

*West Los Angeles Buddhist Temple Centennial Commemorative Seminar
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“What Is Amida Buddha?”

Shin Buddhist Teaching of the Two Buddhas—Shakyamuni and Amida

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Introduction

A. Buddhism As a Teaching of Self-Examination

B. About the Topic of This Seminar

PART ONE

Shakyamuni’s Life and Teaching: The Three Dharma Marks

I. Shakyamuni’s Life (ca. B.C. 460-380)

(Age 1-29: His Life as a Prince)

In 460, born as a prince in a small kingdom in North India. His mother dies seven days after his birth. Witnesses the reality of human sufferings such as aging, sickness, and death. Meets a traveling monk by whom he is deeply moved. At age 29, renounces his secular life and becomes a seeker of the path.

(Age 29 -35: His Life of Learning and Ascetic Practice)

Visits spiritual leaders of his time and studies under them. Engages in yogic meditation and reaches the highest level of samadhi. Being unhappy with meditation practice, he abandons it. Takes up ascetic practices. Having deep doubts about traditional doctrines and practices, he renounces them.

(Age 35: Awakening)

Sits under a tree and meditates: he seriously examines the self—if he has the *atman*, the permanent self or soul. Then he learned that his body and his mind that consists of sensation, conception, volition, and consciousness were impermanent. When he understands the absoluteness of the Dharma

(Truth) of impermanence, he recognizes the mistake of believing in the existence of the *atman*. At age 35, he attains Awakening (*bodhi*) and becomes a Buddha (an Awakened One). He describes the content of his Awakening, saying, “My life is already spent. The Universal Working is already established.”

The Twofold Aspect of Shakyamuni’s Awakening

1. The negative aspect of his awakening: “My life is already spent”—spiritual death in which the permanent self (i.e., *atman*) is negated by the truth of impermanence.
2. The positive aspect of his awakening: “The Universal Working is already established”—spiritual birth in which the true self that is one with the truth of impermanence is realized.

(Age 35-80: Teaching Activities and Death)

Travels to many places in India and shares his teaching with people. At Kushinagara, he enters *parinirvana* at the age of 80.

II. Outline of Buddhism: The Three Dharma Marks

A. The Three Dharma Marks

1. Suffering (*Dukkha*)
2. Impermanence (*Anitya*)
3. Selflessness (*Anatman*)

B. The Yardstick for Judging the Authenticity of Buddhist Traditions

PART TWO

Shakyamuni Buddha’s Last Message and the Message Forgotten after the Teacher’s Passing

I. Shakyamuni Buddha’s Last Message: “Rely on the Dharma, Not on Human Beings.”

II. The Message Forgotten after the Teacher’s Passing

A. Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism and the Dharma-Centered Buddhism

B. Hinayana Buddhism—Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism

1. After Shakyamuni's passing, Shakyamuni's followers developed Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism out of deep respect for the teacher.
2. His followers identified Buddhism with his ideas and concepts (i.e., "finished products") that the teacher produced.
3. They categorized, systematized, and dogmatized Shakyamuni's teaching; his teaching became fixed, lifeless, and fossilized.

PART THREE

The Rise of Mahayana Buddhism and the Concept of "Amida"

I. The Rise of Mahayana Buddhism

A. Mahayana Criticism of the Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism of Hinayana

1. About three centuries after Shakyamuni's passing, Mahayana Buddhism appeared in India as a reaction and criticism against Hinayana Buddhism.
2. Mahayana Buddhists' focus was not so much on "the finished products" that Shakyamuni produced as on the Dharma (or the universal source of inspiration) that produced Shakyamuni.

B. Mahayana Buddhists' Attempts to Restore the Dharma-Centered Buddhism

II. The Concept of "Amida"

A. Mahayana Buddhists Symbolized the Dharma (or the Universal Source of Inspiration) as "Amida."

B. Prof. Ryojin Soga's Article: "The Buddhism Before Shakyamuni"

1. The Dharma was also symbolized as "Innermost Aspiration (i.e., the dynamic spirit of Bodhisattva Dharmakara)"—the basis of Buddhism.

2. **Shakyamuni was one of the many historical Buddhas who were awakened and liberated by the power of the Innermost Aspiration.**
3. **Shakyamuni's words: "There were 'seven (i.e., innumerable)' Buddhas before me."**
4. **According to Prof. Soga, Shinran's Buddhism is based on the view that Buddhism started with the Innermost Aspiration, not with Shakyamuni.**

C. Shin Buddhist Teaching of the Two Buddhas—Shakyamuni and Amida

1. **Only the Pure Land Buddhism, such as the Jodo-shu and Shin Buddhism, has the teaching of the two Buddhas. Other Buddhist traditions, such as Hinayana, Tendai, Kegon, Zen, and Nichiren, do not talk about the two Buddhas.**
2. **In Shin Buddhist temples, we see a statue of Amida, not that of Shakyamuni.**

D. What Does "Amida" Symbolize?

1. **"Amida" does not symbolize:**
 - a. A god (or divine being)
 - b. A historical person
2. **"Amida" symbolizes:**
 - a. The Dharma of impermanence
 - b. Universal Buddhahood—the universal spiritual basis of all historical Buddhas, such as Shakyamuni
 - c. The Innermost Aspiration, the spiritual basis of all humanity
 - d. The true self that is one with the Dharma. The goal of Buddhism is our becoming Amida Buddhas, not Shakyamuni Buddhas.