The Way of Devotion: Pure Land Buddhism

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"An infant turns to its mother without any idea why. There is simply an utter reliance. Entrusting yourself to the Name is like this."

(Kensho)

The carp may wonder what it is like and the accents will be mine; and, moreover, people who write about their faith are, with some exceptions, literati and scholars. The danger may be great that these people do not project a true image of what is living in the hearts of the faithful of a religion that likes to define itself as the religion of the “little man” (bon-bu).

One may think, as in fact I do, that Pure Land spirituality has many of its feelings and impulses in common with Christianity, but this must only make us doubly wary not to presume simple identity. For every element, no matter how similar, carries the imprint of a whole that is, after all, different from the Christian one. What John Carman wrote about the Hindu path of devotion, the bhakti-marga, applies as well in our case: “To understand an alien experience, we need to remember partially similar experiences familiar to us. Bhakti has both appealed to and puzzled Western students because they see in its central features Western monotheism combined with other elements that seem different or even totally alien.”

The most alien and disconcerting element in our case might be the presence, in Pure Land expressions, of a tendency towards deconstruction of all substance (even that of the object of devotion) and duality (especially that between Amida and “sentient beings”) — a tendency that is of course inherited from general Mahāyāna thought, but often appears to us to militate against the fundamental impulses of Pure Land spirituality. How far does this non-duality really impart a new, positive and complementary, dimension to that spirituality, especially as lived by the common people? It is therefore also called “Amidism” since, to most people in the West, and can be characterized as a “Buddhism of faith” (since relying on Amida’s “Other-Power” is central) or a “Buddhism of the Name” (since Amida communicates his power through his Name and the recitation thereof, the nenbutsu). Although basically its religiosity appears as an easily recognizable whole, different accents placed according to age and region account for marked differences in all Buddhism, right from its beginning but especially in its Mahāyāna form — although in the usual descriptions they are hidden in the deep shadows of loftier, more philosophical themes. We may think here, for example of the three refuges, the cult of the Buddha with veneration of the relics and recitation of Buddha names, sentient beings presented as “children of the Buddha” in the Lotus Sūtra, the ideas of different “Buddha lands,” and so on. This parallelism is, of course, much stressed inside the Pure Land School itself to the point of saying: “Nowadays, the nenbutsu is considered to be the exclusive property of the Pure Land School, but in fact it is the basic idea that permeates all of Mahāyāna Buddhism.”

As most readers will know, the Pure Land School is a form of Mahāyāna Buddhism that developed mostly in China (and Korea) and became a separate sect (or rather, sects) in Japan. Therein one is convinced that, especially in these “latter days” (mappō), we cannot reach enlightenment by our own power, and therefore rely in faith on Amida Buddha’s Vow, wherein he promises that he will take everyone up into his Pure Land, where enlightenment is easy to obtain. It is therefore also called “Amidism” and can be characterized as a “Buddhism of faith” (since relying on Amida’s “Other-Power” is central) or a “Buddhism of the Name” (since Amida communicates his power through his Name, and all practice came to be centered on Amida’s Name and the recitation thereof, the nenbutsu).
spirituality and practice. In this short essay, I cannot really take these differences into account, but since I write from my experience of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, I must at least mention the existence of two different sects: one, the Jōdo Shū (Pure Land Sect), the followers of Hōnen (1133-1212), who center everything on the practice of the nenbutsu and rather unabashedly promote devotion to Amida as a person; the other, the Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land Sect or Shin Buddhism), the followers of Shinran (1173-1363) and Rennyo (1414-1499), for whom pure faith (unadulterated by anything human) is central, and who tend to reduce Amida's reality to something in a non-dual relationship with the believer.

In the framework of this issue, Pure Land Buddhism is classified as a "Way of Devotion," and rightly so. It may be good to remember, however, that devotion can show many different nuances and that not necessarily all the different traits of devotional religiosity found in other contexts (as, for example, the already mentioned bhakti-marga in Hinduism or pietism in Protestantism) must be found in Pure Land devotion. Thus, for example, while devotion as between parent and child is very much operative, the feeling of loyalty of the servant to the master is rather conspicuously absent in the Pure Land school, and in many other Pure Land writers, the term of "devotion" has come to mean "firm faith" which in most cases is more clearly defined than in Shinran's teachings.

After this overly long introduction, it is time for us to come to grips with Pure Land spirituality; but which migration from innumerable kalpas in the "historical confirmation." To quote again a phrase by Shan-tao: "...in this evil age of the five defilements, in this evil world, among evil sentient beings, evil views, evil passions, and in a time when evil acts and lack of faith prevail." This view of the human condition forms the necessary background — or better maybe, the content itself — of the fundamental Pure Land spiritual experience: together with my urgent need of salvation, my utter powerlessness to liberate myself, i.e., to live up to the requirements of the traditional Buddhist path, the "Path of Sages" by Pure Land people.

The view of the human condition is totally different between these two religions, the Path of Sages and the Pure Land Path. The Path of Sages maintains that the original state of the human is unhindered and pure Buddha [-Nature], while the Pure Land Path sees the innate nature of human beings as foolishness, evil, and [bondage to the cycle of] birth-death.

The classic devolution of the human being, which can be found in Shinran and in many other Pure Land writers, goes back to a Chinese "patriarch" of the Pure Land school, Shan-tao (613-681). "A foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation." "自身は現にこれ罪悪生死の凡夫、曖昧よりこのかたつみに没し、つゆに流転して、出離の縁あることなしと信す。[信卷]

There can be no doubt that this miserable situation is ascribed to human nature itself. Still, the mappō theme — the conviction that we are now living in the degenerate "latter days" of the Buddha Law, wherein the capacities of human beings have drastically diminished over against the pristine days of Sakyamuni Buddha — is omnipresent (at least since Tao-cho, 562-645) and serves as a kind of "historical confirmation." To quote again a phrase by Shan-tao: "...in this evil age of the five defilements, in this evil world, among evil sentient beings, evil views, evil passions, and in a time when evil acts and lack of faith prevail." This view of the human condition is always considered to be the main line of Mahāyāna (and is called the "Path of Sages" by Pure Land people).
sentient beings and takes them all in just as they are, beset by karmic cause and effect." 15 To be accepted as one is, then becomes a powerful idea. It leaves no place for self-recrimination or anxious preoccupation with one's sins; one simply "throws oneself on the Mercy of Amida." It is, for example, an ever recurring theme in A. Bloom's writings that "Shinran... taught men to accept themselves for what they are, passion-ripened mortals." 15

It could then be argued that in this "self-forgetfulness" the original Buddhist ideal of selflessness or non-ego (as well as the Christian ideal of humility) is beautifully realized. The word "humility" does not play a significant role in Pure Land devotional literature, but real Pure Land believers strike Western observers most of all as "humble and grateful people." As the same A. Bloom has it, "the primary characteristic of the life of faith for Shinran is the negation of self-assertion." 16 Before Amida, we have nothing to assert ourselves with, since all our acts are defiled; and merit-counting is pointless since we cannot discriminate between wise and foolish; it does not differentiate between priesthood and laity; it does not question the length of one's performance and practice; it does not take into account the weight of the karmic evil one has committed; only definitely settled shinjin [faith] is required as the cause-seed of birth. 18

Pure Land religiosity does not have then, as is sometimes felt with Zen, the aura of a "religion of saints" or of heroes who are forever ready to die without flinching. On the contrary, Soga Ryōjin said: "It is the person who lives his "bonbunshu" (his nature as a little man) with real thoroughness that is the real saint." 19 And the theme of the fool as the true religious person is much in evidence. "I recall the late Master Hōnen say, 'Those of the Pure Land tradition attain birth by becoming their foolish selves'." 20 The wise man relies on wisdom.... The fool has not even a little wisdom to rely on, and therefore entrusts himself to the wondrous Vow Power.

- Leaving everything to Amida and expecting nothing from oneself has, of course, its own pitfalls and possible abuses, against which the spiritual leaders must inveigh. Already Shinran himself had to berate some of his followers, who felt impelled to sin since that would make them more worthy of the Vow, by writing that it does not make sense to take poison simply because there exists an anti-dote. 29 Indeed basing an ethics on this mental attitude is a delicate enterprise. The high moral standard of Japan's Pure Land believers may then have been partially obtained by smuggling in by the back door the heretical idea that a good life makes us pleasing in the eyes of Amida. And Soga Ryōjin feels it necessary to appeal to a rather mystical view: "We must reject the ethics of self-importance, and take as the basis of our ethics the awareness of the self's playing within the joyful light of the Tathāgata." 22 Also, "since any suggestion of responsibility or conscious effort on our part would savour of a dangerous concession to self-power and is in any case redundant," 46 an invitation to complete passivity or quietism may seem to be implied in the Pure Land doctrine itself. Thus, for example, the following words by myōda Genza, admirable as they are in themselves, can easily be misunderstood: "Once he said that when a man attains faith there is only one change: everything in the world, without exception, becomes true. All things come to be affirmed; just as they are, they come to manifest the truth." 23 This might become especially problematic in the face of social evil, and indeed Soga Ryōjin declares: "We have nothing to call out boldly to the world. For us it is enough to simply listen to the doctrine and to recite the Name in faith." 26

Over against this in-built tendency, several spiritual writers feel the need to stress somehow the role and importance of effort in Pure Land religiosity.

Without relying on real effort, one cannot prove the limits of the self. Effort is the mirror wherein we see our powerlessness.... Effort and diligence do not prove the greatness of self-power but, on the contrary, lead to the conclusion of the invalidity of self-power. 27 Hōnen rejects all religious practices outside the nenbutsu.... Does this mean that it is all right to do nothing, not to exert ourselves for the world? Would that not be utter egoism? 28

Full consciousness of the miserable and defiled character of this world naturally translates into a desire for another world that is pure and happy. There can be no doubt that, traditionally, Pure Land spirituality has been other-world oriented. "We must pay profound attention to the fact that pure faith of single-minded entrusting finds its origin in the future-oriented desire for birth into paradise." 29 Indeed, over against the Path of Sages, which proclaims "attainment of Buddhahood in this very body," the Pure Land School defines itself as "attainment of enlightenment by birth into the Pure Land after death."

There is no salvation apart from birth into the Pure Land. Pure Land Buddhism stands and falls on this concept. Renunciation of this defiled world and aspiration for the Pure Land are the only foundation of pure action. 30 To be a "little man" means, first of all, to reject the saha world and to desire the Pure Land. [The little man does not think that he can change the world] Speaking from the feelings of the little man, there is nothing to be done but to reject this dirty world and to desire the pure one. 31 Shinran's originality lies among others in his valiant efforts to turn the point of gravity of Pure Land reli-
giosity to this world by making the moment of attainment of faith absolutely central and even calling this the moment of birth into the Pure Land. At the one moment of the attainment of faith one’s salvation is already settled, and what happens at death comes to be of secondary importance. However, Soga Ryōgin, for one, deplores the fact that Shinran did not really succeed in his efforts and that, even among his followers (especially since Rennyo), the after-life remained the center of attention and concern.

It is in the act of shinjin (faith), this linchpin of Pure Land religiosity, that the hopeless human predicament and the miserable world are “over-turned” by being bathed in Amida’s Light and Mercy. For, over against (although at one with) the negative object of faith, the own sinfulness, there stands the absolutely positive pole: Amida. Amida vowed “to take me up never to abandon me,” and will certainly save me by causing my birth in his Pure Land. On this point, glorious vistas open up.

Truly, faith is the alpha and omega of everything. When standing in the one-moment of faith, my actual self as such is a citizen of the Pure Land, and one in being with Amida.... But, when faith is not present, I am nothing but a foolish being.32 I, who am totally powerless over against Amida Buddha, am all-powerful within the Vow-mind of the Buddha.33

This shinjin is supposed to consist of “three minds:” sincerity (whole-heartedness), joyful entrusting, and desire for Birth in the Pure Land. In Shinran’s view, these qualities in their purity cannot originate in the heart of a sinner. Faith itself, therefore, bestowed (“transferred,” eko) by Amida. It is Amida’s fundamental gift whereby he takes us up into himself. “At first sight, faith looks like the mind set whereby we, powerless human beings, go to the encounter of Amida’s infinite Vow-power, but when we penetrate deeper into its reality, we see that it is directly the Vow-power itself of Amida who in order to save us humans deigns to come very intimately into our subjectivity.”34 We, powerless human beings, can of course not add anything to or detract anything from Amida’s gift. The devotion of the believer is therefore detached from the idea of merit acquisition,35 and freed from all anxiety about the yes or no of one’s salvation. In the same vein, shinjin is often presented as perfect from the beginning and not liable to any process of evolution. In actual practice, however, it appears to admit of a struggle with doubt (“A ‘life of praise’, that is my ideal; a ‘life of doubt’, that is my reality”)36 and a process of deepening or growth in purity (of rejection of self-power), as is amply illustrated in Shinran’s “dialectics of the three Vows (sangoan tennyu).”

In the Pure Land School, much stress is put on the certainty, the “assuredness,” of one’s salvation and the peace of mind (anjin) this brings. This may be an heritage from “Shinron’s [and also Hōnen’s] whole experience in monastic life and his quest for certainty and assurance of his final liberation.”37 Many expressions are used in this connection, the most common of which are futaien (non-repetition) and shōdō (by faith one is introduced into the “community of the rightly settled”).

In the light of the doctrine, faith in Amida, the Savior, may appear to bear exclusively on one’s spiritual salvation, but in the devotional life of the believer its object tends to “spread” over everything. Amida’s Primal Vow permeates every facet of our life of shinjin; not only the faith itself but also everything else in our daily life becomes the blessing of the Buddha— including one’s very existence. It is not as if there are already sentient beings before they are called by the Buddha.... The inviting summons of Amida’s Vow is precisely the substance (tai) of sentient beings.... We are born by the inviting call of Amida.38

This brings us to what may strike the observer as the most salient and admirable point of Pure Land spirituality: the all-pervading feeling of gratitude and sense of indebtedness. “Gratitude becomes the central quality to describe and define the Shin way of life.”39 In a sense, this is only natural for people who consider everything as an heritage from “Shinran,” an ocean.40 As already hinted at, this sense of gratitude owes its depth and authenticity to the sense of personal unworthiness as a result of one’s sinfulness. Soga says that gratitude is only repentance turned-around. “Repentance is not the apex of repentance; it is gratitude that is the high point or extreme of repentance. Neither is gratitude the high point of gratitude; trust is the apex of gratitude.”41

True faith, it is stressed, implies a trust in Amida that is absolute. A surprising consequence that is drawn from this in Shinran’s school is that all prayer (of supplication) is not only redundant but is a sign of lack of trust. Since in his Vow-prayer Amida already desires all that is good for us in a supereminent way, there is certainly no need for us to run to gods and other Buddhas to ask for this-worldly benefits, and moreover no need to ask Amida to save us — no need to chase Amida since he is chasing us. But this theoretical position may have to be taken with a grain of salt and may not really correspond to the lived spirituality of most believers since we also find words like: “All things considered, the fundamental teaching of Pure Land Buddhism amounts to no more than the thought ‘Amida Buddha, save me.’”42 Anyways, the religiosity of the Pure Land believer is supposed to be characterized by “single-mindedness” (ishin or ikko). “Aspire for birth with the deep-rooted mind of one fixed on a target.”43 Single-mindedness thus is in aspiration and also in the object of devotion: Amida Buddha only. In contrast with other Buddhist sects with their veneration of
many Buddhhas, the religiosity of the Pure Land School is therefore sometimes characterized as “monotheistic.” Single-mindedness is also in the practice: only nenbutsu, reciting Amida’s Name, wherein faith spontaneously expresses itself: Namu Amida Butsu. We cannot dream here of unraveling the many layers of meaning and implication of this practice. A short and of course debatable formula might possibly be the following: “By reciting the Name of Amida, wherein Amida’s merciful Vow is crystallized, the believer joins in the cosmic hymn of praise to Amida sung by the Buddhhas of the ten quarters, and by remembering (anamnese) Amida in this way he lives in the presence of Amida.” How psychologically powerful such a single-minded practice can be may be gathered — for those familiar with it — from the “Jesus Prayer” in the Orthodox Church. This short invocation comes to be “loaded” with all the religious feelings mentioned in the above: repentance, desire for birth and especially gratitude. Its prolonged repetition can induce a state of deep mental concentration called nenbutsu-samādhi. This “meditative state” has been highly valued in the Pure Land tradition but is downplayed in Shin Buddhism because it may smack again of something one wants we ourselves are in Amida. When we rely on Amida Buddha, or again Amida Buddha is in us. When I go to Amida, Amida comes to me.8 As Light and Name, the Buddha is my parent; as shingin, he is myself; as the life of nenbutsu, he is my child.9 Especially in his old age, Shinran insisted on calling the person of faith “the equal of Maitreya (the future Buddha)” and “similar to the Tathāgata.”

Such a faith-consciousness evokes in the believer together with self-respect a sense of security and a feeling of deep joy.

The Buddha of Great Compassion is always with me. Knowing that, I feel secure.10 How happy the thought that though we are still here in the body we are numbered among the holy ones in Paradise.11

Tell me, Saichi.... What is the taste of Namu Amida Butsu? The taste of Amida Butsu is the overflowing joy in my heart.12

Such a faith also imparts on the believer the “freedom of the children of the Buddha.” It frees the believer from the karmic fetters, from the fears of supernatural powers and from the anxieties of the religious quest. No need to ask whether I shall ever find the treasure; Amida has already found me. “As I worship Amida, I hear him say, ‘Leave all worries to me’.”13 It also frees the believer from all preoccupation with religious laws and regulations. “Within the spacious halls of Amida’s Vow-mind, the sentient beings move freely, drink, get angry...”14 It even frees the believer from the compulsion to spread the own true religion. “Do I spread the Dharma in the world? The Dharma already fills the whole universe.”15 In Shinran’s very specific terminology, faith frees the believer to a life of “naturalness” (jinren hōjō): a life according to one’s deepest aspiration, which is identical with Amida’s Vow-aspiration or “Law of Mercy” — something which Roger Corless translates as “the playfulness of Other-Power.”16

Notes


2. This essay may thus come to resemble the works of the great Pure Land masters, which at a first glance seem to be little more than a concatenation of quotations. In view of the shortness of this essay, I cannot but leave many, possibly baffling, expressions in the quotations unexplained.


4. Reduced to its simplest formulation, the problem for us (Westerners?) is: How is it possible to entrust one's very life and salvation to a Buddha who is not supposed to have any objective reality over against us?

5. Soga Ryōjin, Soga Ryōjin Senshū [Collected Works]. Tokyo: Yayoi Shobō, 1981, Vol. 10, p. 36. In this essay, I shall lean rather heavily on the testimonies of Soga Ryōjin, since he appears to be the foremost Pure Land “theologian” of this century and at the same time a man of deep faith.


9. Soga Ryōjin, Senshū 4, pp. 304-305. — “Dharmākāra” is Amida in his “causal state,” i.e., on the way to Buddhahood; “Tathāgata is a title of the Buddha.
12. Fugen Daein, op. cit., p. 175.
13. Hence the famous words, "akunin shōki" (precisely the evil person is the right recipient) and "Even a good person attains Birth in the Pure Land, how much more so the evil person" (Shinran, Tannishō, nr. 3).
16. A. Bloom, Ibid., p. 44.
23. Soga Ryōjin, Senshungai 4, p. 224. We shall encounter the idea of "playfulness" again.
26. Soga Ryōjin, Senshungai 4, p. 452. — And Kaneko Datei says very significantly: "Our religious life is only the nenbutsu." (Honrai no shakkyō [The Religion of the Primal Vow], Nagoya: Shinshō Kōkan, 1936, p. 115).
27. Soga Ryōjin, Senshungai 1, p. 140 and 2, p. 262.
29. Soga Ryōjin, Senshungai 1, p. 105. — And Soga indicates again that thereby the Pure Land School returns to the spirit of Sakymuni Buddha: "What is the great spirit of Buddhism? It lies in rejecting the defiled, desiring the pure. Pure Land, this path of pure world-renouncing...." (Senshungai 7, pp. 120-121).
31. Kaneko Datei, op. cit., pp. 164 and 173. — In the same work, Kaneko also writes: "Pure Land doctrine emerges where all hope for this world has been cut off at least once" (p. 56). And: What would then entitle us to say things like: "I am the Buddha" or "This world is the Pure Land?" (p. 79)
33. Soga Ryōjin, Senshungai 1, p. 130. — This may make us think of Phil. 4: 13.
34. Soga Ryōjin, Senshungai 2, p. 402.
35. A. Bloom mentions this as one of the distinctive features of Pure Land devotion. Monumenta Nipponica 44/3 (1990), p. 132.
39. Soga Ryōjin, Senshungai 3, p. 315. Or again: "There cannot be a single phenomenon that does not have its final ground in the Primal Vow."