

Nembutsu in the Chinese Pure Land tradition

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Pure Land Buddhism

PURE land faith is a typical form of Mahayana Buddhism. In India and Central Asia it apparently enjoyed popularity and became one of the important forms of Buddhist faith. It has traditionally been oriented to the lay community rather than the clerical body, teaching the possibility of release from samsara and the way to accomplish this for those incapable of mastering clerical discipline, learning, and cultivation. The faithful of Pure Land Buddhism seek deliverance from the delusion and sufferings of samsara through transmigratory rebirth into a pure land—a spiritually pure realm where all conditions are conducive to spiritual progress—in which they can advance rapidly to enlightenment and Buddhahood. A pure land is of course presided over by a pure land Buddha, a supremely compassionate Buddha who under certain conditions brings sentient beings to rebirth in His land and guides them to enlightenment. Theoretically there are many pure lands and pure land Buddhas, but traditionally the Buddha Amida 阿弥陀¹ has been the dominant pure land Buddha, and His land, Gokuraku 極樂,² “Utmost Bliss,” the most important pure land.

Sentient beings, so it is believed, can attain rebirth in this pure land through a variety of means—faith, good works, devotion, ritual observance, aspiration, and so forth. Traditionally, however, the chief mode of rebirth has been *nem-*

¹ Skt., Amitābha, “Infinite Light,” or Amitāyus, “Eternal Life”; C., A-mi-t’o. All Buddhist terms—except those Sanskrit terms which have become English—will be Romanized according to their Japanese pronunciations, because it is only in the Japanese religious and scholarly traditions that the type of Buddhism discussed here has been kept alive. Chinese proper names, however, will be Romanized according to their Chinese pronunciations.

² Skt., Sukhāvati; C., Chi-lo.

bodai shin 發菩提心), practiced various meritorious works, have sincere faith, and have aroused their aspiration desiring to be born in my country, then I will not accept perfect enlightenment.

20. If I should become a Buddha and the sentient beings of the ten quarters who hear my name, reflect (*kenen* 緣念) on my country, store up a stock of merit, and sincerely dedicate it desiring to be born in my country do not achieve the result [of their merit dedication], then I will not accept perfect enlightenment.¹³

We will notice that these vows in effect specify certain practices and attitudes—faith, sincerity, nembutsu, merit accumulation, etc.—by which to achieve rebirth, or at least they were so interpreted in China. Vow eighteen became the most important because it was thought to illustrate most clearly the compassion of Amida Buddha in providing the easiest conditions for rebirth, just ten nembutsu. Other passages of this sutra also specify nembutsu as practice for rebirth, but even considered all together the nembutsu teachings of this sutra are rather terse and few. Setting aside the possibility that *nen* in these teachings means “instant”—one of its possible meanings—it ostensibly means “thought” or “think on.” However, it seems that the Chinese interpreters tended to consider *nen* (C., *nien*) as an abbreviation of nembutsu (C., *nien-fu*) and nembutsu as a broad technical term indicating not merely thinking on the Buddha, but meditative Buddha worship of any sort, for instance, contemplating His physical characteristics, reflecting on His excellencies, calling His name, or meditating on His absolute reality as suchness, emptiness, or *prajñā*.¹⁴ The meaning of the term *nen*, even though it literally means “think

¹³ T. 360, XII, 268a-b; see also *The Sacred Books of the East* (hereafter referred to as *SBE*), Vol. XLIX, Pt. II, p. 15. The numbering of the vows in the *SBE* version of the sutra is different from that of our Chinese version. Vow eighteen of the *SBE* corresponds to vow nineteen of our version, and vow nineteen of the *SBE* corresponds to vows eighteen and twenty of our version.

¹⁴ For example, see T'an-luan's famous interpretation of “one *nen*” (*icbi nen* 一念) in his *Commentary on the Vasubandhu Pure Land Sbastra* (*Ōjōron chū* 往生論註), T. 1819, XXXX, 834c. The teaching of the *Meditation Sutra* urging *ten vocal nembutsu* (T. 365, XII, 346a) undoubtedly contributed to the tendency to interpret the ten *nen* of the *Larger Sutra* as including vocal nembutsu. The *Meditation Sutra's* nembutsu teachings will be treated below.

on," "remember," etc., was therefore not necessarily limited for the Chinese to the simple meaning of thinking or reflecting on the Buddha. Thus the *Larger Sutra* opened the way for many interpretations and a rich growth of nembutsu thought.

We should note, finally, that this text provides for the rebirth of even the lowest beings. In particular, the eighteenth vow provides for the rebirth of all beings except the most depraved—patricides, etc.—and those who utterly reject the Buddhist faith.¹⁵ This is the fruit of Amida's immense bodhisattva endeavor. He has achieved not only his own deliverance but has also effectively provided for that of all mankind through the easy practice of only ten nembutsu.

The Smaller Pure Land Sutra (Smaller Sukhāvati vyūha sūtra) was probably compiled after the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* during the first century A.D. It was first translated into Chinese in 402 by Kumārajīva (C., *A-mi-t'fo ching*; Jap., *Amida Kyō* 阿彌陀經; T. 366). The text is a dialogue between Shakyamuni and Śāriputra. Shakyamuni tells Śāriputra about Amida, about His land, about how to be reborn there, and urges faith in Amida and aspiration to be reborn. Specifically he says that Amida is called Amida (Amitābha, Amitāyus) because His light (the splendor emanating from His aureole, from His various Buddha-marks, and from His body in general, which symbolizes His compassion) is boundless, illumining all Buddha-lands in all the ten quarters, because the length of His life is infinite, and because the number of beings in His land are infinite. Shakyamuni further says that Amida's land is called Utter Bliss (Skt., Sukhāvati; Jap., Gokuraku) because the beings in the land have no suffering and experience only pleasure. And he goes on to describe the various "meritorious adornments" (*kudoku sbōgan* 功德莊嚴) of the land which have been accomplished through Amida's long bodhisattva endeavor and which induce the beings of the land to progress quickly on the path of Buddhahood, such as the land's pavilions, groves, ponds, birds, et cetera.

Then, in the most important passage of the sutra, Shakyamuni declares that those who singlemindedly "hold" (*sbūji* 執持) the name of the Buddha for from one to seven days will on their deaths be welcomed by Amida Buddha and led

¹⁵ It rejects only those who have committed the five irreversible evils (*gogyaku* 五逆)—patricide, matricide, killing an arhat, shedding the blood of a Buddha, and destroying the harmony of the sangha—and those who malign the dharma (*hibō sbōbō* 謗謗正法).

to rebirth in the Pure Land.¹⁶ "Hold the name" can be interpreted as either meditation on the name, that is, meditative nembutsu, or invocation of the name, that is, vocal nembutsu.¹⁷ However, it is clearly not contemplative, or visional, nembutsu.

Later we will see that distinctions between these various types of nembutsu are important, because in both China and Japan a popular Pure Land movement developed emphasizing vocal nembutsu and rejecting contemplative nembutsu.

The *Meditation Sutra* is a late Mahayana work probably compiled in Central Asia or Chinese Turkestan as late as the fourth century. The only translation into Chinese was by Kālayāśas, between 424 and 453 (C., *Kuan wu-liang-shou-fu ching*; Jap., *Kan muryōjubutsu kyō* 観無量寿仏経; "Contemplation on the Buddha of Infinite Life Sutra"; T. 365). This is one of a number of sutras teaching contemplation which were introduced to China during the fifth and sixth centuries and provided concrete methods for contemplative nembutsu and Amida worship.

The *Meditation Sutra* begins with a long introductory section. It is related that one time when Shakyamuni was residing in Rājagrha, the crown prince of Rājagrha, Ajātasatru, imprisoned his father and mother, the king and queen, intending to kill them. The queen mother, Vaidehī, then prayed to the Buddha Shakyamuni for help and He miraculously came to her side to console her. Vaidehī thereupon asked to be taught of a place with no grief and suffering where she could be reborn in her next life. Shakyamuni presented her with a vision of Amida's Pure Land. She then asked for a way to meditate on that land so as to be reborn there. Shakyamuni Buddha's instructions are the famous thirteen contemplations on the Pure Land and Amida. Here are their traditional titles:

1. Sun contemplation (*Nikkan* 日観): Contemplation in sitting posture on the setting sun in the west, first with eyes open, then visualizing it clearly with eyes closed.
2. Water Contemplation (*Suikan* 水観): Contemplation on clear,

¹⁶ T. 366, XII, 347b.

¹⁷ The original Sanskrit of *sbūji* is *manaskāra*, "bearing or pondering in mind;" see Fujiwara, *Nembutsu sbisō*, pp. 35 and 38.

pure water developing into contemplation on various adornments of the Pure Land—banners, nets, pavilions, et cetera.

3. Ground contemplation (*Jikan* 地觀): Contemplation on the ground of the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss.
4. Treasure-Trees Contemplation (*Hōju kan* 宝樹觀): Contemplation on the trees of the Pure Land which are of seven treasure-gems.
5. Treasure-Pond Contemplation (*Hōchi kan* 宝池觀).
6. Treasure-Pavilion Contemplation (*Hōrō kan* 宝樓觀).
7. Lotus Dais Contemplation (*Keza kan* 華座觀): Contemplation on the lotus blossom dais of Amida Buddha which has eighty-four thousand petals of enormous size, each ornamented with countless colorful gems, and the whole covered with brilliant jewelled canopies, banners, and nets. The practitioner is instructed to contemplate each detail, such as the leaves and their veins, gems, et cetera, separately and to see them as clearly as his own face in a mirror.
8. Amida Buddha Image Contemplation (*Zōkan* 像觀): Contemplation of an image of Amida and of His attendant bodhisattvas, Kannon (Avalokiteśvara) and Daiseishi (Mahāsthāmaprāpta), in preparation for contemplation of Amida Buddha Himself.
9. True Body Contemplation (*Sbinsbin kan* 眞身觀): Contemplation on the Buddha-marks, light, et cetera, of Amida Buddha Himself.
10. Kannon Contemplation (*Kannon kan* 觀音觀).
11. Daiseishi Contemplation (*Daiseisbi kan* 大勢至觀).
12. General Contemplation (*Fukan* 非觀): Contemplation on one's own rebirth into the Pure Land and of all the sounds and sights thereof.
13. Mixed Contemplation (*Zōsō kan* 雜想觀): Contemplation on a sixteen-foot image of Amida, et cetera.

Here are the sutra's injunctions for accomplishing the central True Body Contemplation, number nine:

The Buddha [Shakyamuni] said to Ananda and Vaidehi, "When you have perfected this meditation (śō 想), you should next contem-

plate (*kan* 觀) the Buddha-marks and brilliance of the Buddha of Eternal Life. Ananda, this you must realize. The body of the Buddha of Eternal Life is of a gold color like a hundred trillion Jambu River sand golden Yama gods. The Buddha's body is as tall as six hundred thousand *nayutas*¹⁸ of Ganges Rivers' sands of *yojanas*¹⁹ tall. The luminous tuft of white hair [Buddha-mark] (*byakugō* 白毫) between his brows curls to the right in a volute as great as five Mount Sumerus. The Buddha's eyes are pure blue and bright as the water of the four great seas. The brilliance from the pores of his body is like Mount Sumeru. His aureole (*enkō* 円光) is like ten billion three-thousand-great-thousand-worlds (*sanzen daisen sekai* 三千大千世界) and within its brilliance are an infinite Ganges Rivers' sands of manifested Buddhas (*kebutsu* 化仏). Each manifested Buddha has innumerable manifested bodhisattvas as attendants. The Buddha of Eternal Life has eighty-four thousand major Buddha-marks like these; each major mark has eighty-four thousand minor Buddha-marks, and each minor mark has moreover eighty-four thousand rays of light. Each ray of light shines on the nembutsu practitioners of all the worlds of the ten quarters, taking them in and never abandoning them.

These rays of light, major and minor marks, and manifested Buddhas cannot be fully told of. You should just meditate (*akusō* 憶想) and see them in your mind's eye. If you see these, you will see all the Buddhas of the ten quarters. Seeing all Buddhas is called nembutsu-samadhi. Achieving this contemplation is called contemplating all Buddha-bodies. By contemplating the Buddha-bodies we also see (*ken* 見) the Buddha-heart. The Buddha-heart is Great Compassion. It is unconditioned compassion embracing all sentient beings. When those who contemplate like this abandon their bodies [die], they will in another life be born before all the Buddhas and attain realization of non-birth-non-production (*musōnin* 無生忍). Therefore the wise will concentrate their hearts and clearly contemplate the Buddha of Eternal Life.

If you would contemplate the Buddha of Eternal Life, gain entrance

¹⁸ *Nayuta* means one hundred billion.

¹⁹ A *yojana* is usually considered to be about nine miles or the distance yoked oxen can travel in a day.

by proceeding from one Buddha-mark. Just contemplate the tuft of luminous hair between the Buddha's brows. If you see (*ken* 見) the tuft of luminous hair between the brows with perfect clarity, all eighty-four thousand major and minor marks will naturally appear. To see the Buddha of Eternal Life is to see all the infinite Buddhas of the ten quarters. And to attain a vision (*toku ken* 得見) of all the infinite Buddhas is to receive before all Buddhas a prophecy [of future Buddhahood]. This [contemplation] is the complete contemplation of all Buddha-marks (*sbiki sō* 色想)²⁰ called the ninth contemplation. Contemplating thus is called correct contemplation. Any other contemplation is to be called a wrong contemplation."²¹

This is the culmination of the *Meditation Sutra's* teaching on Buddha contemplation. Along with the other twelve contemplations, it had an immense effect, both as inspiration and practical instruction, on the Pure Land movement. We should not further that most of the contemplations end with a formula like, "If one perfects this contemplation he will cancel fifty billion kalpas of samsaric sinful deeds and will surely be reborn in the Pure Land of Utter Bliss."²² The rebirth taught by the *Meditation Sutra* depends ultimately on the compassion of Amida Buddha, but it operates according to the principles of karma cancellation and merit accumulation through nembutsu.

At the close of the thirteenth contemplation the subject of the sutra abruptly shifts from the method of contemplation to a classification of types of beings and the requirements for, and nature of, their rebirth into the Pure Land. All sentient beings are classified into nine grades according to their faith, practice, and manner of rebirth. They are divided into three groups, each group containing three grades of rebirth. Here is the sutra's description of the rebirth of the upper group's upper grade of beings:

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidehī, "The upper group's upper grade of beings are those sentient beings who resolve to be born in that land, arouse the three devotional hearts (*sanshin* 三心) and are

²⁰ *Sō* 想 seems to be an error for *sō* 相; see T., XII, 343c, n. 31.

²¹ T., XII, 343b-c; *SBE*, Vol. XLIX, Pt. II, pp. 179-180.

²² T., XII, 343a.

therefore reborn. What are the three? The first is sincerity; the second is deep faith; the third is dedicating [merit] and longing [for rebirth]. If they possess the three devotional hearts, they will necessarily be reborn in that country.

There are also three types of beings [within this grade] who will attain rebirth. What are these three? The first is [beings who] compassionately do not kill and who keep the precepts. The second is [beings who] recite the Mahayana Vaipulya scriptures. The third is [beings who] practice the six reflections (*roku nen* 六念), and dedicate their merit in longing for rebirth. If they maintain this merit for from one to seven days, they will then attain rebirth. When they are reborn in that country, because these men have striven diligently, Amida Tathāgata with Kannon, Daiseishi, innumerable manifested Buddhas, a great host of a hundred thousand bhikshus and shramanas, and innumerable devas and seven-jewel palaces, will come and appear before the practitioner, Kannon bodhisattva and Daiseishi bodhisattva holding a golden dais. Amida Buddha will release a great beam of light illumining the practitioner's body and with all the bodhisattvas will offer his hand in welcome. Kannon and Daiseishi with innumerable bodhisattvas will praise the practitioner and encourage him. When the practitioner sees this he will dance for joy. He will find himself riding the golden dais. Following after the Buddha, in the snap of a finger he will be reborn in that country. When he has been reborn in that country he will see that Buddha's physical body with all its Buddha-marks, and he will see all the bodhisattvas' bodies with their marks. The light and the treasure trees will preach the wondrous dharma, and when he has heard this he will become enlightened to the realization of non-birth-non-production. In the interval of an instant he will travel to and serve all the Buddhas in all the realms of the ten quarters, will before each Buddha receive a prophecy [of his future Buddhahood], and will return to the original country, obtaining the teaching on the hundred thousand dharanis. This is called the upper grade of the upper group."²³

²³ T., XII, 344c-345a; *SBE*, Vol. XLIX, Pt. II, pp. 189-90.

This is a description of the faith, discipline, and rebirth of the very best of sentient beings. The three devotional hearts (*san shin* 三心) in particular became very important as the standard of Pure Land faith. The succeeding grades of beings gradually decline from this excellence until for the lowest grade of the lowest group is described the evil life and inferior manner of rebirth of the worst beings:

The Buddha said to Ananda and Vaidhei, "The lower group's lower grade of beings are those sentient beings who commit evil karma such as the five irreversible evils,²⁴ the ten violations,²⁵ and all other evils. Because of his bad karma a foolish man such as this ought to descend into a bad existence [in the next life] and spend many kalpas receiving limitless suffering. When such a foolish man is about to die, he will meet a good friend and teacher who will console him in various ways preaching the good dharma and urging him to nembutsu. But oppressed with sufferings this man will not be able to nembutsu. Then the good friend and teacher will say, 'If you can't *nen* you should call (*shō* 称), "Buddha of Eternal Life." In this way, not letting your voice cease, accomplish ten *nen* calling (*shō* 称) "Namu Amida Butsu.'" Because of calling the Buddha's name, with each *nen* he will cancel eight billion kalpas of samsaric sinful deeds. At the end of his life he will see before him a golden lotus blossom [dais] like the sun's disk and in an instant he will attain rebirth in the Land of Utmost Bliss. He will remain in the [closed] lotus blossom for a full twelve great kalpas and then the lotus blossom will open. With a voice of great compassion, Kannon and Daiseishi will preach for him the dharma on Suchness (*shobō jissō* 诸法实相) and on the cancellation of sinful karma (*jometsu zaibō* 除滅罪法). When he has heard this, he will rejoice and immediately arouse the *bodhi*-mind. This is called the lower grade of the lower group. . . ."²⁶

The exact meaning of "ten *nen*" in "accomplish ten *nen* calling, 'Namu Amida

²⁴ See above, p. 15, n. 15.

²⁵ Usually listed as killing, stealing, adultery, lying, double-tongue, coarse language, filthy language, covetousness, anger, and perverted views.

²⁶ T., XII, 346a-b; SBE, Vol. XLIX, Pt. II, pp. 197-99.

Butsu' " is unclear. It can mean ten instants, ten times, ten thoughts, or ten nembutsu. But by coupling "*nen*" with "call" this passage emphatically teaches rebirth by *vocal* nembutsu, that is, by invocation of the sacred formula *Namu Amida Butsu*. Moreover this invocational nembutsu is prescribed as practice for rebirth for the very lowest of mortals. Later we will see how important this teaching became in the hands of the Chinese Pure Land teachers.

Thus the *Meditation Sutra's* teachings on nembutsu encompass an extremely broad range. They set out both the difficult, contemplative nembutsu of the thirteen contemplations and also an easy vocal nembutsu for those incapable of contemplation. This breadth has undoubtedly been one of the reasons for its great popularity and influence.

Another text of great importance for its teachings on nembutsu is the so-called *Vasubandhu Pure Land Sbastra*. This is a text attributed to Vasubandhu (ca. fifth century A.D.), and was translated in 529 A.D. by Bodhiruci (C., *Wu-liang-sbou-ching yu-p'o-t'i-sbe yüan-sheng chieh*; Jap., *Muryōjūkyō ubadaisha ganshō ge* 無量壽經優婆提舍願生偈; "*Gatha in Aspiration for Rebirth Interpreting the Larger Pure Land Sutra*"; T. 1524; also known as the *Ōjō Jōdo ron* 往生淨土論, *Ōjō ron*, and *Jōdo ron*). The work consists of a short verse section expressing aspiration for rebirth and praising Amida and his land, and a somewhat longer prose section purporting to interpret the verse. The gist of the prose section is its teaching on the fivefold nembutsu (*gonen mon* 五念門). This is a complex of nembutsu centered practices presented as a way to attain rebirth. Here is a translation of the passage setting out the fivefold nembutsu:

If a good man or a good woman practices the fivefold nembutsu, when his practice has been accomplished he will gain rebirth in the Land of Peace and Bliss and behold Amida Buddha. What is the fivefold nembutsu? The first is nembutsu-veneration (*raibai mon* 禮拜門), the second is nembutsu-praise (*sandan mon* 讚嘆門), the third is nembutsu-aspiration (*sagan mon* 作願門), the fourth is nembutsu-contemplation (*kanzatsu mon* 觀察門), the fifth is nembutsu-dedication (*ekō mon* 廻向門).

What is veneration? It is venerating with physical karma Amida, the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Perfectly Enlightened One, wishing to be born in that country.

What is praise? It is praising with oral karma, calling that Tathāgata's name, [praising Him] for His light and wisdom and for the significance of His name, desiring truly to practice in accord [with His excellence].

What is aspiration? It is from the heart always aspiring and single mindedly *nen-ing* in order to eventually be reborn in the Land of Peace and Bliss, desiring to truly practice *śamatha*.²⁷

What is contemplation? It is with wisdom properly *nen-ing* and contemplating that [land and Buddha], desiring to truly practice *vipaśyanā*. There are three kinds of contemplation: (1) Contemplating that land's meritorious adornments (*kudoku sbōgon* 功德莊嚴), (2) contemplating Amida Buddha's meritorious adornments, and (3) contemplating that [land's] bodhisattvas' meritorious adornments.

What is dedication? It is vowing not to abandon suffering sentient beings, but with dedication [of one's own merit to them for their rebirth] as the source perfecting the great compassionate heart.²⁸

This broadly inclusive yet concise statement of Pure Land practice became in China and Japan something of a standard or classic formulation of nembutsu. It considerably influenced later masters, even though they often departed from its rigorous demands to devise simpler forms of Pure Land worship. Here we should note that the fivefold nembutsu centers on contemplation of Amida and His land, that is, on contemplative nembutsu. However, vocal nembutsu is also taught as an aspect of nembutsu-praise. In addition to these thorough Pure Land texts there are others which were important for Pure Land thought in China. Among sutras there are such works as the *Buddha Contemplation Samādhi Ocean Sutra* (Skt., *Buddha dhyāna samādhi sāgara sūtra*; C., *kuan-fu san-mei bai cbing*; Jap., *Kambutsu zammai kai kyō* 觀仏三昧海經; T. 643), and the *Bodhisattva Nembutsu-samādhi Sūtra* (Skt., *Bodhisattva buddhānusmṛti samādhi sūtra*; C., *P'u-sa nien-fu san-mei cbing*; Jap., *Bosatsu nembutsu zammai kyō* 菩薩念仏三昧經; T. 414).

²⁷ *Śamatha* means quiescence or tranquillity. It is usually found coupled with *vipaśyanā*, which means insight or realization (*vipaśyanā* occurs just below, *śamatha* at the description of *nembutsu*-contemplation). *Śamatha-vipaśyanā* is a traditional form of meditation where the mind is quieted permitting insight and realization.

²⁸ T., XXVI, 231b.

Among shastras containing important nembutsu teachings are the *Mahā prajñā pāramitā śāstra* (C., *Ta chib-tu ching*; Jap., *Dai chido ron* 大智度論; T. 1509), and the *Sbastra on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages* (Skt., *Daśabbūmika vibhāṅgā śāstra*; C., *Sbib-chu k'un-p'o-sba lun*; Jap., *Jūjū bibasba ron* 十住毘婆沙論; T. 1521). These texts teach nembutsu-samadhi and kambutsu-samadhi—virtually identical terms—which consist of contemplation of the Buddhas in first their apparent and then their absolute aspect. Contemplation of the apparent aspect often takes the form of visualization of a Buddha's thirty-two Buddha-marks, and contemplation on the absolute aspect becomes deep meditation on the Dharma-body or Suchness (*tathā, jissō* 實相) of the Buddha. In contra-distinction to the more thorough Pure Land texts described above, however, these texts do not exclusively focus on rebirth as the goal of nembutsu practice and they do not center on Amida alone but generally direct their nembutsu to all the Buddhas of the ten quarters.

One exception is the ninth chapter of the *Sbastra on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages*, the "Chapter on the Easy Practice" (C., "I-hsing p'in"; Jap., "Igyō bon" 易行品). It distinguishes clearly between the Pure Land Way and other ways to enlightenment, teaching that there is the difficult way of bodhisattva practice and the easy way of nembutsu. Moreover, it urges vocal nembutsu and centers on Amida Buddha. The teachings of this chapter were very important for the development of an independent, popular Pure Land movement in China.

We have now outlined the nembutsu teachings of the major Pure Land sutras and shastras. We can see that nembutsu embraces a considerable range of practices. In general, we can distinguish in these texts three types of nembutsu: (1) contemplative nembutsu—visualizing the Buddha Amida or His attributes, as is taught, for instance, in the True Body Contemplation of the *Meditation Sutra*; (2) invocational nembutsu—reciting the name of the Buddha with the sacred formula *Namu Amida Buddha*, as in the passage on the lowest grade of the lowest group of beings of the *Meditation Sutra*; and (3) meditational nembutsu—thinking or dwelling on the Buddha or his attributes or his non-objectifiable ultimate nature without either visualizing these or reciting his name, as is taught to one degree or another in almost all the Pure Land sutras. These types of nembutsu are often taught in conjunction of course, and moreover, we should bear in mind that in any particular passage we are often quite

unable to determine which of these three basic types is intended. In fact, we have seen how in the Chinese translations the terms *nen* and nembutsu (C., *nien-fu*) were amenable to broad interpretations as nembutsu in general, or even as a particular one of these three types of nembutsu according to the predilection of the interpreter.

The relation of types of nembutsu to types of beings—within the framework of nembutsu as the medium of communion between beings and Buddha—is also an important aspect of the teachings of these sutras. We have seen that the *Larger Sutra* and the *Meditation Sutra* teach that even the lowest of sentient beings can attain rebirth by nembutsu. These conceptions of nembutsu and beings and their mutual relation were the fundamental ideas that the Chinese masters dealt with in shaping an indigenous Pure Land movement. Let us proceed to examine that movement.

The Chinese Development of Pure Land Buddhism

Introduction and early development

Pure Land Buddhism was probably among the earliest forms of Buddhism introduced to China. It was popular in North West India and Chinese Turkestan, and some of the first texts translated into Chinese were Pure Land sutras. The *Larger Sutra* is recorded as having been translated in 147–86, 223–28, 252, 258, 308, 419, 421 (twice), and 424–41.²⁹ It would seem that there was considerable Pure Land faith, particularly centering around the *Larger Sutra*. However, Pure Land faith of the period from the first to the fourth century, like that of Buddhist faith generally, seems to have been mixed with magico-religious Taoistic folk beliefs such as belief in immortals, in the Yellow Emperor, in healing, and so forth. Moreover, what pure faith there was, such as that of the celebrated priest Chih-tun 支遁 (314–366), was not at all exclusive but was held along with other Buddhist faiths, such as faith in Maitreya, or it accompanied a search for *prajñā pāramitā* wisdom. As with the Buddhist movement in general, Pure Land Buddhism had to await two reforming influences—that from within of Tao-an 道安 and his disciple, Hui-yüan 慧遠, and that from without of Kumārajīva.

²⁹ Tsukamoto, *Fuan to gongu*, pp. 50–51.

Kumārajīva (343-412) arrived in the northern capital Chang-an in 401. His arrival marked the end of the period of preparatory assimilation of Buddhism in China and the beginning of a period of mature development.³⁰ His contribution was twofold. First, he translated scores of important Mahayana texts authoritatively and in a good Chinese style. Secondly, he transmitted for the first time clearly and correctly the Nāgārjuna systemization of *prajñā pāramitā* thought, the Mādhyamika doctrine. Both contributions were important for the development of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.³¹ First, Kumārajīva translated the *Smaller Pure Land Sutra* and also the *Sbastra on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages* and the *Prajñā pāramitā lāstra* which contain important Pure Land teachings. In his role as transmitter of the true Mādhyamika doctrine, Kumārajīva helped to purify and enrich the Chinese understanding of Pure Land conceptions. We have noted that Pure Land faith was confounded with Taoist and magico-religious beliefs. Up until Kumārajīva's arrival this was true of Buddhist faith in general. Particularly the concept of *śūnyatā*—void or emptiness—the key term of *prajñā pāramitā* thought, was confused with the Lao-tzu-Chuang-tzu idea of “nothingness” (*wu* 無). In his teachings and translations, Kumārajīva for the first time clearly distinguished *śūnyatā* from *wu* and clearly expressed in Chinese the meaning of *śūnyatā*. He also incorporated Pure Land thought into this genuine Mādhyamika position. Kumārajīva interpreted Amida Buddha as an expression of *śūnyatā* and recommended nembutsu as a means of realizing *śūnyatā* or ultimate wisdom, *prajñā*.

However, it was Hui-yüan (334-416) who transformed Kumārajīva's theory into practice. In 402 Hui-yüan, together with one hundred and twenty-three fellow believers, lay and cleric, organized a nembutsu society, later called the White Lotus Society, centering on Amida and dedicated to achieving nembutsu-samadhi and *prajñā* realization. Their nembutsu practice was contemplative in nature. That is, they meditated on the appearance of Amida—first perhaps using an image and then just their mind's eye—attempting to attain a vision

³⁰ For a good, concise treatment of Kumārajīva's career see Tsukamoto, *Fuan to gongu*, pp. 52-55.

³¹ Kumārajīva's and Hui-yüan's contributions to Pure Land Buddhism are well treated by Mochizuki Shinkō, *Cbūgoku Jōdo kyōri shi*, pp. 24-28, and Ishida Mitsuyuki, *Jōdokyō kyōrisbi*, pp. 49-56. Also see Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, I, 86-91, 145-158, and 219-255.

of the actual Buddha Amida and to realize the ultimate *śūnyatā* or voidness and absolute truth embodied in Amida Buddha as representative of all Buddhas and Buddha-nature. This realization and also the process to it was known as nembutsu-samadhi. The source of this nembutsu as well as Kumārajīva's theorization of it was the *Seeing All Buddha's Samadhi Sutra* which we have mentioned as teaching both *prajñā pāramitā* ideas and Pure Land faith.

However, the members of Hui-yüan's White Lotus Society were all privileged clerics or educated gentry, and the Society had no direct influence on the religious beliefs or practices of its time. Moreover, we should point out that his Pure Land faith was neither exclusive nor thorough. The purpose of his nembutsu was *prajñā* realization and not rebirth. His Amida worship and nembutsu practice were but a means to achieve a goal alien to Pure Land faith—immediate enlightenment in the present incarnation by one's own efforts independent of the compassion and vows of Amida Buddha. Yet Hui-yüan's nembutsu-society had great significance for the development of Pure Land Buddhism in China and Japan. First, as we have noted, it actualized Kumārajīva's Pure Land formulations, firmly grounding Pure Land faith and practice on genuine and fundamental Mahayana principles and purifying these of magico-religious and Taoistic elements. Secondly, Hui-yüan's contemplative nembutsu-samadhi became the prototype for a nembutsu method, the T'ien-ta'i Constantly Walking Samadhi, which later became the foundation of nembutsu practice in Japan. Furthermore, the White Lotus Society served as an inspiration for Pure Land faith and as a model for countless later nembutsu-societies.

We have traced the development of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism through the period of introduction. Let us proceed to outline the development of an independent Pure Land movement.

An Independent Pure Land movement: The Sui-Tang school

The founder of an independent and genuine Pure Land movement in China was T'an-luan 曇鸞 (476-542).³² His major work is the *Commentary on the Vasubandhu Pure Land Sastra* (C., *Wang-sbeng lun chü*; Jap., *Öjōron chū* 往生論註;

³² The best treatment of the thought of the Chinese Pure Land masters is to be found in Mochizuki, *Chūgoku Jōdo kyōri shi*.

T. 1819). Though based on the *Vasubandhu Sbastra*, it draws heavily on other basic Pure Land texts also. In this work T'an-luan clearly drew out the distinction between the difficult path of bodhisattvas and the easy Pure Land path first taught in the "Chapter on the Easy Practice" of the *Sbastra on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages*, making this the distinguishing principle of an independent Pure Land movement. He pointed out that the difficult way is based on self-power and the Pure Land Way on other-power, that is, on Amida Buddha's power of salvation operating through His original vows.³³ The significance of his position can be most clearly seen if we compare it to that of Hui-yüan. Hui-yüan used nembutsu as a means to achieve *prajñā* wisdom by his own self-efforts. T'an-luan considered nembutsu the best practice for salvation, that is, for rebirth, because nembutsu is the easiest practice through the power of Amida's compassionate vows.

T'an-luan taught contemplative nembutsu as did Hui-yuan but did not limit nembutsu to this type of practice. He apparently interpreted *nen* of the eighteenth vow's "ten nen" as nembutsu in general and taught that rebirth could be achieved through meditative, contemplative, or invocational nembutsu.³⁴ He interpreted "ten" of "ten nen" as indicating merely sincere, single minded, continuous practice, that is, as easy practice suitable for common, lower grade, less capable beings.³⁵ In this way he strongly affirmed the possibility of rebirth for the common man and also opened the way for an interpretation of the *nen* of the eighteenth vow as invocational nembutsu. Archeological evidence shows that from about the time of T'an-luan's Pure Land ministry and in the locality where he labored Amida Pure Land worship increased strikingly.³⁶ He not only laid the doctrinal foundation for an independent Pure Land movement but also initiated a tide of popular Pure Land faith.

T'an-luan's spiritual successor was Tao-ch'ö 道綽 (562-645). Tao-ch'ö is the first thinker of a group we shall call the Sui-T'ang Pure Land school. The members of this group share certain important characteristics and are notable for formulating and popularizing a vigorous Pure Land movement that spanned

³³ T., XXXX, 826a-b, 843c-844a.

³⁴ T., XXXX, 834c.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Sketch*, pp. 170-173; Ch'en summarizes the results of Tsukamoto Zenryū's studies.

the Sui Dynasty (589–618) and the first century of the T'ang Dynasty (618–907).

Tao-ch'ō become converted to Pure Land faith when he read of T'an-luan's career on his grave monument. In his only surviving work, the *Collection on Sukhāvati* (C., *An-lo chi*; Jap., *Anraku shū* 安樂集; T. 1958), Tao-ch'ō clearly shows his spiritual descent from T'an-luan by giving T'an-luan's distinction between the easy Pure Land path and the difficult bodhisattva path a cosmological-historical justification. Buddhist cosmology early adopted the Indian idea of evolving world cycles and formulated the doctrine that there would come about a period of cosmic decline during which the dharma, that is, the Buddhist religion, would also decay, known as "the latter age of the Law" (*mappō* 末法). Many people in Tao-ch'ō's age, including Tao-ch'ō himself, passionately believed that this time had come. Tao-ch'ō related this view to the easy Pure Land Way singled out by T'an-luan and claimed that the Pure Land Way (*Jōdo mon* 淨土門), in addition to being easy, is the only possible way to salvation in the latter age of the Law. All non-Pure Land teachings he characterized as the Way of Saintly Self-endeavor (*sbōdō mon* 聖道門) suitable to an earlier age but utterly futile in the present. Moreover, he related this cosmological-historical view to a theory of man. He emphasized that the potential of sentient beings—whom he characterized as "common beings" (*bombu* 凡夫)—had also declined in the present age and that such "common beings" were no longer capable of the sustained effort and discipline necessary to reach enlightenment by their own efforts. And finally, what is most significant for our study, he urged vocal, invocational, nembutsu as the best of all Pure Land practices for such beings in such an age.³⁷ Thus he succeeded in providing a clear rational or justification for exclusive adherence to Pure Land faith and practices and especially to the easy practice of invocational nembutsu. In spite of this thorough stand, however, he did not found a Pure Land sect, nor did he abandon contemplative nembutsu. His total nembutsu position is rather obscure, but he clearly valued *nembutsu-kambutsu-samadhi* very highly, apparently assigning it to more capable beings and urging simple vocal nembutsu for the great mass of spiritually incapable mankind.³⁸

³⁷ T., XLVII, 42-b.

³⁸ T., XLVII, 6b-7a, 8a-9b, 11c.

Tao-ch'ò's disciple Shan-tao 善導 (613-681), the most famous and prolific member of the Sui-T'ang Pure Land school, brought independent Chinese Pure Land thought to its highest point. He left five works, three of which will concern us here because they contain the most important of his teachings. Fortunately these works show a development from earlier to later thought, and thus we may treat them singly.³⁹

The *Amida Buddha Nembutsu-samadhi Contemplation Method* (C., *Kuan-nien A-mi-t'ò-fu-bhsiang bai-san-mei kung-te fa-men*; Jap., *Kannen Amidabutsusō kaizammai kudoku bōmon* 觀念阿彌陀仏相海三昧功德法門; T. 1959; usually shortened to *Kannen bōmon*) is apparently an early work. As the title suggests it sets out a practical method of nembutsu contemplation. This method, based largely on the *Seeing All Buddhas Samadhi Sutra* and the *Meditation Sutra*, instructs the practitioner to perform nembutsu for an uninterrupted period of seven days, only standing or sitting and never sleeping, but just incessantly contemplating the Buddha-marks of Amida Buddha while calling his name in the hope of attaining a vision of Him. The purpose is to accumulate merit, cancel bad karma, and become assured of rebirth in Amida's Pure Land.⁴⁰ We might say that it is a thoroughly Pure Land form of the contemplative nembutsu first taught in China by Hui-yüan. Yet the concern for the less capable common man and high regard for vocal nembutsu which we found in T'an-luan and Tao-ch'ò and which are characteristics of the Sui-T'ang school are hardly to be found here. We have instead a rather formalistic contemplative nembutsu method better suited to disciplined clergy than to common laymen.

Shan-tao's *Hymns to Rebirth* (C., *Wang-sbeng li-tsan chieh*; Jap., *Ōjō raisan ge* 往生礼讚偈; T. 1980) reveals a more mature stage of thought. As an introduction to the six hymns in this work Shan-tao sets out a summary of the faith, practice, and mode of practice (*anshin kigyō sagō* 安心起行作業) necessary for rebirth. As Pure Land faith he urges the three devotional hearts of the *Meditation Sutra*, as practice the fivefold nembutsu of the *Vasubandhu Pure Land Sbastra*, and as mode of practice the so-called "four modes of practice" (*sbisbu bō* 四修法)—lifelong, reverent, ceaseless, and exclusive practice. The key to Zendo's entire thought is to be found here in his interpretation of the *Meditation Sutra's*

³⁹ See Fujiwara, *Nembutsu Sbisō*, pp. 204-09.

⁴⁰ T., XLVII, 242-b.

three devotional hearts, particularly the second of these, deep faith (*jinsbin* 深心). This is how he formulates "deep faith":

The second, deep faith, is true faith (*shinjitsu shinjin* 眞實信心). It is deep conviction (*shinchi* 信知), that [on the one hand] we ourselves are passion ridden common beings (*bombu* 凡夫), lacking of good roots, transmigrating in the triple world⁴¹ unable to escape this burning house, and because [on the other hand] it is deep faith (*shinchi* 信知), without even a single moment of doubt, that now by Amida's great original vows and by calling Amida's name as few as ten times or even once, we will surely gain rebirth.⁴²

We see that Shan-tao interprets deep faith as, on the one hand, deep conviction of our own inferiority as *bombu* common beings. Shan-tao himself had a passionate conviction of the insurmountable karmic burden of sentient beings, of their deep delusion folly and greed, of their passion stained nature, one might even say sinful nature. All this he summed up in the term *bombu* 凡夫, inferior, unworthy, common being. This conviction of human fallibility seems to have been one of the sources of his fervent Pure Land faith and powerful mission. The other source, as we see in his interpretation of "deep faith," was his faith in the saving power of Amida Buddha through the agency of his vows, especially the eighteenth vow which he read as promising rebirth by *vocal* nembutsu. This interpretation, and particularly the reading of the eighteenth vow as just vocal nembutsu, was a very significant step in the development of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist thought.

We will recall that T'an-luan included vocal nembutsu within the range of the eighteenth vow's nembutsu teachings, and that Tao-ch'ao urged vocal nembutsu as especially appropriate for common beings. Here in his explanation of "deep faith" Shan-tao interprets the eighteenth vow as teaching *only* vocal nembutsu, and moreover considers *all* beings as common *bombu*. This is tantamount to taking the position that the only proper religious endeavor for all sentient beings is invocation of the sacred name of Amida Buddha. However, in the *Hymns to Rebirth* Shan-tao does not explicitly take this position. He still

⁴¹ The *sangai* 三界; the world of samsara.

⁴² T., XLVII, 438c.

urges the practice of contemplative nembutsu also.⁴³ But he does explicitly insist on exclusive Pure Land faith and practice, rejecting all other forms of Buddhist belief and endeavor.⁴⁴

It is only in his *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra* (C., *Kuan wu-liang-shou-fu-ching shu*; Jap., *Kan muryōjubutsukyō sho* 觀無量壽仏經疏; T. 1753) that Shan-tao took the extreme Pure Land position for which he is most famous. In the last chapter of this four chapter work he raises vocal nembutsu to the position of the only proper and necessary practice for rebirth. He does not reject contemplative nembutsu entirely, but relegates it—together with reciting Pure Land texts, ritual veneration (*raibai*), ritual worship (*kuyō*), and praise of Amida Buddha—to the role of an assisting practice. All other forms of worship and practice are rejected.⁴⁵ This is the most thorough position Chinese Pure Land Buddhist thought was to achieve. It was only in Japan that a more thoroughly popularized position was reached.

There are two other prominent members of what we are calling the Sui-T'ang Pure Land School. They are Chia-ts'ai 迺才, a contemporary of Shan-tao, who left a text entitled *Treatise on the Pure Land* (C., *Ching-t'u lun*; Jap., *Jōdo ron* 淨土論; T. 1963), and Huai-kan 懷感 (d. ca. 710), Shan-tao's one-time disciple, who wrote a work called *Interpretations on the Multitude of Pure Land Problems* (C., *Sbib ching-t'u chun-i lun*; Jap., *Shaku jōdo gungi ron* 釈淨土群疑論, T. 1960). In general they did not go beyond the position of Shan-tao's forerunner Tao-ch'ō. They valued vocal nembutsu highly, especially for *bombu* common beings, but considered contemplative nembutsu or *nembutsu-kambutsu-samadhi* to be a superior form of practice.⁴⁶

In summary we can say that the distinguishing characteristics of the Sui-T'ang Pure Land school—in addition to its exclusive adherence to Pure Land faith and practices—were a great concern for the salvation of the ordinary man and high regard for the efficacy of vocal nembutsu, an exercise which they considered within the capacity of even the least spiritually capable of men.

⁴³ It is included in "practice" (*Kigyō*); *ibid.*

⁴⁴ T., XLVII, 439c.

⁴⁵ T., XXXVII, 272a-b.

⁴⁶ For characteristic nembutsu teachings of Chia-ts'ai see T. 1963, XLVII, 89-90a; for those of Huai-kan see T. 1960, XLVII, 59c-60a, 70c, 75c-d, and 76b-c.

NEMBUTSU IN THE CHINESE PURE LAND TRADITION

The significance of this movement is that in China it most nearly fulfilled the true mission of Pure Land faith, which is to bring within the reach of *all* men the deliverance taught by Shakyamuni. There is no doubt that both during and after the ministry of these Pure Land masters Pure Land faith flourished in China. After Huai-kan, however, the independent Pure Land movement declined, Pure Land practice and thought tending to accommodate itself to, and merge with, other Buddhist traditions. This movement, as we hope to show in a later paper, was to find its fulfillment in Japan.