

4. What Is Amida Buddha?

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Introduction

The concept of “Amida” (i.e., a Japanese form of the two Sanskrit names of a Buddha: *Amitabha* [Limitless Light] and *Amitayus* [Limitless Life]) is probably the most important concept in Shin Buddhism. But people often have a shallow understanding of it. Or, worse, they often misunderstand it. If we have a wrong understanding of the concept of “Amida,” our understanding of Shin Buddhism is totally wrong.

In this essay I will discuss three topics. First, I will discuss the historical background of the appearance of “Amida” in India. Second, I will define “Amida.” Third, I will explain the meanings contained in Amida’s name, *Namu Amida Butsu*.

Historical Background of the Appearance of “Amida” in India

Here I will first discuss the contents of Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment and then explain how the concept of “Amida” appeared in India approximately three centuries after Shakyamuni’s death.

Tradition tells us that when Shakyamuni was born as a prince in a small kingdom in India, he was given the name Siddhartha. Siddhartha grew up without knowing the reality of human suffering. But when he became a young man, he went out of the three gates of the palace and saw the reality of human suffering, of old age, sickness, and death. He learned that those things were inevitable and that all the things he had cherished must be lost some day. He became extremely depressed. Then one day, he went out of the fourth gate and met a traveling monk. The monk’s face was shining because of his wisdom. Having met this awakened person, Siddhartha awakened his aspiration to become a Buddha. When he was twenty-nine, he left his family to seek the way.

After Siddhartha left his family, he visited spiritual leaders. Although he studied various doctrines and practices under them, he thought that they could not lead him to the ultimate peace he was seeking. Thus he renounced them and sat under a tree. With firm determination, he said to himself, “Never shall I stir from this seat until I have attained the most perfect enlightenment.” He started to meditate.

His meditation under the tree eventually led him to enlightenment. In his meditation, Siddhartha asked, “What am I? Do I have something permanent in myself?” He examined his body, things such as his skin, muscles, bones, and blood. He also examined his mind, things such as sensation, conception, volition, and consciousness. Then, he realized that everything in his body and mind was constantly moving, changing, and flowing and that there was nothing permanent.

One morning, when Siddhartha looked at the morning star, he attained enlightenment. He understood that there was nothing permanent outside himself or inside himself. When he clearly understood the Dharma, i.e., the truth of impermanence, he became a Buddha, an Awakened One. Insight into the Dharma was the content of his enlightenment.

Although we usually say that Shakyamuni attained the Dharma, it is more accurate to say that Shakyamuni “was attained by the Dharma,” an expression by the Zen master

Dogen (1200-53, the founder of the Japanese Soto Zen School).¹ The Dharma's killing and reviving Shakyamuni are called his enlightenment.

When Shakyamuni experienced enlightenment, he said, "My life is already spent. The Holy Work is already established." These two sentences describe the two—negative and positive—aspects of the Dharma and of his enlightenment experience. Since these two aspects are quite important, let me elaborate.

The negative aspect of the Dharma (i.e., the truth of impermanence) initially appeared to Shakyamuni as a negative force (taking the form of old age, sickness, or death). This negative force destroyed all his ideas, thoughts, and opinions. It did not allow him to be attached to anything. The total negation of the self (or spiritual death) that he experienced in encountering the negative force is described in his words, "My life is already spent." This was a very humbling experience. We can say that he became a humble person.

When he experienced total negation of the self, the Dharma turned into a positive force. The Dharma initially appeared to him as a negative force because he was seeing it from an attached perspective. But now that he had lost his attached perspective, he no longer saw the Dharma as a negative force. He now saw the Dharma as a positive force, as a dynamic and creative force. He realized that all existing things were constantly new, fresh, and lively. He realized that they were the creative elements of the creative world and that he himself was one creative element in the creative world.

The fact that he became one with the Dharma, the dynamic and creative force, means that he started to live his life as a constant seeker and learner, as an appreciator of his ever-fresh ordinary life. This is expressed in his words: "The Holy Work is already established." We can say that he became a dynamic (or creative) person.

Hence, having been attained, i.e., killed and revived, by the Dharma, he became a "humble and dynamic" person. The humility and dynamism that were realized in him by the Dharma were two sides of the same coin. Only a truly humble person can engage in dynamic seeking activities.

The core of Buddhism is *how* Shakyamuni lived, not his ideas and teachings. Buddhism spread, and many people took refuge in it, mainly because they were moved by Shakyamuni's "humble and dynamic spirit" and desired to emulate it. But after his passing it was often the case that his vital spirit was forgotten and only his ideas and teachings were honored and studied.

Not long after Shakyamuni's death in the fourth century B.C., the Buddhist tradition called the Hinayana appeared in India. The Hinayana developed as follows. When Shakyamuni died, his disciples lost their beloved and revered teacher. They regarded Shakyamuni as the founder of a new religion. Since they thought that he had left a perfect and definitive teaching, they considered it their mission to faithfully memorize his teachings and preserve them. They did so because they had deep respect for their teacher. Having deep respect for the teacher is an admirable thing. But at the same time, there is often a danger involved in it. Out of their respect for their teacher, they started to categorize, systematize, and academicize his teachings. They started to dogmatize them. During the first few centuries after Shakyamuni's death, his teachings came to be fixed, formalized, and, to use a stronger expression, fossilized. This tradition is called the Hinayana.

It was in this historical context that the Mahayana, another major Buddhist tradition, appeared in India around the first century B.C., approximately three hundred years after Shakyamuni's death. The Mahayana appeared as a reaction against and criticism of the Hinayana, as a revivalist movement. In the eyes of Mahayanists, Hinayanists were attached to lifeless ideas and concepts. Mahayanists believed that the most important thing in Buddhism was not the ideas and concepts, i.e., the finished products that were produced by Shakyamuni, but his creative spirit itself. In the eyes of Mahayanists, Hinayanists were seeing only the footprints of a rabbit; they were not seeing the dynamic and lively life of the rabbit itself. Hinayanists were interested in that which Shakyamuni produced, not in the source of inspiration that produced Shakyamuni.

Mahayanists were interested in identifying the universal source (or basis) of the inspiration that awakened and produced Shakyamuni. And they identified it as the Dharma or universal Buddhahood. In order to show this spiritual basis of Shakyamuni in a more concrete human form, Mahayanists created the concept of "Amida"—an ideal human being, a "humble and dynamic" human being who embodies the Dharma.

Mahayanists described this ideal human being in Mahayana texts such as the *Larger Sutra*. The earliest version of this sutra was composed in India in approximately the first century B.C. The *Larger Sutra* tells the story of a seeker by the name of Dharmakara. Dharmakara symbolizes the "Innermost Aspiration" or "Basic Desire." The "Innermost Aspiration" means the primordial human aspiration—an aspiration that makes humans humans. It means an aspiration for Buddhahood that is entertained by all human beings. After performing many difficult practices, Dharmakara fulfills his "Innermost Aspiration" and becomes Amida Buddha.

The *Larger Sutra* was translated into Chinese and became one of the most popular *sutras* in Sino-Japanese Buddhism. The Pure Land tradition that is based on the *sutra* became one of the major Buddhist traditions in China and Japan. Shinran considered the *Larger Sutra* the most important textual basis of his Buddhism. Now I have discussed the historical background of the appearance of "Amida" in India. With this historical background in mind, let us define "Amida."

The Definition of "Amida"

Amida is "a personal symbol." In other words, Amida is "a fictional character" like Hamlet or Faust. Let me explain this definition by first discussing what Amida is not. Since "Amida" is a fictional character, he is (1) *not* a god (or a divine being) and (2) *not* a historical person.

First, Amida is *not* a god. Just as Hamlet symbolizes certain spiritual qualities of human beings and does not have any superhuman (or divine) meaning, "Amida" symbolizes certain spiritual qualities of human beings and does not have any superhuman (or divine) meaning.

Second, Amida is *not* a historical person. Just as Hamlet is a fictional character created by Shakespeare and not a historical person, Amida is a fictional character created by ancient Indians and is not a historical person. Hamlet is supposed to be a prince of Denmark, but we cannot find his name in the actual chronicle of Denmark. Similarly, there is no actual history of "Amida"; being a symbolic (fictional) figure, Amida never lived in any specific time and place.

Next, let us discuss what “Amida” is, what he symbolizes. We can say that “Amida” symbolizes two things: (1) Shakyamuni, a historical person, and (2) the Dharma (ultimate reality or truth) or universal Buddhahood.

First, “Amida” symbolizes Shakyamuni, a historical person. Just as Strickland, the hero of Somerset Maugham’s novel *The Moon and Sixpence*, is a symbol of the painter Gauguin, a historical person, “Amida” can be considered a symbol of Shakyamuni, a historical person. We can say that “Amida” symbolizes the “humble and dynamic spirit” of Shakyamuni. As we have seen, Mahayanists created the concept of “Amida” in order to criticize the fossilized doctrines of Hinayanists and restore the vital spirit of Shakyamuni.

Second, “Amida” symbolizes the Dharma or universal Buddhahood. Mahayanists created the concept not only to express the vital spirit of Shakyamuni, but also to show the spiritual basis of Shakyamuni and all human beings. They wanted to show that just as Shakyamuni was awakened and liberated by the Dharma or universal Buddhahood, all human beings are awakened and liberated by it.

Thus, as far as our personal attainment of Buddhahood is concerned, this second meaning of “Amida” as a symbol of the Dharma or universal Buddhahood is more important than the first. The goal in Buddhism is that we personally become Amida Buddhas. The Buddhahood that we are expected to attain in Buddhism is not the historical Buddhahood of Shakyamuni, but the universal Buddhahood that is symbolized in “Amida.” We cannot totally identify with Shakyamuni, because we live in a different historical context than that of Shakyamuni. However, we can and should identify with the universal aspiration that Dharmakara symbolizes, strive to fulfill it, and become Amida Buddhas. We must realize our deepest reality, our true selves, which is what the realization of Amida Buddhahood means.

Here I want to pose a question concerning the doctrinal relationship between Shakyamuni and the Mahayana. What would Shakyamuni say about the Mahayana? Would he say, “Mahayanists, you have distorted my teachings and deviated from them”? I believe that Shakyamuni would endorse the Mahayana, because he emphasized the importance of the Dharma and universal Buddhahood as the basis of his enlightenment.

Shakyamuni never claimed to have created the Dharma. He identified himself as a person who was awakened and liberated by the Dharma. The discovery of the Dharma that had existed before him was called enlightenment. He emphasized the importance of relying upon the Dharma, saying, “Rely upon the Dharma; don’t rely upon a human being.”ⁱⁱ Shakyamuni taught them that they should not look at Shakyamuni, a physical existence that perishes, but at the Dharma that does not perish.

The same thing can be said about Buddhahood. Shakyamuni taught that the Buddhahood that had existed before him awakened and liberated him. Thus it is not right to say that Shakyamuni was the first Buddha. In some early Buddhist texts, Shakyamuni said, “There were seven Buddhas in the past.” As we have noted earlier, when Siddhartha went out of the fourth gate of the palace, he met an awakened person, a Buddha. It was because of this meeting that an aspiration for Buddhahood was awakened in him. Thus, Buddhahood existed before Shakyamuni, and it awakened his aspiration for Buddhahood.

Since Shakyamuni taught that the Dharma and Buddhahood that had existed before him were the most important basis of his enlightenment experience, we can say that

Mahayanists' emphasis on the importance of "Amida" is in total agreement with what Shakyamuni taught. Now let us examine the meanings contained in Amida's name.

Meanings Contained in Amida's Name, *Namu Amida Butsu*

In Shin Buddhism, Amida's name, "*Namu Amida Butsu* (i.e., the six-character name)," is the most important thing. The reason it is considered the most important thing in Shin Buddhism is that it is one of the most compact and excellent expressions of the essence of Buddhism. *Namu Amida Butsu* means "Bowling Amida Buddha."ⁱⁱⁱ This name expresses the "humble and dynamic spirit," the essence of Buddhahood.

Now in order to understand the meanings contained in the name, we must examine the story of Dharmakara in the *Larger Sutra*. At the beginning of the story, Dharmakara meets his teacher and expresses his joy by praising his teacher. After receiving instructions from his teacher, Dharmakara makes his vows and engages in a practice called "eternal practice." And he eventually becomes a Buddha by the name of "Bowling Amida Buddha."

Here it is important to know the contents of his practice, because his practice crystallizes into his name. Although he takes up various practices, such as precept keeping and meditation, the most important practice Dharmakara performs is *kuyo* (which is the Japanese term for the Sanskrit term *pūja*). Because of this *kuyo* practice, Dharmakara becomes a Buddha by the name of "Bowling Amida Buddha."

Although *kuyo* is usually translated as "making offerings to a Buddha," it implies the whole process of learning. It implies that a student visits his teacher, worships and praises him, gives offerings to him, serves him, and studies under him. Thus, *kuyo* basically means that a student visits a teacher and studies under him.

The *Larger Sutra* emphasizes the importance of *kuyo* practice in many places. For example, in the "Verses in Praise of a Buddha (*Sambutsu-ge*)" Dharmakara says, "Even though there are zillions of Buddhas and great sages as many as the sand grains of the River Ganges, I will visit all of them and study under them (i.e., *kuyo*)"^{iv}; and in the "Verses of Repeated Vows (*Jusei-ge*)" he says, "I will visit all the Buddhas and study under them (i.e., *kuyo*), thereby acquiring roots of virtue."^v

Kuyo is a practice in which Dharmakara perfects his "humble and dynamic studentship," being gradually emptied (killed) and permeated (revived) by the Dharma. The humbler he becomes, the more Buddhas he discovers and worships. The more Buddhas he discovers and worships, the humbler he becomes. Dharmakara gradually loses his attachment to himself—to his own ideas and opinions. He sees less importance in himself. At the same time, he deepens his respect for Buddhas, for his teachers, and intensifies his practice of *kuyo*. The speed with which he studies the Dharma accelerates.

The nature of Dharmakara's *kuyo* practice becomes clear when we refer to the *Essentials of the Eight Schools (Hasshu-koyo)*, a traditional Japanese Buddhist textbook composed in the thirteenth century. It says that a bodhisattva goes through forty stages of *kuyo* practice and reaches the forty-first stage of Buddhahood. The forty stages of *kuyo* practice are divided into the following four divisions: (1) the first thirty stages (i.e., from the first to the thirtieth), in which a bodhisattva worships Buddhas as many as the sand grains of five Ganges Rivers; (2) the six stages (i.e., from the thirty-first to the thirty-sixth) in which he worships Buddhas as many as the sand grains of six Ganges Rivers; (3) the three stages (i.e., from the thirty-seventh to the thirty-ninth) in which he worships

Buddhas as many as the sand grains of seven Ganges Rivers; (4) the fortieth stage, in which he worships Buddhas as many as the sand grains of eight Ganges Rivers.^{vi}

This text shows that a bodhisattva intensifies his practice of *kuyo* at an accelerated pace. The closer he gets to Buddhahood, the more Buddhas he worships. In this way, the text teaches us that the perfection of Buddhahood is the perfection of *kuyo* practice.

The text, however, does not say anything about the number of Buddhas the Buddha in the forty-first stage of Buddhahood worships. Does this mean that the Buddha in the forty-first stage does not worship Buddhas? No, on the contrary, it means that the Buddha in the forty-first stage can worship a limitless number of Buddhas. When a bodhisattva becomes a Buddha, his entire being becomes the practice of *kuyo* itself. He now sees all human beings as Buddhas and worships them. For a Buddha, not only all animate things but also all inanimate things are Buddhas. Since his entire life is *kuyo* practice, he is not even aware that he is doing *kuyo*.

Because of *kuyo* practice Dharmakara has become a Buddha by the name of “Bowling Amida Buddha”—a Buddha who bows his head before all existing things, considering them Buddhas. “Bowling Amida Buddha” means that Dharmakara has become a Buddha because of his “Bowling.” “Bowling” and *kuyo* practice are synonymous.

“Bowling (*Namu*)” is the most important part of the name. Thus we can say that the most important thing in Buddhism is not *whatness* (i.e., things such as ideas, concepts, and theories) but *howness* (i.e., “bowing”). In Buddhism we are not moved by a person of *whatness* but by a person of *howness*. A person of extensive scholarship and knowledge may impress us, but cannot shake us from the bottom of our hearts. We are moved by a person who is humbly and dynamically seeking—a person who is permeated by the truth of impermanence. I believe this is the manner in which Buddhism has been transmitted to us. If Buddhism were only *whatness*, it would have perished a long time ago. Buddhism has survived and has been transmitted to us because there have been many individuals who embodied the “humble and dynamic spirit.”

Shin Buddhism is a religion of *howness*, of “bowing.” It is not a religion of assertion or propagation. In Shin Buddhism, meeting with a person who embodies “Bowling Amida Buddha” is crucially important. The person of “Bowling Amida Buddha” does not have any intention of teaching or converting other people. When we meet such a person, we cannot help being shaken by him. When we meet a “Bowling Amida Buddha,” his “Bowling” speaks to us in a silent and quiet, yet powerful, way. His “Bowling” tells us, “You should bow your head, too!” Thus in his “Interpretation of the Six-Character Name” Shinran says, ““Bowling (*Namu*)’ means an absolute command in which the Innermost Aspiration calls us to come.”^{vii}

Thus the “Bowling” in the Buddha’s name has two aspects: the first is that Dharmakara has become a Buddha because of his “Bowling” (or *kuyo*); the second is that Dharmakara’s “Bowling” exerts spiritual influence upon others, becoming a silent calling voice. The first is called the self-benefiting (or “going”) aspect; the second is called the others-benefiting (or “returning”) aspect. Here it is extremely important to know that these two aspects are two sides of the same coin; they are contained in Dharmakara’s single practice of “bowing.” The only thing Dharmakara did was to perfect his own “bowing.” It is a mistake to think that Dharmakara took two different actions—that he *first* took self-benefiting action and *then* took an others-benefiting action.

Only when we meet a bowing person can we bow our heads. When Shinran met Honen, he saw a “Bowing Amida Buddha” in him. Shinran was shaken by Honen’s humble and dynamic spirit. And Shinran also came to embody “Bowing Amida Buddha.” That was Shinran’s liberation. Having been permeated by the spirit of Dharmakara, Shinran lived the life of a humble and dynamic seeker. Throughout his life he identified himself only as a student of Honen. He never claimed that he was a teacher. In the *Tannisho* (A Record in Lament of Divergences) he says, “I, Shinran, do not have even one single disciple.”^{viii}

When I was twenty-two, I met a Buddhist teacher by the name of Shuichi Maida (1906–67). He embodied the spirit of Dharmakara—the spirit of *kuyo* practice. He kept on learning from many teachers, many Buddhas. I was deeply moved by his humble and dynamic spirit. Although I was studying Russian at that time, I became interested in Buddhism. Since then I have been studying Buddhism.

We do not have to talk about many things in Buddhism. Only one thing—becoming a true student—is good enough. If we can realize it in our lives, that is our liberation. Everything important in Buddhism is contained in it. Becoming a true student is the highest goal, the ultimate goal, in Buddhism. If we are hoping to attain something more dramatic than that, we are just dreaming a Buddhist dream. We are liberated, not by an external being or force, but by *the bowing that is realized in us*.

Conclusion

In order to restore the universal basis of Buddhahood, the “humble and dynamic spirit,” Mahayanists created the symbol of Amida (or Dharmakara). Amida symbolizes a human spirit that keeps on advancing without being complacent with whatever it has attained. But unfortunately, the Mahayana that challenged the stagnation and fossilization of the Hinayana also became stagnant and fossilized when it became the predominant Buddhist tradition in India in the centuries following. Then later, in the Sino-Japanese Buddhist tradition, there developed new Mahayana traditions, such as the Pure Land tradition, that challenged and criticized earlier Mahayana traditions that had become stagnant and lifeless. Individuals like Honen and Shinran criticized the fossilized Mahayana tradition. They attempted to revive the fresh and creative spirit of Buddhism.

Honen and Shinran were humble students, but this does not mean that they were passive; they were the greatest rebels of their times. They were not satisfied with lifeless Buddhist doctrines. They challenged those complacent Buddhists whose teachings were fossilized. Since the two masters became a threat and danger to such people, they were persecuted by them.

But unfortunately the tradition of Honen and Shinran also became stagnant and fossilized when it became one of the major Buddhist traditions in Japan. Shinran’s vital, creative spirit was totally forgotten immediately after his death. Shinran’s successors, led by his descendants, created a sectarian dogma, a rigid and fossilized dogma. They created a doctrine in which Amida is presented as if he were a divine savior. The true meaning of Amida as a symbol with which all human beings should identify was totally forgotten.

Thus in modern Japan, Shin Buddhist teachers such as Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa, Rev. Haya Akegarasu, and Rev. Ryojin Soga had to reinterpret “Amida” in their modern consciousnesses and revive its original meanings. Amida is a symbol of the “humble and dynamic spirit.” In our personal lives we must meet a person who embodies this spirit

and discover “Amida” in ourselves. When we personally become one with it and become humble and dynamic students, we experience liberation.

ⁱ See below, p. (*note xxxv) and p. (*in “What’s Happiness?”)

ⁱⁱ *Taisho*, Vol. 12, p. 633 a2. Cf. *CW1*, p. 241.

ⁱⁱⁱ Besides “bowing” *namu* [Skt. *namas*] has other meanings such as “taking refuge in,” “worshipping,” and “revering.”

^{iv} *Taisho*, Vol. 12, p. 267 b5-7. Cf. Hisao Inagaki, trans. *The Three Pure Land Sutras* (henceforth *Inagaki*) (Berkeley: Numata Center, 1995), P. 29.

^v *Ibid.*, p.269 b25. Cf. *Inagaki*, p. 40.

^{vi} See Leo Pruden, trans., *The Essentials of the Eight Traditions*, BDK English Tripitaka (Berkeley: Numata Center, 1994), 107-I, III, pp. 64-65.

^{vii} *Taisho*, Vol. 83, p. 549 c9-10. Cf. *CW1*, p. 38.

^{viii} *Taisho*, Vol. 83, p. 728 b1-2. Cf. *CW1*, p. 664.