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Pure Lands in Japanese Religion

TODAY the term “Pure Land Buddhism” in the context of Japanese Religion commonly refers to the particular pure land inhabited by the Buddha called Amida. But in fact all buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas “purify” their physical environment, and thus their locales are termed “pure lands” (*jōdo* 浄土), understood in contrast to the mundane saṃsāric existence of ordinary beings, who inevitably reside in “defiled lands” (*edo* 穢土). Traditionally the most well-read description of what a pure land is and how one might be acquired was most probably in the first chapter of the *Yuimakyō* (Sk. *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra*), an early Indian Mahāyāna sutra considered part of the *Prajñāpāramitā* corpus and one of the three sutras traditionally understood to have inspired commentaries by Prince Shōtoku in the early seventh century. Referring to the “purification of the buddha-fields,” the sutra explains what acts or practices a bodhisattva must do to obtain a “buddha-field” (Sk. *buddhakṣetra*), which in Chinese translation was rendered as “buddha-land,” in Japanese pronunciation *butsudo* 仏土. Thus while the conception of a locale that has been purified by the sacred presence of a buddha or bodhisattva is Indian, the term “pure land” is a truncated form invented in China.

Pure Lands are also defined by vows. That is, they are known not only for the buddha or bodhisattva who inhabits them, but also by the particular vows made by that sacred personage when training as a bodhisattva. Thus in the *Yuimagyō*, the concept of purified buddha-lands is also used to identify specific religious skills that individual bodhisattvas aim to acquire as his/her special power, such as merit transference; when he/she acquires a buddha-land into which sentient

beings are born, both the bodhisattva/buddha and the sentient beings reborn there all acquire that same skill. The mechanism here is that pure lands are always pure lands of someone; they only come into being when that someone accomplishes the path. And in order to complete the path, a bodhisattva must declare and fulfill vows of compassion to aid those in need in his sphere of activity. There are both common vows taken by all bodhisattvas, and particular or “special vows” (*betsugan* 別願) whose content differs for each individual bodhisattva. The mythic biographies of famous bodhisattvas like Jizō (Sk. Kṣitigarbha), Kannon (Sk. Avalokiteśvara), Miroku (Sk. Maitreya), Monju (Sk. Mañjuśrī), or Fugen (Sk. Samantabhadra) all describe a list of such vows, giving rise to concrete conceptions of how they perform their particular religious activities. Likewise the most commonly revered buddhas in Japan, such as Shaka (Sk. Śākyamuni), Amida (Sk. Amitāyus, Amitābha), Yakushi (Sk. Bhaiṣajyaguru), or Dainichi (Sk. Mahāvairocana) have also gone through the same procedure and thus acquires the skills contained in their own personal vows. Yakushi, for example, was also called by the epithet “twelve-vow king” 十二願王, and people knew what to pray for when addressing this buddha by the description of his vows in the sutras about Yakushi. Many students of Japanese religion are familiar with the word *hongan* 本願, translated as “original vow” or “primal vow,” for example, in reference to the pure land of Amida. But there is nothing unique to the religious culture of Amida Buddha here—the special vows of all buddhas and bodhisattvas may be called *hongan*. The title of the most commonly read *Yakushi Sutra*, for example, is *Yakushi Nyorai hongan kyō* 藥師如來本願經.

And just as all pure lands are created by original vows, arrival in each land by a sentient being after asking for a rebirth there is called *ōjō* 往生, a word well known for its use in reference to attaining Amida’s pure land. And in the same way that meditations and rituals called “nenbutsu” 念仏 are typically known to be dedicated to enabling an individual to achieve rebirth or Birth in Amida’s pure land, all buddhas residing in a pure land can be ritually animated, accessed, or at least appealed to by means of similar practices also called nenbutsu, although the particular buddha referred by “butsu” here may vary a great deal.

One might expect at least some consistency throughout the canon as to geographical location, that is, where a particular pure land associated with a particular sacred personage might be. But unlike the rational system of Chinese correspondences between directions, colors, deities, and so forth, Buddhism coming from India incorporates conflicting information, suggesting a wide geographic area for the construction of the Mahāyāna sutras. Sutras typically describe a pure land as being located a certain number of worlds away (usually multipliers of the number of grains of sand in the Ganges River) from ours and in a specific direction. The location of Amida’s pure land in the west (there has been much speculation as to whether this direction symbolizes the end of a person’s life because the sun disappears in the west) and Akṣobhya’s pure land in the

east is considered to be a very early paradigm in Mahāyāna. But later the *Yakushi Sutra* places his pure land in the east and the *Nirvana Sutra* locates Śākyamuni's pure land in the west.

Thus there has always been a flexibility, variety, and even inconsistency in the concept of "pure land" within Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole. With regard to the belief and practice of Buddhism in East Asia, however, scholars add their speculations on different types of pure lands, even those associated with the same buddha. For example, each body of the same buddha is expected to have a different pure land associated with it and different inhabitants as well; thus the manifest or incarnate-body, the reward-body, and the Dharma-body of each buddha has a different pure land associated with it. This kind of discourse began in China in the Sui dynasty but does not take hold in Japan until the Kamakura period when Hōnen's disciples were involved with their more conservative Tendai counterparts in fierce debates about the pure land of Amida to which Hōnen alluded.

We do not see that kind of intellectually charged discussion on doctrinal issues here in these papers, which are concerned instead with ritual and artistic expressions of various pure lands in Japan in a variety of contexts. A simplified reduction of those debates breaks down to two basic forms or expressions of belief in some kind of liminal *topos* contrasted with the all-too-obvious defiled land of our *saha* world: a pure land that is an *other world*, meaning an idealized environment not seen here in our experience, or a pure land that is *this world*, designating an idealized reconceptualization of this world that is experienced when religious awakening removes the defilements that limit our perception. Key to both aspects is the element of idealism, and it is thus not surprising that Buddhist millenarian movements in Chinese history always involve some form of pure land worship. The closest thing to this in Japan would be the *Ikkō ikki* movements of the Muromachi period, which arise from an Amidist tradition: the Jōdoshinshū form of Buddhism. A more common Japanese adaptation of this twofold pure land notion is the way one or both dimensions were combined with native beliefs in specific locales long since considered sacred by the presence of local kami. Sometimes a local cult would not only borrow a Buddhist deity but even the Buddhist language of "pure land" to glorify itself.

But among this plurality of pure lands, original vows, and nenbutsus, the dominance of the Amida-Buddha-centered culture of pure land cannot be ignored. The emergence in the latter half of the Heian period of Amida's Pure Land as an ideal postmortem state eventually led to a general if not universal acceptance in Japan of the persuasiveness of this particular pure land conception. In the process, the attractiveness of its own paradisiac quality spread out to these other notions of pure lands. In other words, the Amida pure land known as *gokuraku* 極樂 became so appealing that notions of seeking rebirth in a pure land of other buddhas or bodhisattvas come to look very much like rebirth in

the pure land of Amida. The most widespread devotional beliefs directed to non-Amida pure lands of the postmortem, other world, variety were those centered on Miroku and Kannon. Those traditions of Nara Buddhism that survive as religious orders into the Kamakura period, namely Kegon, Hossō, and Ritsu, as well as the Tendai and Shingon traditions all embody alternative conceptions of idealized pure lands, and there are many examples of this in the papers here.

The papers in this volume form what we feel is a wonderful contribution to our understanding of how the conceptualization of “pure land” has manifested in various times, places, and ritual expressions throughout Japanese history.

Peter KNECHT addresses the deeply embedded coexistence of Buddhist and Shinto practices which prevailed before the modern period at Ise, although Ise is supposed to be (and to have been) the archtypical supremely unadulterated Shinto site. Using the iconography of Ise-centered mandala, his is a wonderful example of how the pure land motif was a universal theme that was easily appropriated for expressing the religious consciousness of this conception. Showing how the mandala is painted from the perspective of an Ise pilgrim, various figures of the postmortem world appear together as the pilgrim considered what his future may bring, such as Amida, Enma, and *tengu*.

William LEE undertakes a study in folklore about a local festival in Aichi Prefecture inheriting Tokugawa-period Shugendō traditions which incorporated Pure Land rebirth imagery and practices. This is a fascinating study of how *yamabushi*, *kagura* dance, and a ritual entering into Amida’s pure land, just to name a few, are all fused in a *hanamatsuri*. An interesting aspect of this festival as it is performed today is what is, in effect, a Shinto base for a Buddhist festival, which Lee understands to be a by-product of Meiji-period policies toward Buddhism.

R. Keller KIMBROUGH takes up the ways popular Pure Land narrative treatments, also distant from the contents of normal Amidist texts, appear in performative storytelling about potential reincarnation in hells. Looking at *otogizōshi* stories that date from the Muromachi period, he finds a rich mine of religious stories that mix Japanese sacred geography such as Mount Fuji with Buddhist conceptions of pure lands, where individuals are confused by false and true pure lands, where the latter must be that of Amida but Jizō is the only individual who can show the pilgrim the way. Hells and their horrors are contrasted here with the paradisiac qualities of Amida’s pure land, reminding us of the staying power of a similar approach used by Genshin in the *Ōjōyōshū*, and the universal acceptance of Amida’s Pure Land as a postmortem ideal by that time. We see a blending of the *other world* and *this world* dimensions of pure land faith, and also a mixing and even competition in the popular imagination between, at times, Amida, Dainichi, and Yakushi, each in their respective pure lands.

Karen MACK looks at the cult of Fudō and his role in enabling believers to reach a pure land, in this case the pure land of Miroku, or Tosotsu Heaven. As

the Fudō cult is more representative of Heian religious culture, he is often called upon as one approaches death because of his ability to help the dying individual maintain a concentrated state of mind, considered an absolute necessity if one wants to reach Miroku's heaven after death. She analyzes the presence of Fudō in Miroku Raigō paintings, and shows how Fudō was invoked in a death-bed ritual much as we expect that nenbutsu was used, and shows the centrality of the *Lotus Sutra* to this conception.

Meri ARICHI's paper examines the interesting mandala created around the central motif of Mount Hiei. Although there are twenty-one Buddhist deities of one sort or another represented in these mandala, they are called *miya mandala*, or Shrine Mandala, because the sacred locale of the mountain is what the story is ultimately about. Citing *imayo* songs from the *Ryōjin hishō*, she shows these mandala reflect similar sentiments in contemporary poetry and song, how "the kami of Ōmiya" is fusing with Śākyamuni, and stylistically how the perspectives used in the mandala were intended to show the grandeur of the site of the mountain, despite the fact that no had been up in the air to see things in that way.

In contrast to the harmonic fusing of Buddhist and native deities in the Arichi, Knecht, and Lee papers, Anna ANDREEVA investigates the way that Amidist Pure Land teachings after Hōnen was perceived as a challenging, popular movement that alienated some of the older schools of Buddhism. In particular, she looks at how Saidaiji felt this movement undercut support for earlier monastic Buddhism, and how it had the effect of stimulating the Saidaiji monastic Buddhist tradition to instigate vinaya reform and doctrinal reformulation centered around Shinto resources of deities and practices.

Finally, Tomoko YOSHIDA gives us a learned and discerning look at the fascination that the prominent Japanese historian Kuroda Toshio (1923–1993) had for the pure land school known as Jōdoshinshū. Her contribution shows the complex and relatively concealed way in which the historical thought of the very modern Kuroda was shaped by Jōdoshinshū Buddhist values, and in turn how his views of Shinshū were affected by his mid-twentieth-century predicament and his unavoidable Marxist orientation.

The papers all make solid contributions to the field of Japanese Religion, and it is hoped that they will stimulate wider interest and future research into this enormous area of study called Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. It is a field that generates huge volumes of scholarship in Japan but that remains in its infancy in the English-speaking world.

