

5. What Is the Pure Land?

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

The Japanese word for Shin Buddhism is *Jodo Shinshu* (“True School of the Pure Land”). *Jodo* means “Pure Land.” The unique feature of Shin Buddhism is that it talks about the concept of “the Pure Land” as one of the most important things. Thus without a good grasp of this concept, we cannot understand Shin Buddhism.

However, among all Shin Buddhist concepts, the Pure Land seems to me the most difficult to understand. Traditionally, on a folklore level, many people believed in the literal descriptions of the Pure Land in the sutras (that talk about wonderful things to be enjoyed there, such as delicious foods, wonderful music, and the comfortable climate) and desired to enjoy them in the Pure Land after their deaths. But this literal interpretation of the Pure Land—an interpretation based on affirmation of human greed and attachment—is against Buddhism, which challenges these things. Thus the Pure Land masters cautioned people not to take descriptions of the Pure Land literally. For example, T’an-luan (476-542, the third Shin patriarch) said, “If people hear that they will constantly experience pleasure in the Pure Land and desire to be born there because of that, they will not be born there.”ⁱ

We must know that just as Buddhas (like Amida and Vairocana) and bodhisattvas (like Maitreya and Manjushri) are symbols, places such as the Pure Land and hell are also symbols. What, then, does the Pure Land symbolize? Buddhist scholars often explain that the Pure Land is a symbol for the ultimate truth, nirvana, or suchness. But their explanations often complicate, rather than clarify, the issue. Thus in this essay, I will attempt to present what I consider a simple and concrete interpretation of the Pure Land—an interpretation given by Rev. Rijin Yasuda (1900-82, a Shin teacher). I will attempt to answer the following four questions: (1) “What does the Pure Land symbolize?”; (2) “Why did Dharmakara (or Amida Buddha) create the Pure Land?; (3) “What is the power of the Pure Land?”; and (4) “Who can be born in the Pure Land?”

What Does the Pure Land Symbolize?

Before I answer this question, let me first discuss how the *Larger Sutra* depicts the Pure Land. According to the *sutra*, the Pure Land consists of three components: (1) Amida Buddha, the master of the land; (2) innumerable bodhisattvas, the people in the land; and (3) the things in the land, such as the ground, trees, rivers, lakes, and houses. Let me talk about these respectively.

The first component of the Pure Land, Amida Buddha, is the master of the land. The Pure Land is a place where Amida Buddha is teaching and his spirit pervades. Who, then, is Amida Buddha? What is his spirit? Amida Buddha is a symbol of the perpetual seeker and his spirit is the spirit of the perpetual seeker.

The *Larger Sutra* says that Amida was originally a young seeker by the name of Dharmakara. When Dharmakara met his teacher, he awakened his aspiration to become a Buddha and create a wonderful Buddha-land. Dharmakara then asked his teacher for instructions on the creation of the Buddha-land. Using the example of a person emptying

the ocean and finally obtaining a treasure that lies at its bottom, the teacher told Dharmakara that if he kept on seeking a treasure (i.e., Buddhahood), he would eventually be able to attain it. This instruction became Dharmakara's spiritual basis.

What, then, does it mean to “seek a treasure (i.e., Buddhahood)” in Buddhism? When we are first told to “seek a treasure,” we generally think that there is a qualitative difference between “seeking” (the process) and “treasure” (the goal). We think of it just as we think of drilling for oil, in which drilling is the process and oil is the goal. But if we think this way, we are misunderstanding the teaching about “seeking a treasure.” In Buddhism there is no qualitative difference between the process and the goal; there is no “treasure” (or goal) apart from “seeking” (the process). The “treasure” (or goal) means perfect seeking, the perfect process. Process is “seeking” and the goal is “perfect seeking.” Thus, “seeking a treasure” means that we seek perfect seeking or perfect seeker-hood.

The reason I say so is that the only Dharma (truth) that Buddhism teaches us is the truth of impermanence. The truth of impermanence is the freshness of life, or creativeness of life. When this truth starts to permeate us and we start to embody this truth, we become seekers; we can no longer be complacent with fixed values. Then, what do we seek? We seek to fully seek—to fully embody the truth. We seek to become a perfect seeker—one who fully embodies the truth.

The *Larger Sutra* says that Dharmakara attained the “treasure” and became a Buddha. This means that Dharmakara fully embodied the truth of impermanence—that he became a perfect seeker and learner. Thus when Dharmakara became a Buddha, he became a Buddha by the name of *Namu Amida Butsu* (Bowing Amida Buddha). His name means that he has become a Buddha who is constantly “bowing his head before all Buddhas”—that he is constantly showing respect for them and learning from them. His name means the fulfillment of the deepest human aspiration—the aspiration to live a rich, full, and creative life. His spirit of perfect studentship pervades every corner of the Pure Land.

The second component of the Pure Land is the bodhisattvas (seekers), the people in the land. In the Pure Land there are innumerable bodhisattvas. They have come to the Pure Land from all the ten directions, because they wanted to emulate the spirit of Amida. In the Pure Land, Amida is constantly teaching the Dharma to them; and they are passionately and diligently listening to him.

The third component of the Pure Land is the things in the land, such as the ground, trees, rivers, lakes, and houses. Whenever things in the Pure Land make sounds, those sounds turn into the sounds of the Dharma. For example, whenever the ripples of rivers or the leaves of trees generate sounds, their sounds become the sounds of the Dharma. In this way, all things in the Pure Land are constantly teaching the Dharma to the people in the land.

To summarize, the essence of the three components of the Pure Land is the same; it is the Dharma, the truth of impermanence. Amida Buddha is a perfect seeker, an embodiment of the truth of impermanence, and his spirit of perfect studentship pervades everywhere; all people in the land are diligently learning to have his spirit; and everything in the land is teaching the Dharma.

What, then, does the Pure Land symbolize? When I read the above depiction of the Pure Land in the *Larger Sutra*, the term that immediately comes to my mind is “the

Sangha”—a place where a teacher and his students are wholeheartedly seeking the Dharma. I believe that the Pure Land is a symbol of “the Sangha.” This is probably the most concrete way of defining the Pure Land.

In this connection, I recollect the following words of Rev. Rijin Yasuda that he uttered in one of his lectures:

People say various things about birth in the Pure Land. But could there be any greater “birth in the Pure Land” than the fact that we are now sitting and learning the Dharma together? ... *This place where we are listening to the Dharma together is the Pure Land.* Our being allowed to be part of this place, of this Sangha, is “birth in the Pure Land.”

Do you think that you can have anything greater than this in your life—the fact that you are listening to the Dharma as a member of the Sangha? Some people may speak about the wonderful things to be obtained in the Pure Land after death, but those things are nothing but projections of human greed. The fact that we are privileged to be part of the Sangha is our liberation, our “birth in the Pure Land.”

Now I have said that the Pure Land is a symbol of the Sangha—a place where a teacher and his students are wholeheartedly seeking the Dharma. In short, it is a place where we can have true friends.

This definition of the Pure Land as the Sangha—as a place where we can have true friends, is consistent with the definition of the Pure Land by Shan-tao. Shan-tao defines this shore and the other shore (i.e., the Pure Land) in his famous parable of “The Two Rivers and White Path.” He defines this shore: “The wilderness where no human being is seen. One constantly follows evil friends, without ever meeting a true teacher.”ⁱⁱ He defines the other shore (i.e., the Pure Land): “The traveler immediately reaches the western shore; he meets his good friend(s), and his joy is limitless.”ⁱⁱⁱ Shan-tao explains that this shore symbolizes the world of loneliness or solitude where one does not have any true friend; the other shore (i.e., the Pure Land) symbolizes the world where one has true friends.

Thus, Buddhism simply confirms the importance of the truth that all of us already know—the truth that friends are important in our lives. The place where we can have true friends (the Sangha) is symbolized as “the Pure Land.” Entering such a place is called birth in the Pure Land. Having true friends is the greatest happiness and liberation taught in Buddhism. Buddhism does not talk about any greater happiness or liberation.

Why Did Dharmakara (or Amida) Create the Pure Land?

As far as Dharmakara’s aspiration for Buddhahood is concerned, he was no different from other bodhisattvas, because all bodhisattvas aspire to become Buddhas. But Dharmakara was different from other bodhisattvas in that he aspired to create the Pure Land, a Buddha-land. Then why did he create the Pure Land? It was because he was concerned with the liberation of the inferior—those who cannot easily attain liberation because of their heavy karmic evil, and he needed a Buddha-land *specifically* for them.

The *Larger Sutra* says that Dharmakara meditated for five *kalpas*—an inconceivably long time—to formulate his plan for creating a Buddha-land that is designed for the liberation of the inferior. If Dharmakara had been concerned only with the liberation of the religiously superior, he need not have meditated such a long time. An analogy is this.

It does not take a long time to discover cures for diseases like stomachaches; but it takes a long time to discover cures for diseases like AIDS. Likewise, Dharmakara had to meditate a long time in order to discover a cure for the incurable—in order to create a Buddha-land that is *specifically* designed for the liberation of the inferior.

Why, then, was it necessary for Dharmakara to create a Buddha-land for the liberation of the inferior? This question, I believe, is an extremely important question for those who wish to understand the basic features of Shin Buddhism. Let me answer this question with the following story.

Once upon a time there was a teenage boy named John in a country town in the state of Montana. From an early age, he wanted to become a dancer. He initially thought that he could become a professional dancer all by himself. Thus, having bought many books on dancing, he started to learn dance steps from them. But, since he was not very talented, it was not easy for him to reach his goal.

One day John met his uncle, whom he deeply respected. Having known that John was interested in dancing, his uncle told him, “John, there is a wonderful dance school named the Astaire Dance School in Hollywood. Please trust my words and go to Hollywood and enter the school. There are no requirements for admission. Just trust my words and enter it. If you enter the school, you’ll be surprised by the rapid progress you’ll make.”

Since John was a trusting boy, he trusted his uncle’s words. He went to Hollywood and entered the Astaire Dance School. When he entered the school, he was deeply impressed by it. The teacher and his students there had a tremendous passion for the art; they were all burning with the desire to perfect it. As soon as John entered the school, the passionate atmosphere there immediately influenced him. He could not help practicing dancing for hours and hours every day. Thus, although he was not exceptionally talented, he made rapid progress and became one of the best dancers in the school. And eventually he became a famous dancer; his name was known all over the country. He later started his own dance school and many young people came to study there.

I have created this story with the life of Shinran in mind. The Shin Buddhist implications of the story are as follows: John is Shinran; his uncle is Honen (Shinran’s teacher); the dance school is the Pure Land; entrance into the school is “birth in the Pure Land”; making rapid progress is “attaining the stage of non-retrogression,”^{iv} and becoming an accomplished dancer is “becoming a Buddha.”

This story shows that the school (i.e., the Pure Land) was important and indispensable for an ordinary person like John (i.e., Shinran), who did not have exceptional talent and could not reach his goal all by himself. Without entering the school (i.e., being born in the Pure Land) John could not find a way to become an accomplished dancer (i.e., a Buddha). It was not John’s abilities that realized his goal. It was the powerful and contagious atmosphere of the school, the power of the burning aspiration entertained by the teacher and students (i.e., Amida and the bodhisattvas) of the school, that totally transformed John. Thus, for an ordinary person like John, entrance into the school was quite important and necessary.

The chief doctrinal feature of Shin Buddhism is that it talks about the Pure Land. Amida, a symbol of limitless compassion, considered that those who are inferior needed a

place where they could become Buddhas. Thus he created the Pure Land specifically for them.

The Pure Land is a symbol of the Sangha. Birth in the Pure Land is a symbol of becoming part of the Sangha—a living Buddhist tradition that consists of great teachers. For those who consider themselves religiously superior, the Pure Land (the Sangha) may not be necessary. But for those who recognize the limitations of their abilities, the Pure Land has extremely important meaning. It is absolutely necessary. It is entirely due to the power they receive in the Pure Land that they are transformed into Buddhas.

What Is the Power of the Pure Land?

Here I want to discuss the specific meaning of the power of the Pure Land that transforms us. When I talk about the power of the Pure Land (or Amida Buddha) that transforms us, some people may think that I am talking about some mysterious power. But Buddhism is not a form of mysticism; there are no mysterious elements whatsoever in Buddhism. The power of the Pure Land means the power of the words of historical teachers, human teachers.

Shin Buddhism teaches us the importance of the words that we hear from our predecessors. It teaches us that *listening to their words alone* brings about our birth in the Pure Land and eventually our Buddhahood. In order to explain the Shin Buddhist emphasis on the exclusive importance of listening, let me talk about the process of making smoked salmon.

To make smoked salmon, we must first put salmon into a smoke box. Then, we must keep them in the box for several days. During that time those salmon will be exposed to the smoke. After several days, we take them out of the box and find that they have become smoked salmon.

The Buddhist implications of this example are as follows: salmon symbolizes us human beings; a smoke box symbolizes the Pure Land (the Sangha); entrance into a smoke box symbolizes birth in the Pure Land (the Sangha); and becoming perfectly smoked salmon symbolizes becoming Buddhas.

If salmon are put into a smoke box and kept there for a certain length of time, they will never fail to become full-fledged smoked salmon. It is not the talents or abilities of salmon that transform them into smoked salmon; it is the power of the smoke that transforms them into full-fledged smoked salmon.

Here two things are important: “smoke” and “exposure to the smoke.” In human life, the “smoke” means “words”; and “exposure to the smoke” means “listening to words.” Just as exposure to the smoke alone creates smoked salmon, *listening to the words alone* realizes Buddhahood.

As far as Shinran was concerned, his birth in the Pure Land meant not only that he became part of a specific historical fellowship that formed around Honen, but also that he became part of the great Buddhist tradition of the seven patriarchs to which Honen guided him. For Shinran the seven patriarchs were all Buddhas, i.e., historical appearances of Amida Buddha. It was through listening to their words alone that Shinran was able to become a Buddha. Thus, Shinran emphasized the exclusive importance of listening to their words. For example, at the end of his “*Verses of True Entrusting*,” he says, “Just entrust yourself to the words of these [seven] great monks say.”^v Here Shinran

indicates that “entrusting (*shin* or *shinjin*)” means “listening.” According to him, there was a tremendous joy in listening and listening alone realized Buddhahood.

The Pure Land (the Sangha) is a place where a living Buddhist tradition is maintained—a place where we are exposed to the words of our predecessors and are transformed into Buddhas. This spiritual transformation through listening is technically called “listening-perfuming (Skt. *shruti-vasana*).” Although all Buddhist schools emphasize the importance of listening, Shin Buddhism is unique in teaching that *listening alone* is necessary.

Who Can Be Born in the Pure Land?

Now let me discuss the last question, “Who can be born in the Pure Land?” I have earlier noted that Amida Buddha created the Pure Land specifically for the inferior—those who cannot attain liberation because of their heavy karmic evil. This means that only those who know the limitations of their abilities—who know themselves to be evil and ignorant—can be born in the Pure Land. Those who have moral or intellectual pride cannot be born there.

In other words, the only thing necessary for birth in the Pure Land is “bowing (*namu*).” Otherwise, one cannot be born in the Pure Land. To illustrate the importance of “bowing,” let me tell a story about Hideyoshi (1536-98, a samurai ruler of Japan) and Rikyu (1522-91, the systematizer of the art of the tea ceremony).

When Hideyoshi became the ruler of Japan, he summoned Rikyu, a famous tea master, to serve him as his tea maker. Rikyu is known as the original designer of the tea house. The tea house that Rikyu designed was a small cottage-like house, consisting of only two *tatami* mats. A tea master makes tea inside the house; and guests enter it through a tiny entrance. The design of the entrance is unique; it is located at the bottom of a wall. Thus when guests enter the house, they have to stoop to fit into the small entrance at the bottom of the wall. It looks as if the guests are bowing their heads before the tea master who sits inside the house.

Rikyu had deep insight into Buddhism. He knew that in order to enter a noble realm, one had to bow his head deeply. Rikyu knew that unless one became a bowing person, a humble person, he could not enter such a realm. He knew that “bowing” was the only requirement for entrance.

Thus the only thing that was necessary for Hideyoshi, the *shogun*, to enter the tea house was to bow—to enter it through the lowered entrance. He had to take off his samurai sword, which meant that he had to forget all about his power, fame, prestige, and pride. He had to become a naked human being, a humble and ignorant human being.

But Hideyoshi could not bow. He thought Rikyu was an arrogant teacher, demanding complete submission from the ruler of Japan. He thought that Rikyu demanded that the ruler of Japan bow his head before him. He thought that he could not take such a humiliating action before one of his subjects. Thus eventually, because of the antagonism and frustration that Hideyoshi felt towards Rikyu, he ordered Rikyu to commit *harakiri*. Having received the order, Rikyu committed *harakiri* and died. In order to enter the tea room the only thing necessary was “bowing.” But Hideyoshi could not do that.

The Pure Land is precisely like Rikyu’s tea house. It is the spiritual realm of *Namu Amida Butsu* (Bowling Amida Buddha). It is a land permeated with the “bowing (*namu*)”

spirit—a student’s spirit. In order to be born there (to be part of the Sangha), the only thing necessary is “bowing”—to become humble students.

Conclusion

The Pure Land is a symbol of the Sangha—a place where people are seriously seeking the Dharma. “Birth in the Pure Land” is a symbol of becoming part of the Sangha. Amida Buddha created the Pure Land *specifically* for the inferior. For the inferior, the Pure Land is indispensable. The power of the Pure Land means the power of the words of Buddhist predecessors. It is through “listening to their words alone” that one can realize Buddhahood. The only thing necessary for birth in the Pure Land, the land of *Namu Amida Butsu* (Bowling Amida Buddha), is “bowing.” Only a bowing person—a person who knows his own evilness and ignorance—can be born in the Pure Land.

No matter how capable a seed may be, it cannot sprout by itself. If a seed is placed on a rock, it will never sprout. It must have conditions such as heat, moisture, and light. The Pure Land (the Sangha) is the condition that enables us to sprout. It is by receiving power from the Pure Land, from the Sangha, that we can sprout and eventually bear fruit.

Realistically speaking, among the Three Treasures (i.e., the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha), the Sangha is the most important. Becoming a member of the Sangha, of a living tradition, is the most important thing in Buddhism. It is the Sangha that enables us to gain insight into the Buddha and the Dharma. Thus Shin Buddhism says that birth in the Pure Land (the Sangha) is the most important thing. Our birth in the Pure Land, our becoming part of the Sangha, is our liberation.

ⁱ *Taisho*, Vol. 12, p. 606 c23-25. Cf. *CWI*, pp. 108-9.

ⁱⁱ *Taisho*, Vol. 37, p. 273 a17-18. Cf. *CWI*, p. 90.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 273 a12-13. Cf. *CWI*, p. 90.

^{iv} *Taisho*, Vol. 83, p. 694 c25-p. 695 a3. Cf. *CWI*, p. 476

^v *Taisho*, Vol. 83, p. 600 c7. See above, p. (*note v)