



Smithsonian Associates

Pure Land Buddhism: An Easier Path to Nirvana?

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I. Basic Concepts

- Multiple Buddhas throughout the cosmos
- Buddha-lands or Buddha-fields: where a Buddha dwells
- Buddhas and bodhisattvas can assist suffering beings
- Others may inhabit a buddha-land, but only after great achievements
- The Buddha of Pure Land: Amitābha (Immeasurable Light)

II. The Basic story

- The monk-bodhisattva Dharmākara
- Vows his buddha-land would be the best and most inclusive
- Sets forth 48 vows that specify his future land's features and inhabitants
- Achieves his vows
- Establishes land called Sukhāvātī (Utmost Bliss)

III. The Basic Practice: *nianfo* 念佛

- Originally any practice if one “dedicated the merit” to rebirth in the Pure Land
- Why it is hard to translate into English
- India: practice of buddha-recollection (Sanskrit: *buddhānusmṛti*)
- Ambiguity of the word *nian* 念: contemplation or recitation?
 - Visualization
 - Holding the Buddha's name as a sound-image in mind
 - Oral recitation of the name
- By the 7th century, Chinese monk Shandao 善導 (613–681) defines practice as recitation
- Results of practice
 - Mental purification, elimination of past bad karma
 - Visualization/vision of the Buddha and his land
 - Rebirth in the Pure Land after death

IV. “Self-power” and “Other-power”

- India: Success in gaining rebirth depends upon one's own efforts
- China: The Buddha assists by conducting one to the Pure Land
 - Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610): like a sail catching the wind
 - Jixing Chewu (1741-1810): Two minds mutually enmeshed
 - “Two powers of self and other”
- Japan: The Buddha does all the work
 - Hōnen (1133–1212): Start with *nianfo* (Jpn: *nenbutsu*) for safety, move to other practices

- Shinran (1173–1262): Devotee is helpless. The Buddha does everything, including arousing faith
- Ippen (1234–1289): Even faith is unnecessary; just recite the name
- Staircases, escalators, and elevators

V. The Goal: Rebirth in the Pure Land

- Represents final escape from suffering
- Perfect training ground where enlightenment is guaranteed
- Levels of rebirth and the “City of Doubt”

VI. Conclusion: a Path for Ordinary People



Amitābha and retinue coming to meet a dying devotee