

Pure Land Buddhism (From Wikipedia)



Pure Land Buddhism, also referred to as Amidism in English, is a broad branch of Mahayana Buddhism and one of the most widely practiced traditions of Buddhism in East Asia. Pure Land is a tradition of Buddhist teachings that are focused on the Buddha **Amitābha**. The three primary texts of the tradition, known as the "**Three Pure Land Sutras**", are the Longer Infinite Life Sutra, Contemplation Sutra, and the Shorter Amitabha Sutra.

Pure Land oriented practices and concepts are found within basic Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmology, and form an important component of the Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions of China, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Vietnam. The term "Pure Land Buddhism" is used to describe both the Pure Land of Mahayana Buddhism, which may be better understood as "Pure Land traditions" or "Pure Land teachings," and the separate Pure Land **sects** that developed in Japan from the work of Hōnen. Pure Land Buddhism is built on the belief that we will never have a world which is not corrupt, so we must strive for re-birth in another plane, referred to as the "Pure Land".

Early history

1) History in India

The Pure Land teachings were first developed in India, and were very popular in Kashmir and Central Asia, where they may have originated. Pure Land sutras were brought from the Gandhāra region to China as early as 147 CE, when the Kushan monk Lokakṣema began translating the first Buddhist sūtras into Chinese. There are also images of **Amitābha** with the **bodhisattvas** Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta which were made in Gandhāra during the Kushan era.

In the Buddhist traditions of India, Pure Land doctrines and practices were spread by well-known teachers of the Mahāyāna teachings, including Nāgārjuna. Pure Land schools arose because of the belief that humans were becoming incapable of **Dharma**, emphasizing that humans needed help from another power; that power being **Amitābha** Buddha.

Pure Land sutras

The three principal Pure Land sūtras describe **Amitābha** and his **Pure Land of Bliss**, called **Sukhavati**. Also related to the Pure Land tradition is the Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra, which gives an early description of the practice of reciting the name of Amitābha as a meditation method.

Bodhisattvas hear about the Buddha Amitābha and call him to mind again and again in this world. Because of this calling to mind, they see the Buddha Amitābha. Having seen him they ask him what truth it takes to be born in the realm of the Buddha Amitābha. Then the Buddha Amitābha says to these bodhisattvas:

"If you wish to come and be born in my realm, you must always call me to mind again and again, you must always keep this thought in mind without letting up, and thus you will succeed in coming to be born in my realm."

2) Early history in China and Japan

The Pure Land teachings first became prominent in China with the founding a Temple at Mount Lu in 402ce. As a young man, Huiyuan practiced Daoism, he turned to Buddhism and became a monk learning under Dao'an. Later he founded a monastery at the top of Mount Lu and invited well-known scholars to study and practice Buddhism there, where they formed the White Lotus Society. They advocated the practice of reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha in order to attain rebirth in the western pure land of Sukhāvātī. Mount Lu is regarded as being among the most sacred religious sites of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, and the site of the first Pure Land gathering.

The Pure Land teachings and meditation methods quickly spread throughout China. The main teaching of the Chinese Pure Land tradition is based on focusing the mind with Mindfulness of the Buddha through recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha, so as to attain rebirth in his pure land of Sukhāvātī.

At a later date, the Pure Land teachings spread to Japan and slowly grew in prominence. Hōnen (1133–1212) established Pure Land Buddhism as an independent sect in Japan known as Jōdo-shū. Today Pure Land is an important form of Buddhism in Japan, China, Korea, and Vietnam. Pure Land schools make up almost 40 percent of Japanese Buddhism practitioners with the most temples, second to Chan schools. These schools were influenced by the thought that humans could no longer understand the **dharma** by themselves.

The Pure Land

Contemporary Pure Land traditions see the "pure land", as a region offering respite from rebirth. Amitābha's pure land of Sukhāvātī is as a land of beauty that surpasses all other realms. It is said to be inhabited by many gods, men, flowers, fruits, and adorned with wish-granting trees where rare birds come to rest. In Pure Land traditions, entering the Pure Land is popularly perceived as equivalent to the attainment of enlightenment. Upon entry into the Pure Land, the practitioner is then instructed by Amitābha Buddha and numerous bodhisattvas until full and complete enlightenment is reached. This person then has the choice of returning at any time as a **bodhisattva** to any of the six realms of existence in order to help all sentient beings in **samsāra**, or to stay the whole duration, reach **buddhahood**, and subsequently deliver beings to the shore of liberation.

Sutras of Pure Land Buddhism preach that **Dharma** brings effects equally without distinction. This is one of the reasons that became most popular among the populace. In addition, it says that expecting the good reward does not have to come from good deeds, and suggests that good and evil may be interchanged in the difference of one's situation. Hence, it was thought that menial persons could be released from the underworld like Hell and arrive at Pure Land easily depending on their good deeds in one's lifetime. However, because this teaching includes extremely difficult subject matter, various denominations or sects appeared over the interpretation.

Meditation methods

1) Mindfulness of Amitābha Buddha

Repeating the name of Amitābha is traditionally a form of mindfulness of the Buddha. This term was translated into Chinese as nianfo and then into Japanese as nenbutsu, by which it is popularly known in English. The practice is described as calling the Buddha to mind by repeating his name, to enable the practitioner to bring all his or her attention upon that Buddha. This may be done vocally or mentally, and with or without the use of Buddhist prayer beads. Those who practice this method often commit to a fixed set of repetitions per day. According to tradition, the second patriarch of the Pure Land school, Shandao is said to have practiced this day and night without interruption, each time emitting light from his mouth.

In Chinese Buddhism, there is a related practice called the "dual path of Chan and Pure Land cultivation", which is also called the "dual path of emptiness and existence." As taught by Nan Huai-Chin, the name of Amitābha is recited slowly, and the mind is emptied out after each repetition. When idle thoughts arise, the name is repeated again to

clear them. With constant practice, the mind is able to remain peacefully in emptiness, culminating in the attainment of samādhi.

2) Pure Land Rebirth Dhāraṇī

Repeating the Pure Land Rebirth **dhāraṇī** is another method in Pure Land Buddhism. Similar to the mindfulness practice of repeating the name of Amitābha, this dhāraṇī is another method of meditation and recitation in Pure Land Buddhism. The repetition of this dhāraṇī is said to be very popular among traditional Chinese Buddhists. It is traditionally preserved in Sanskrit, and it is said that when a devotee succeeds in realizing singleness of mind by repeating a mantra, its true and profound meaning will be clearly revealed.

namo amitābhāya tat-hāgatāya tadyathā, amṛt[od]bhava amṛta[siddhambhave]

amṛtavikrānte amṛtavikrāntagāmini, gagana kīrti[kare] svāhā

The Chinese use a version of this dhāraṇī that was transliterated from Sanskrit into Chinese characters, called the "Amitabha Pure Land Rebirth Mantra", "Mantra for Birth in the Pure Land".

3) Visualization methods

Another practice found in Pure Land Buddhism is meditative contemplation and visualization of Amitābha, his attendant bodhisattvas, and the Pure Land. The basis of this is found in the Amitayurdhyana Sutra, in which the Gautama Buddha describes to Queen Vaidehi the practices of thirteen progressive visualization methods, corresponding to the attainment of various levels of rebirth in the Pure Land. The first of these steps is contemplation of a setting sun, until the visualization is clear whether the eyes are open or closed. Each progressive step adds complexity to the visualization of Sukhāvātī, with the final contemplation being an expansive visual which includes Amitābha and his attendant bodhisattvas. According to Inagaki Hisao, this progressive visualization method was widely followed in the past for the purpose of developing samādhi.

Going to the Pure Land

Practitioners claim there is evidence of dying people going to the pure land, such as:

- ✿ Knowing the time of death: some prepare by bathing and nianfo.
- ✿ The "Three Saints of the West": Amitābha and the two bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara on his right and Mahāsthāmaprāpta on his left, appear and welcome the dying person. Visions of other Buddhas or bodhisattvas are disregarded as they may be bad spirits disguising themselves, attempting to stop the person from entering the Pure Land.
- ✿ Records of practicing Pure Land Buddhists who have died have been known to leave śarīra, or relics, after cremation.

The dying person may demonstrate some, but not necessarily all, of these evidences. For example, his facial expression may be happy, but he may not demonstrate other signs, such as sharira and dreams.

When a person dies, at first "good luck at the underworld" is prayed for the dead person. The family remains in mourning for 49 days till the dead person's reincarnation (Pure Land sects may say "till achieving Pure Land"). It is thought that the great sinner transmigrates to a beast or a hungry ogre without being able to go to the Pure Land.

Variance between traditions

In **Tibet**, which has a **Tantric** culture, the original Indic general orientation of seeking rebirth in the Pure Land of any deity was retained. Tibetan practitioners may also visualize themselves as a Buddha. By contrast, the Chinese traditions are oriented towards seeking assistance from an "other-Amitabha Buddha" which is outside the self, and may consider the Western Pure Land to exist only in the mind.

1) Indian Buddhism

Regarding Pure Land practice in Indian Buddhism, Hajime Nakamura writes that as described in the Pure Land sūtras from India, Mindfulness of the Buddha (Skt. buddhānusr̥ti) is the essential practice.[36] These forms of mindfulness are essentially methods of meditating upon Amitābha Buddha.[36] Andrew Skilton looks to an intermingling of Mahāyāna teachings with Buddhist meditation schools in Kashmir for the rise of Mahāyāna practices related to buddhānusr̥ti, mindfulness of the Buddha:[37]

Great innovations undoubtedly arose from the intermingling of early Buddhism and the Mahāyāna in Kashmir. Under the guidance of Sarvāstivādin teachers in the region, a number of influential meditation schools evolved which took as their inspiration the Bodhisattva Maitreya. [...] The Kashmiri meditation schools were undoubtedly highly influential in the arising of the buddhānusr̥ti practices, concerned with the 'recollection of the Buddha(s)', which were later to become characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the Tantra.

2) Chinese Buddhism

In particular, Pure Land and Zen practice are often seen as being mutually compatible, and no strong distinctions are made. Chinese Buddhists have traditionally viewed the practice of meditation and the practice of reciting Amitābha Buddha's name, as complementary and similar methods for achieving enlightenment. This is because they view recitation as a meditation method used to concentrate the mind and purify thoughts. Chinese Buddhists widely consider this form of recitation as a very effective form of meditation practice.

Historically, many Buddhist teachers in China have also taught both Chan and Pure Land together. Many suggested the dual practice of the Chan and Pure Land methods, advocating mindfulness of Amitābha to purify the mind for the attainment of self-realization.

3) Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Pure Land Buddhism has a long and innovative history dating from the 8th-9th centuries, the era of the Tibetan Empire. Tibetan versions of pure-land prayers and artistic pictures of Sukhāvātī in Central Asia date to that time. Tibetan pure-land literature forms a distinct genre and encompasses a wide range of scriptures, and meditations and rituals belonging to the Vajrayāna tradition. There are many treasure texts associated with Tibetan Pure Land Buddhism.

It is important to apply our knowledge internally. The Buddha attained enlightenment in this way. The pure lands are internal; the mental afflictions are internal. The crucial factor is to recognize the mental afflictions. Only by recognizing their nature can we attain Buddhahood.

4) Japanese Buddhism

In Japanese Buddhism, Pure Land teachings developed into independent institutional sects, as can be seen in the Jōdo-shū, Jōdo Shinshū, Yūzū-nembutsu-shū, and Ji-shū.

The majority of the important schools of Japanese Buddhism developed in the middle ages, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. However they were mostly influenced by the Tendai school, as their founding monks were all trained originally in that school. Its teachings were based on the Lotus Sūtra and Mahāyāna Nirvāṇa Sūtra, encompassing a wide range of teachings and eclectic practices of austerities.

Strong institutional boundaries exist between sects which serve to clearly separate the Japanese Pure Land schools from the Japanese Zen schools. One notable exception to this is found in the Ōbaku Zen school, which was founded in Japan during the 17th century by the Chinese Buddhist monk Ingen. The Ōbaku school of Zen retains many Chinese features such as mindfulness of Amitābha through recitation and recitation of the Pure Land sūtras.