression. When a person finally attains this stage,

He sees the dharma, enters the dharma, attains the dharma, and abides in the firm dharma, from which he can never be moved, and thus he ultimately reaches nirvana (Practice, 13).

The person in this stage must still perform bodhisattva practices to progress through the remaining nine stages, but with his realization of wisdom attained in the first stage, a decisive change has taken place. In the bodhisattva's practice prior to this, there is always the danger of falling into negligence or despair, or of sinking into eternal repose in an imperfect, self-centered form of nirvana. Nagarjuna calls this latter the "death of the bodhisattva," who must exert himself with constant vigilance and a million times the energy of those who seek only their own salvation if he is to perfect his bodhisattvahood and ferry others as well as himself to enlightenment. Thus, attaining non-retrogression and becoming a bodhisattva whose eventual enlightenment is "definitely settled" is cause for great rejoicing, and the first stage is also known as the "stage of joy."

Reaching this stage, however, comes only after aeons of resolution and effort to fulfill the paramitas. Later, Tao-ch'o termed such practice the "Path of Sages," suitable only for those of extraordinary capacities. Referring to Nagarjuna's explanation, T'an-luan notes that "seeking non-retrogression in this world of five defilements at a time when there is no Buddha" presents great difficulties for the practitioner (Practice, 18). It is hard to purify the mind and achieve the profound meditation in which the roots of delusional thought are sundered, particularly at a time when life is short, human intellectual and moral faculties are deteriorating, and social conditions are adverse. But above all, such practice is difficult when one lacks the guidance of a Buddha. Thus, in his commentary, Nagarjuna raises the question of whether there is a simpler, quicker path to this fundamental goal. While stating that such a question in itself betrays a faint-heartedness hardly befitting a bodhisattva, he teaches that there are countless paths to non-retrogression. Some bodhisattvas engage in difficult practice that may be compared to arduous travel overland, and others reach non-retrogression relatively swiftly and comfortably, as though riding in a boat.

Instead of laboring to purify one's mind and thereby manifest the Buddha-nature within one, it is also possible to take up, in Nagarjuna's words, "the easy

practice of entrusting as the means” for attaining non-retrogression (Practice, 15). The easy practice based on trust or faith works to overcome the difficulties of pervasive defilement and the absence of a guiding Buddha by bringing the practitioner into relationship with the Buddhas and into contact with the realm of enlightenment.

This faith is not a simple acceptance of that which cannot be proved; neither is it belief in doctrine or assent to some teaching. For Nagarjuna, the easy practice is the “think on the Buddhas (*nen-bustu*) of the ten quarters and say their names in praise.” Trust therefore expresses itself above all as mindfulness of the Buddhas and great bodhisattvas throughout the cosmos, who manifest the wisdom-compassion of the Mahayana way through their own bodily splendor and brilliance and that of their lands. Since Nagarjuna describes the virtues of the various Buddhas and their lands, to think on may be understood to include deep reflection or contemplation on the character of each Buddha. Thus, “thinking on” represents entrance into the Buddhas’ activity through the entrusting of oneself to it.

Nagarjuna does not restrict “easy practice” to focus on Amida Buddha, but he singles out Amida’s Vows as a clear and representative example of it and therefore is considered by Shinran the first of the seven great masters of the Pure Land tradition.

T’an-luan, following Nagarjuna, further contrasts the Pure Land path with the path of difficult practice by noting that it “is based solely on self-power and lacks the support of Other Power” (Practice, 18). T’an-luan was the first to employ the contrasting terms “self-power” and “Other Power,” which express fundamental elements of the concept of trust in Buddhist practice. Sincere trust on the part of practitioners implies, on the one hand, an awareness of the power and effectiveness of Amida’s Vow (Other Power), fulfilled through the bodhisattva practice of Dharmakara, and on the other hand, an awareness of the inadequacies of one’s own efforts and practice (self-power). Thus, in summarizing the Pure Land way as the path of easy practice, T’an-luan states:

In the path of easy practice, one aspires to be born in the Pure Land with solely one’s entrusting to the Buddha as the cause, and allowing oneself to be carried by the power of the Buddha’s Vow, one quickly attains birth in the land of purity. Supported by the Buddha’s power, one immediately joins the truly settled of the Mahayana. (Practice, 18)

Mindfulness

While Nagarjuna set the basic parameters of the Pure Land path—the practice of “thinking on the Buddha and saying his Name” and the goal of non-retrogression—it was Vasubandhu who first provided a systematic account of nembutsu practice in the Pure Land path. In his *Treatise on the Pure Land*, a commentary on the *Larger Sutra*, he sets forth the nembutsu as encompassing

“five gates of mindfulness,” or five aspects of practice centering on Amida Buddha and the Pure Land:

- 1) worship
- 2) praise, particularly through utterance of the Name
- 3) aspiration for birth
- 4) contemplation of the Buddha and the Pure Land
- 5) directing of merit accrued through the first four aspects of practice to all beings.

The five gates of mindfulness may be viewed from several different perspective. The first three “gates” describe acts of body, speech, and mind, respectively, the three categories into which all human activity is divided in Buddhist thought.

Further, the third and fourth, aspiration and contemplation, correspond to the basic meditative practice of *samatha* (stilling the mind) and *vipasyana* (insight into reality). By concentrating on Amida and the Pure Land practitioners enter the samadhi of tranquility, in which all distracting thoughts are dispelled, and contemplating the adornments of the Buddha and the Pure Land in this state, they perceive them as manifestations of enlightenment or reality.

Moreover, the first four gates taken together form the practice for one’s own attainment of the Pure Land, while the fifth gate, “directing of merit,” signifies return from the Pure Land for the sake of all beings:

With great compassion, one observes all sentient beings in pain and affliction, and assuming various transformed bodies to guide them, enters the gardens of birth-and-death and the forests of blind passions. (Realization, 17)

This concept of two directions—going and returning, or entrance into the Pure Land and emergence again in this world—concisely expresses the core of the bodhisattva path, and became a fundamental concept in Shinran’s teaching.

We find in Vasubandhu’s concept of the five gates of mindfulness a comprehensive course of practice that may be seen as an adaptation of the bodhisattva path to the Pure Land context. He speaks of wholehearted entrusting of oneself to Amida—“taking refuge with mind that is single”—as the proper attitude in practice, and also of the “power of the Primal Vow” as instrumental in its accomplishment. Nevertheless, while the path that he teaches might be called rapid and easy in comparison to other formulations of the bodhisattvas’ practice, it still requires extraordinary religious and spiritual capacities. The core of this nembutsu practice remains contemplation, in which one sees the features of Amida Buddha, the Pure Land, and the bodhisattvas born there as embodiments of true reality, and is led to an awakening to the formless, uncreated dharma-body.

Saying the Name

The *Treatise on the Pure Land* is the only systematic exposition of Pure Land thought and practice in India. From the late second century, however, Pure Land texts began to be translated into Chinese, and in the early sixth century T'an-luan wrote a commentary on Vasubandhu's work that laid the foundation for establishing the Pure Land way as a sufficient and independent Buddhist path in China. T'an-luan follows Vasubandhu in teaching the five gates of mindfulness with contemplation as their core, but he also recognizes the possibility of a person who has passed an entire lifetime in evil attaining birth through utterance of the Name at death.

In addition to the nembutsu presented in the Eighteenth Vow, there is another strain of nembutsu teaching in the *Larger Sutra*. It is taught in a passage that describes three levels of practice, differing in the difficulty and quality of the exercises undertaken, but all including the practice of thinking on Amida Buddha (*nembutsu*) and all resulting in birth in the Pure Land. Shinran understood this passage as teaching the fulfillment of the Nineteenth Vow.

This description of practice has two important features. First, a range of practice is described. The highest level is that of monks who perform religious practices; the middle level is that of lay people who do meritorious deeds, make offerings, and build stupas; and the lowest level is that of people who are incapable of meritorious deeds but still aspire for the Pure Land and think on the Buddha perhaps ten times. The concept of various grades of beings, all nevertheless attaining birth in the Pure Land, became a significant fixture of Pure Land thinking about practice.

Second, birth is attained by seeing Amida Buddha at the point of death and following him to the Pure Land. Those of the highest level see Amida directly, those of the middle level see a transformed body, and those of the lowest level see the Buddha in a dream. While bodhisattvas of the path of difficult practice may enter deep samadhi in the course of their exercises, those of the Pure Land are unable to accomplish this. Nevertheless, the Buddha appears to them at the point that their future lives are determined, and with the mind purified through perception of him, they are guided by him to the Pure Land and born there in the next life.

The most influential exposition of this strain of nembutsu thought is in the *Contemplation Sutra*, which teaches a similar grading of practice, with each level again divided in three. Concerning the very lowest level, it describes people who commit evil all through life, but chance to encounter the teaching at the point of death. It states that, even if unable to think on Amida, if they simply say the Buddha's Name ten times, taking refuge in him, they will attain birth. It is taught that with each utterance, the effects of their lifelong evil, which would have bound them to samsaric life for aeons, are eliminated, and when they die, they see before them a lotus that carries them to the Pure Land.

While the Indian tradition continued to view the Pure Land path in the context of bodhisattva practice, the mainstream Pure Land tradition in China turned greater attention to the aspect of reflection on the human condition inherent in Pure Land thought and sought the means by which all people, even those in mundane life and those incapable of religious practices, could attain

birth. Since the sutras present a range of practice, consideration was focused on the minimal necessary practice, and the passage from the *Contemplation Sutra* on the lowest level of practice came to be the basis for interpreting the meaning of nembutsu in the Eighteenth Vow. This is apparent in Tao-ch'o, who lived at a time when the concept of the historical decline in the practice and realization of the teaching deeply troubled Buddhists. He paraphrases the Vow by fusing it with the teaching of the *Contemplation Sutra*:

If sentient beings, though they have committed evil all their lives, should say my Name at the time of death, continuing for ten times, and yet not attain birth, may I not realize the supreme enlightenment. (SSZ I, 410)

Throughout the Pure Land tradition until Shinran, the *Contemplation Sutra* remained the basis for understanding the Eighteenth Vow. There are two basic consequences. First, nembutsu as utterance of the Name—in contrast to mental concentration—came to occupy an increasingly important position, for within the framework of practices, it was seen to be the essential, minimally required, act conforming to the Primal Vow. Shan-tao labels it the “act of true settlement,” distinguishing it from such activities centering on Amida as worship and contemplation; he relegates these other practices to an auxiliary or supportive status. Honen develops such thinking further, and teaches that saying the Name is *the* practice selected by Amida Buddha in his compassionate Vow to save all beings, and that other practices are to be set aside.

Second, the idea that Amida Buddha comes to welcome one into the Pure Land became a strong element of the teaching, and practitioners sought to prepare themselves for the final moment of life, which they regarded as decisive for their attainment of birth.

Shinran declares the *Contemplation Sutra* a provisional teaching and not the true message of Sakyamuni, which lies in the *Larger Sutra*. He follows Nagarjuna in stressing that the stage of non-retrogression may be attained in the present, without depending on events at the moment of death. Moreover, he goes even further, declaring that the realization of entrusting itself signifies attainment of non-retrogression, and that thereafter one is the same as Maitreya bodhisattva—a bodhisattva of the highest stage—for one will realize supreme enlightenment immediately at the end of this life and birth in the Pure Land, without the arduous progression through other stages. This development of the Pure Land path was made possible through a fundamental revision of the conception of the nembutsu. Shinran sees it not as the minimal act required of beings, but removes it altogether from the framework of traditional practice.

NOTES

1. See Maitreya's *Mahayana-sutralamkara*, I, 4, and Vasubandhu's commentary.