

Pure Lands

Buddhas and ‘Buddha-fields’

We have established elsewhere that the Buddha (Śākyamuni) is not understood by Buddhists to be unique, because there have been buddhas before him (like Dīpaṅkara), stretching back through the beginningless past, and there will be buddhas after him (like Maitreya), stretching into the endless future, albeit appearing at great intervals. But most Buddhist traditions in India, and still today the Theravāda tradition, understood that there is only *one* buddha in existence at a time, since a defining attribute of a buddha is that he realizes the Dharma and reveals it to the world when it has been totally forgotten. And since the Dharma remains in the world today – albeit, most Buddhist traditions think, in a state of decline – none of us will be able to encounter a buddha in this life or in many lifetimes yet to come.

However, traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism differ on this point. They agree that there can only be one buddha in the world at a time, but what if there is more than one world? For Buddhists a world consists of the totality of humans, animals, deities and other sentient beings, and for the Theravāda tradition there is just one of these, through which we cycle through different kinds of existences (only rarely being born human, or sometimes a god). But early in the development of the Mahāyāna tradition there emerged the idea that there could be, and indeed is, more than one world; in fact, there are *innumerable* worlds out there, parallel to our own, many of which have buddhas teaching in them right now.

Teachings about other worlds and other buddhas are the foundation for what comes to be called “Pure Land Buddhism”, which remains a foundation for traditions in East Asia today (especially Japan). The Indian term behind this is “buddha-field” (Sanskrit *buddhakṣetra*), which refers to a world that is transformed by a buddha’s teaching. Our world, called sometimes “Sahā” (“the arduous”!) is Śākyamuni’s buddha-field, and will be the buddha-field of Maitreya when he eventually appears. In texts that celebrate other buddha-fields that have a buddha in them currently, and which are described as being far more pleasant than our own world, East Asian Buddhism calls these “Pure Lands” (Chinese *jingtu*; Japanese *jōdo*).

The idea of buddha-fields, some of which can be called Pure Lands, served a couple of purposes in Indian Buddhism. The aim in Mahāyāna Buddhism is to be a bodhisattva, and so to eventually become a buddha oneself. To be a buddha requires that one (re)introduces the Dharma to the world when it has been forgotten. If there is just one world, and becoming a buddha takes an immensely large number of lifetimes anyway, practitioners could expect to take an incredibly long time to achieve this. The idea of other buddha-fields offers some reassurance: a bodhisattva may not become a buddha who teaches the Dharma in *this* world, but they could, before then, become the buddha of *another* world, which currently knows nothing of the Dharma and is in desperate need of instruction. There are understood to be plenty of worlds out there waiting for the Dharma to be (re)introduced to them.

Amitābha and his Pure Land

The other aspect of Pure Land teaching, and the one most prominent in forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism today, focuses on more immediate benefits of there being other worlds and, moreover, other buddhas in some of them. Some very influential Mahāyāna discourses (*sūtras*), probably produced very early in the Common Era, celebrate the power of specific other buddhas who are teaching *right now* in worlds other than our own, and describe how we might be able to attain rebirth in their world, their “Pure Land”, in a next life. Existence in these other worlds is described as being far more pleasant than in our own: these worlds are imagined as being particularly “heavenly” in many respects, but are also considered to be ideal training-grounds for making progress as a bodhisattva oneself, so that from one’s next lifetime onwards transmigration is not quite so torturous as it otherwise would be.

The most important Pure Land in Buddhism today – in fact, the only one that has a living tradition built around it – is called Sukhāvātī, “the Land of Bliss”, which is imagined to be situated far away from our own world and is home to a buddha called Amitābha (also called Amitāyus, and sometimes, after his Japanese name, called “Amida”). Forms of especially East Asian Buddhism revere Amitābha as a Buddha whose compassion led him to transform his world – that is, his buddha-field – into a heavenly domain accessible to anyone who expresses a genuine desire to be reborn there. And crucially, his lifespan there, and the duration of his teaching, is supposed to be immeasurably long – available to anyone, at any time.

Buddhists in East Asia today chant what in Japanese is called the *nembutsu*, or “the name of the buddha” (i.e., Amitābha). How this chanting is supposed to work is understood differently by different traditions, but the essential idea is that by repeatedly expressing heart-felt reverence to Amitābha one can achieve rebirth in Sukhāvātī when one dies. In these traditions, various rituals at the end of someone’s life are oriented towards making sure that this happens, so that when someone dies they are not reborn in our world but immediately progress to being born in the company of Amitābha. Because of Amitābha’s power and compassion, sentient beings can escape from their own worlds and enjoy the benefits of hearing the Dharma from a living, teaching buddha in an “ideal” setting.

Many Buddhists in especially Japan consider birth in the Pure Land of Amitābha to be an end in itself – it is described as something like a paradise, in which there are not forms of negative rebirth (for example, as an animal or ghost), which is taken either literally or understood metaphorically to refer to an existence characterized by complete tranquillity. All of this, including the miraculous means by which one comes to be born in Sukhāvātī, is supposed to have come about because of vows that Amitābha made long ago, when he was still a bodhisattva, called Dharmākara. Conservatively speaking, however, Sukhāvātī is not supposed to be the end of one’s journey, so much as time spent in a world made so wonderful by Amitābha that anyone born there will rapidly make progress as a bodhisattva, and in their next life after that will move on to yet another world and become a buddha themselves.

The Vows of Dharmākara, and the World of Amitābha

At one time, the Buddha (Śākyamuni) was residing at the mountain called Vulture Peak, in the kingdom of Magadha, accompanied by a large assembly of monks and of bodhisattvas. The Buddha was in a meditative state reflecting upon all of the buddhas in other worlds, and his attendant Ānanda asked him to teach about this.

The Buddha approved of Ānanda's question, and said how incredibly rare it is for anyone to encounter a buddha, even though there have been many in the past and are many in other worlds teaching right now. The Buddha recounted the story of a previous buddha, teaching long ago, who at that time inspired a bodhisattva called Dharmākara. The bodhisattva Dharmākara made forty-eight vows in the presence of that Buddha, including the following:

1) If, when I have attained complete awakening, the world in which I reside possesses a hell, or a realm of ghosts, or animals, may I not actually attain complete awakening!

2) If, when I have attained complete awakening, humans and gods in my world should after their death descend to any negative rebirths – into a hell, as a ghost, or as an animal – may I not actually attain complete awakening!

16) If, when I have attained complete awakening, humans and gods in my world should even hear of any wrongdoing, may I not actually attain complete awakening!

20) If, when I have attained complete awakening, there are sentient beings anywhere in any direction, who have heard my name, and who concentrate their thoughts on my world while with a sincere desire to be born there, but they should in fact *not* realize this aspiration, may I not actually attain complete awakening!

32) If, when I have attained complete awakening, all the many things found in my world, from the ground to the sky, including palaces, pavilions, ponds, streams and trees, should not be composed of countless treasures that surpass in beauty anything in the worlds of men and gods; and should they not be made of a hundred thousand kinds of aromatic wood, the fragrance of which pervades all the worlds in all directions, so that all bodhisattvas who smell it perform good deeds, then may I not actually attain complete awakening!

After making these and many other vows, the bodhisattva Dharmākara continued in his career as a bodhisattva.

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Having heard this, Ānanda asked the Buddha whether or not Dharmākara did in fact go on to achieve complete awakening. Indeed he had, and he is now the Buddha Amitābha, residing in the Pure Land called Sukhāvātī. As his vows dictated, this means that Dharmākara must have produced a buddha-field that was vast in size, supremely wonderful in character, and in which sentient beings do not descend into any bad rebirths. He in fact did this many ages ago, and continues to teach there today.

The Buddha then described Amitābha and his world to Ānanda. The earth of that world is composed of jewels and other precious substances, producing dazzling displays in the air. Trees in that world are similarly made of precious substances of all colours, as also are all the buildings there. Water that runs through the streams and rivers of that world makes beautiful sounds, and by listening to it one hears whatever one wishes; for example, one can hear in the water the teachings of the Dharma.

What is more, everyone born into the world of Sukhāvātī has a beautiful body and all kinds of supernatural powers, as if they were all gods, all the time. The food is wonderful, but one needs only to see it to feel perfectly satisfied. Amitābha himself is radiant, and anyone touched by his light immediately has removed from them all of the afflictions and defilements that they have amassed over previous lifetimes.

Having spoken at greater length about the wonders of Sukhāvātī, and the benefits of being born there, the Buddha stated as follows:

“I have delivered this teaching for the sake of sentient beings, and enabled you to see Amitābha and everything in his world. Strive to do as you should. After I myself have passed finally into nirvana, still you should have no doubts about this. In the future, my discourses and teachings will disappear; but out of pity and compassion, I will preserve this teaching and keep it in the world for a hundred years longer. Those sentient beings who encounter it will be liberated in the way that they aspire to be.”

The Buddha then concluded by reminding his audience of just how remarkably rare it is to encounter a buddha, how difficult it is to receive Buddhist teachings, and how still more difficult it is to have faith in what the Buddha has just taught, about the Buddha Amitābha and his world of Sukhāvātī.



Above: a Korean painting of Amitābha surrounded by bodhisattvas, from the fourteenth century. Image free for reproduction, from Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art. <https://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/YAA003352/Buddha-Amitabha-Amita-and-the-Eight-Great-Bodhisattvas>

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source

Who is Dharmākara?

For what reasons would someone want to be born in Amitābha's world?

Why does the Buddha conclude that it is so rare to encounter a buddha?

Application to other contexts

How far does Pure Land teaching resemble ideas in other religious traditions?

Given that it is meant to be an "ideal world" for a Buddhist, what else would you imagine to be features of Amitābha's Pure Land?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues

Does the goal of attaining rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land match up with other understandings of the point of Buddhist teaching that you have studied elsewhere?

What kinds of reassurances does Pure Land teaching offer to Buddhists?

Why does the supposed existence of "other worlds" in Mahāyāna Buddhism offer some reassurance to people who want to be bodhisattvas?

Sources / Further Reading

The source is a paraphrase from a translation of the Chinese version (itself a translation from Sanskrit) of the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra*; one of the Mahāyānist sources foundational to forms of Pure Land Buddhism, and perhaps composed in India in the first century of the Common Era. A complete English translation from the Chinese can be downloaded here:

https://www.bdk.or.jp/document/dgtl-dl/dBET_ThreePureLandSutras_2003.pdf

The text in question is translated over pages 3–62, and has in the present document been paraphrased and modified for simplicity. In the full translation Amitābha's name is presented as Amitāyus, a variant referring still to the same buddha.

Another of the many vows of made by Amitābha, when still the bodhisattva Dharmākara, may be worthy of carefully discussion in some classrooms:

35) If, when I have attained complete awakening, women in worlds of every direction who have heard my name rejoice and aspire to become completely awakened themselves, and they renounce being born as women ever again, but they should then still be born as women, may I not actually attain complete awakening!

In especially pre-modern Buddhist contexts, birth as a woman is seen to be an obstacle on the path of the bodhisattva, such that one of Dharmākara's vows relates to how fortuitous it would be if a bodhisattva could avoid ever being born as a woman ever again. This reflects conventions of Buddhist thinking in India and elsewhere in Asia in earlier centuries, and could be used to discuss Buddhist attitudes to gender in the classroom.

A good source for further reading on this topic is Charles B. Jones (2021), *Pure Land: History, Tradition, and Practice* (Shambala Press).