

Chapter One

Pure Land Buddhist Development in India and China Prior to Hui-yüan

The term “Pure Land Buddhism”

“Pure Land Buddhism” refers to a set of beliefs and practices that espouses for its aspirants the realization of the stage of non-retrogression (*avaivartika*; *pu t’ui-chuan*) either in the present life or through rebirth in a Buddha land or realm (*Buddha-kṣetra*; *fo-kuo*) called “Sukhāvātī” (Land of Bliss).¹ According to the Pure Land sutras, the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha* and the *Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha*, Sukhāvātī lies billions of Buddha lands away in the western direction from this world, the Sahā world-realm (*loka-dhātu*).² The Buddha Amitāyus (*Wu-liang-shou*; Immeasurable Life) or Buddha Amitābha (*Wu-liang-kuang*; Immeasurable Light) is the ‘transcendant’ Buddha who presides over the Sukhāvātī world-realm. The following will refer to this Buddha as “Amitābha” unless “Amitāyus” is more appropriate.

According to the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūha Sutra*, Amitābha established through his compassionate vows (*praṇidhāna*) Sukhāvātī in order to lead sentient beings to Buddhahood. He made the vows as a Bodhisattva, named “Dharmākara” (storehouse of Dharma), and after five Kalpas (aeons) of contemplation followed by innumerable Kalpas of cultivation his vows were consummated. For the past ten Kalpas, Buddha Amitābha has dwelled in Sukhāvātī and has continually preached the Dharma. The sutras exhort both monks and laity, who aspire for rebirth in Amitābha’s Sukhāvātī, to engage in a broad range of practices that include: meditation, observances of precepts, virtuous acts, building of *stūpa* (relic monument), and contemplation. Those reborn in Sukhāvātī acquire an ideal environment unlike this world for consummating their practices. Rebirth guarantees the attainment of the stage of non-retrogression and the eventual realization of the Mahayana goal of perfect enlightenment (*samyaksambodhi*). Upon attainment of enlightenment, some return to this Sahā world-realm to carry out the Bodhisattva task of leading others to rebirth and ultimately to Buddhahood.³

This set of beliefs and practices surrounding Amitābha and Sukhā-

vatī has come to be referred to as “Pure Land Buddhism” and in its Chinese sectarian development as the “Pure Land school” (*ching-t’u tsung*) or “Pure Land teaching” (*ching-t’u chiao*). It is of interest to note, however, that the term “Pure Land” in specific reference to Sukhāvātī does not occur in any of the ‘Pure Land’ sutras translated prior to the middle of the eighth century.⁴ Sukhāvātī is, instead, normally rendered into Chinese as “An-le kuo” (Country of Peace and Bliss) or “Chi-le” (Extreme Bliss). Apparently the identification of these two ideas, Sukhāvātī and Pure Land, began among Chinese commentators. One of the earliest textual sources for this occurs in the *T’an-luan Commentary*, which speaks of “the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī” (*An-le ching-t’u*).⁵

T’an-luan is also the earliest known writer to employ the term “Pure Land” to denote a distinct form of Chinese Buddhism. The *T’an-luan Commentary*, compiled around 540, includes a phrase “the Dharma-gate for the rebirth in the Pure Land” (*wang-sheng ching-t’u fa-men*), which refers to the five kinds of practices necessary for rebirth.⁶ Approximately half a century later, Tao-ch’o in his *An-le chi* advocated the “path of rebirth in the Pure Land” (*wang-sheng ching-t’u men*) as one of two primary Buddhist paths, the other being the “path of the sages” (*sheng-tao men*).⁷ Elsewhere in the same work appear such terms as “the singular gate of Pure Land” (*ching-t’u i-men*) and “the Dharma-gate of Pure Land” (*ching-t’u fa-men*).⁸ The works of the preeminent Pure Land Buddhist, Shan-tao, also include the term “Pure Land teaching” (*ching-t’u chiao*).⁹ Thus, the use of “Pure Land” to designate a distinct form of Buddhism had apparently begun around the first half of the sixth century and had become standard by the mid-seventh century.¹⁰

In the larger Mahayana context, Amitābha, along with Akṣobhya and Bhaiṣajyaguru, is the best known of the countless Buddhas in the cosmology who preside over the equally numerous Buddha-lands. While the traditions of the latter two Buddhas require greater research, unquestionably the Amitābha tradition has been the most pervasive and enduring of the three, if not on the Indian subcontinent, then clearly in China, Korea, and Japan. This is especially true of its scholastic tradition, which gave rise to Dharma-transmission lineages, not only in China, as we shall see, but also in the sectarian institutions of Japan. Its impact on East Asian popular religious devotion has been equally extensive and abiding, ranking with the traditions of such well-known Bodhisattvas as Maitreya, Avalokiteśvara, and Kṣitigarbha.

Background and development of the doctrine and practice

India offers no evidence of an independent Pure Land school or lineage. The diaries of early Chinese pilgrims to India do not refer to Pure Land at all. Instead, the second century stone foundations for an Amitābha image dated 104 C.E. from Mathurā comprise the only nonliterary trace of exclusive Amitābha devotion.¹¹ The next oldest epigraphical evidence is found in Sañcī and dates from the late seventh century. But it forms only a fragment of a verse of praise dedicated to Avalokiteśvara. Devotion to Amitābha, thus, appears to have been a limited movement during the Kuṣāṇa period (ca. 50–200 C.E.) with no impact on the continuing development of Buddhism during the Gupta period (ca. 320–570) either at Mathurā or any other location in Northern India.¹²

Mention of Pure Land practice occurs only in the early eighth century. During his India pilgrimage begun in 702, Hui-jih (later called “Tz’u-min,” d. 748) reported that when he inquired about the swiftest means for seeing the Buddha, all the scholars encouraged him to pursue the Pure Land teaching. In Gandhāra Hui-jih received a revelation related to rebirth in the Western Realm. But his account must be treated with caution in the absence of corroborating evidence about the prevalence of Pure Land devotion in India. His reports could very well be a pious accounting of a Pure Land devotee who, on his return to China, became one of the major Pure Land proponents of the mid-T’ang period.¹³

The process of generalization and disassociation incurred by Pure Land teaching may explain the absence of any significant Pure Land school. Gregory Schopen’s study of early Sanskrit literature proposes that Sukhāvatī may have become disassociated from the specific cult of Buddha Amitābha as early as second century C.E. Devotion not only to Amitābha but also to Śākyamuni, Bhaiṣajyaguru or other Buddhas could also affect rebirth in Sukhāvatī. Aspirants to Sukhāvatī could now broaden their devotion beyond Amitābha to a host of other Buddhas. Also, Sukhāvatī became generalized as a realm epitomizing an ultimate religious goal. Just as Mt. Meru symbolized unshakability and imperturbability, so did Sukhāvatī become the standard literary simile for magnificence, loveliness, charm, and splendor. The appropriation by non-Pure Land Buddhists of Sukhāvatī not only rendered it accessible to them but also weakened the coherence of Pure Land’s soteriological foundations as formed by Amitābha, Sukhāvatī, and the aspirant’s practice.¹⁴

The earliest Indian textual sources for Pure Land Buddhism are the *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra* and the *Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra*. Their subsequent translations and linguistic and internal evidence suggest they were compiled in Northwest India around 100 C.E. during Kuṣāṇa Dy-

nasty. Examination of the Chinese transliteration determines the original language of the sutras to be Gandhārī (or a related dialect), a Northwestern Prākṛit language of Northwest India and Central Asia extant from the third century B.C.E. to third century C.E.¹⁵ In these sutras are found the essential components of Pure Land doctrine: (1) the career of Bodhisattva Dharmākara before becoming Buddha Amitābha, (2) his vows to establish Sukhāvatī as a Buddha land, (3) a description of the features of Sukhāvatī, (4) the practices required of the aspirants for rebirth, and (5) the character of rebirth in Sukhāvatī and the attainment of enlightenment.

With these two sutras as reference points, the development of Pure Land teaching and practice seems to proceed in the following five stages: (1) the initial dominance of the concept of multiple Buddhas of the past and future (from fifth century B.C.E.), (2) the subsequent shift to the idea of transcendent contemporary Buddhas (from second century B.C.E.), (3) then the emergence of Buddha Amitābha, (from first century C.E.), (4) the adoption of visualization and recitative techniques (from ca. third century), and (5) the establishment of a critical commentarial tradition (from ca. fifth century). While the dates cannot be exact given the absence of solid evidence, this scheme nevertheless offers a general chronology for the major developments. As we have defined it, Pure Land Buddhism begins in stage three with the prior two stages comprising its major conceptual background.

Stage one: multiple Buddhas of the past and future

The idea that Buddhas other than Śākyamuni existed in the distant past seems to have emerged soon after Śākyamuni Buddha's death in ca. 486 B.C.E. The theory of the "seven past Buddhas" best represents this notion of previous Buddhas. It maintained that six earlier Buddhas, Vipasyin, Śikhin, Viśvabhū, Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni and Kāśyapa preceded Śākyamuni. Śākyamuni was, in a sense, the spiritual heir to a lineage of Buddhas. The early literary sources along with Aśokan inscriptions establish the idea of seven past Buddhas no later than mid-third century B.C.E.¹⁶ Subsequent theories posited fifteen, twenty-four and even a much larger number of past Buddhas. Regarded by many early schools as the first Buddha, Dīpaṃkara acquires special prominence among these Buddhas as the foreseer of Śākyamuni's enlightenment.¹⁷

One impulse for this idea derived from efforts to account for Śākyamuni's achievement of Buddhahood in this life, a feat unattained by any of his contemporaries. This also prompted the compilation of the *Jātaka* Tales that detailed the great accomplishments of the Buddha in his previous lives as a Bodhisattva.

If Buddhas existed in the past, it followed that there would be future Buddhas. Towards the end of the second century B.C.E., such inferences led to the belief in the best known of the future Buddhas, Maitreya. This belief held that like Śākyamuni Maitreya awaits in Tuṣita Heaven to be reborn in this world 5,000 to billions of years after Śākyamuni's death. The Maitreya faithful hoped for rebirth either in Tuṣita Heaven or in the world at the time of Maitreya Buddha's messianic appearance.¹⁸

These past and future Buddhas universalized the enlightenment of the historical Buddha. Śākyamuni no longer retained a monopoly on Buddhahood, because those in the past as well as the future could obtain it. This reinforced the pronouncement attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha: "Whosoever sees me sees the Dharma and whosoever sees the Dharma sees me."¹⁹

Stage two: Transcendent contemporary Buddhas of other world-realms

Although previously confined to this Sahā world-realm, Buddhist cosmology gradually expanded so that the immediate universe came to be described as "the three thousand great-thousand world-realm" consisting of one billion smaller worlds. By the second century B.C.E., its cosmology underwent a still greater expansion by addition of innumerable numbers of world-realms in all ten directions. Since Buddhas presided over many of these world-realms, they were referred to as "Buddha realms." Thus, the cosmos in the ten directions became populated with countless transcendent Buddhas. Unlike the past and future Buddhas, these Buddhas existed contemporaneously, albeit in distant realms beyond the Sahā world-realm.¹⁹

Although criticized by the Theravādins and Sarvāstivādins, this new idea apparently found currency within the Mahāsaṃghika and Lokottaravāda schools. The *Kathāvatthu* of the Theravādins credited the Mahāsaṃghikas with a doctrine that the Buddhas pervade all the directions of the universe.²⁰ Further, the Lokottaravādin's *Mahāvastu* expressed this same doctrine, which later commentators of other schools also corroborated as the idea of the Lokottaravādins.²¹ The doctrine of multiple contemporary Buddhas must have existed by the second century B.C.E. since the *Kathāvatthu* was completed by the end of the same century.²²

In the absence of this conception by these pre-Mahayana proponents or their critics, modern scholars have turned to Mahayana sources as the possible doctrinal origins for the emergence of multiple contemporary Buddhas. Some have suggested that the thesis of contemporary Buddhas directly derived from the realization that large numbers of Bodhisattvas upon becoming Buddhas had nowhere to go. From very early on, Buddhists had

tacitly ruled that only one Buddha could inhabit at one time the Sahā world. Thus, the “one Buddha to one world-realm” premise forced the issue about the dwelling place of the contemporary Buddhas.²³ Although Asanga (ca 390–470) offered this explanation (of the Bodhisattvas having nowhere to go upon becoming Buddhas) in the fifth century C.E., it is unlikely that it had anything to do with an idea that arose at least five centuries earlier.²⁴ While the concept of a distinct Bodhisattva path existed in the second century B.C.E., it instead referred specifically to Śākyamuni prior to his becoming the Buddha rather than to multiple Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Thus, the earlier conception lacked the doctrinal necessity to find “homes” for them in the transcendent realms.

Instead, the concept of Buddha-realm may provide a more likely doctrinal explanation for the emergence of these contemporary Buddhas. Under this view, the Buddhist cosmos is not an objective and material but a subjective and spiritual reality. The transcendent Buddhas and their realms that fill the universe are concretized expressions of the eternal Buddha-principle (*dharma*), which as the basic reality of the universe is ever active to lead all beings to enlightenment. In other words, the universe is the domain of the Buddhas and is, thus, fashioned and sustained by their work to lead beings to enlightenment.²⁵ The idea that the Buddhist universe is spiritually determined finds expression in other genres of Buddhist literature, for example, in the *Jātaka* with respect to Śākyamuni Buddha:

Now at the moment when the future Buddha made himself incarnate in his mother's womb, the constituent elements of the ten-thousand world systems (i.e. entire universe) quaked, trembled and shook violently.²⁶

While further research might determine with greater certainty the doctrinal factors for the idea of transcendent contemporary Buddhas, the religious demands of the believer cannot be neglected. Social and political ferment in North India followed the relative stability of the golden age of Mauryan and, in particular, of King Aśoka's dynastic rule (r. 269–232 B.C.E.). Competing with the non-Buddhist Śaivaites and Bhāvagatas, the Buddhists sought innovative responses to the cultural and religious demand for a theistic, saviour-centered devotionism.²⁷ Accordingly, the contemporary Buddhas assured devotees that in the absence of a Buddha in this world, Buddhas yet resided elsewhere who could answer their calls and in whose land they could be reborn.²⁸

This new religious milieu required a new soteriological scheme, which in turn changed the earlier assumption about personal karma as the sole responsibility of the individual. Now, the devotees could expect the “intervention” or “grace” of these saviour Buddhas that drastically altered

the karmic makeup of these devotees. The concept of “merit transference” (*pariṇāma/pariṇāmanā*) expresses this soteriological process wherein an accomplished practitioner can transfer to others his accumulated good merit for their benefit. Those with higher spiritual attainments were able to transfer greater amount of merit. Hence, the transcendent Bodhisattvas and Buddhas could dispense benefits on a greater scale due to their immense stock of accumulated merit. The transference also took place among ordinary devotees of this Sahā realm. These benefits took either the worldly form of good health and wealth or the religious form of attainments closer to enlightenment. In performing virtuous acts of devotion, one can transfer the merit accrued from the action to his family members, either alive or deceased.²⁹ A similar idea finds expression in the *Questions of King Milinda* (*Milindapañha*), a non-Mahayana text compiled in Northern India around the beginning of the common era. According to this well-known work revered also by the Theravādins, offerings made to the relics of Śākyamuni Buddha create goodness that can assuage and allay the fever and the torment of the threefold fire of desire, hatred, and delusion. Though the Buddha has passed away, such offerings to him have value and bear fruit.³⁰

Stage three:

Emergence of the Amitābha Pure Land movement

The compilation of the sutras around 100 C.E. implies that Pure Land thought and practice became established by the latter half of the first century C.E. In this process, Buddha Amitābha appeared as one of the transcendent contemporary Buddhas. He presides over Sukhāvātī, one of the innumerable transcendent world-realms located billions of Buddha-lands away in the western quarter. Thus, the concepts in stage two of multiple contemporary Buddhas and of transcendent world-realms now converge to form a specific cult of Amitābha Buddha to which the *Larger* and *Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtras* give expression. The Pure Land sutras assert that Amitābha constitutes one of the contemporary Buddhas. Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 C.E.) also confirms this by regarding Dīpaṃkara, Amitābha, and Maitreya as representatives of, respectively, the past, contemporary and future Buddhas.³¹

As initially mentioned, the original Sanskrit name for this Buddha was either “Amitābha” (immeasurable light) or “Amitāyus” (immeasurable life).³² But by the time of their compilation, the two Pure Land sutras used both names but with different frequencies. While the *Larger Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* favored “Amitābha,” the *Smaller Sūtra* preferred “Amitāyus.”³³ In the East Asian context, the names of this Buddha originate

not only from translations of Amitābha as “Wu-liang-kuang” or of Amitāyus “Wu-liang-shou,” but also from its transliteration as “A-mi-t’o” (Chinese), “Amit’a” (Korean) or “Amida” (Japanese).³⁴

Modern scholars have diversely advocated either non-Buddhist or Buddhist origins for Amitābha Buddha. In general, Western scholars comprise the former group, often citing Zoroastrian sun gods such as Mithra whose theme of light is cognate with “immeasurable light” of Amitābha.³⁵ Also, the Zoroastrian primordial principle of *zrvan akarana*, “infinite time,” may have influenced Amitāyus, “immeasurable life.”³⁶ Others have postulated non-Buddhist Indian sources such as the Viṣṇu mythology, Amitaujas (“immeasurable power”) of Brahmaloka Heaven and the deity Varuṇa of western quarter.³⁷

Represented largely by Japanese scholars, those unconvinced by this contend, instead, that the Buddhist tradition offers a sufficient doctrinal basis.³⁸ For instance, Fujita cites numerous passages from early sutras and pre-Mahayana school literature on the Buddha’s exceedingly long or immeasurable life and immense or immeasurable light.³⁹ A doctrine attributed to the Mahāsaṃghikas and its related schools states: “The power of the Tathāgatas is unlimited, and the life of the Buddhas is unlimited.”⁴⁰ Since “power” (Chinese *wei-li*; Tibetan *mthu*) in this context is intimately connected with “light,” this passage could refer to the two qualities (light and life) that later became ascribed to Amitābha Buddha.⁴¹

Theories about the derivation of Sukhāvātī have similarly generated scholarly debate. Advocates of a non-Buddhist provenance point to various prototypes: an island off the coast of Africa called “Scotia,” Brahma’s realm, Varuṇa’s realm of Sukhā and Yāma’s realm, and even the Garden of Eden.⁴² A more recent hypothesis centers around a Taq-i-Bustan Cave in eastern Iran.⁴³ In contrast, theories of a Buddhist source cite the city of Kusāvātī of King Mahāsudassana, the northern continent of Uttarakuru in the Buddhist cosmology, the heavens within the Desire (Kāma) and Form Realms (Rūpa-dhātu) and the *stūpas* dedicated to Śākyamuni.⁴⁴

The ensuing debates of the last fifty years about both Amitābha and Sukhāvātī have not established any decisive conclusions. With regard to the genesis of Amitābha, Fujita maintains that, while external influences cannot be totally excluded, the origin of Amitābha Buddha can be adequately explained as a development within mainstream Buddhist thought.⁴⁵

In my view, a theoretical framework for the interreligious transmission of ideas would enhance the clarity of Fujita’s conclusion. I shall suggest that transmission may occur in one of three modes which I term “direct,” “eclectic,” and “stimulative.” In direct transmission, Amitābha, for example, would be identified with the Zoroastrian sun-god Mithra. In the absence of a precedence, Buddhists would find sufficient rationale to

subsume it under a new Buddhist name. Eclectic transmission would entail a Buddhist assimilation of certain elements from an external tradition. For example, a prominent characteristic of external deities, such as light, would be incorporated into the Buddhist framework as a trait of a Buddha. The stimulative mode, however, does not involve any borrowing as in the direct and eclectic transmissions. Rather, Buddhists would be stimulated to meet the challenges of external traditions by turning to resources of its own heritage.

In my estimation, Fujita's position exemplifies primarily a stimulative and, only secondarily, an eclectic mode. The strong presence of Persian, Hellenistic, and other occidental elements in the cultural milieu of first century C.E. in Northwestern India under Kuṣāṇa rule suggests a non-Buddhist provenance for Amitābha. If the non-Buddhist gods with salvific powers associated with light and life enjoyed popularity and influence in that region, then they might have served as an impetus for a Buddhist Amitābha. They amplified the valued qualities of light and life which, as shown above, already existed within the Buddhist tradition. If elements were borrowed and assimilated in an eclectic transmission, they would most likely be physical features belonging to Yāma and Varuṇa. But no compelling evidence of direct transmission occurs in the development of Amitābha Buddha or Sukhāvātī in Pure Land Buddhism.

We have discussed Pure Land's two key doctrinal components, Amitābha Buddha and Sukhāvātī. But Pure Land Buddhism would not have achieved its complete soteriological form without these other doctrinal components: the career story of Bodhisattva Dharmākara, the Bodhisattva vow, and the practices of the aspirants for rebirth. These components do not suggest extraneous influences, and it is safely assumed that they evolved internally within the Buddhist fold. The career story of Dharmākara becoming Amitābha follows the basic model of the earlier Buddhist *Jātaka* literature. The Bodhisattva vow accords with the general practice of Bodhisattvas within pre-Mahayana and early Mahayana models. The maintenance of monastic precepts, the performance of such virtuous acts as *stūpa* building and sutra copying, and mindfulness on the Buddha all conform to the Buddhist devotional practice.

Stage four: Adoption of visualization and recitation

The range of practices for Pure Land devotees expanded significantly with the adoption of visualization (*anusmṛti*; *kuan*) and oral recitation of the name (*ch'eng-ming*) of Amitābha, which neither the *Larger* nor *Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtras* discussed. In the development of Pure Land Buddhism in India and beyond, both practices attracted many devotees to the

Pure Land path. A commentary to the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* attributed to Nāgārjuna advocates recitation as a means for rebirth in any one of the multiple transcendent world-realms.⁴⁶ This work, however, is not technically a Pure Land text and its authorship is questionable.⁴⁷ Hence, the earliest Pure Land resource for visualization and recitation practices would be the *Kuan-ching*.⁴⁸ Believed to have been compiled in the late fourth century, this sutra undoubtedly describes practices of the early fourth, if not third, century.⁴⁹

The sutra refers to visualization practice as the “*samādhi* (concentration) of contemplation on the Buddha” (*nien-fo san-mei*).⁵⁰ Thus, Pure Land visualization may be regarded as one among many of the early Mahayana *samādhis* such as the Śūraṅgama-*samādhi* (concentration of the heroic Buddha in which the defilements are destroyed) and Pratyutpanna-*samādhi* (concentration in which the Buddhas stand before one).⁵¹ The textual background and content of the *Kuan-ching* suggest that it belongs to a group of so-called visualization sutras (*kuan-ching*) devoted to Mahayana Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. These meditational techniques gained popularity in India and more notably, Central Asia, particularly from about the fourth century. The Central Asian popularity of visualization may be partially seen in the inordinately large number of Central Asians involved in translating “visualization sutras” into Chinese in the early fifth century.⁵²

In the *Kuan-ching* aspirants for rebirth visualize (*hsiang*) the features of Sukhāvātī, Amitābha and his attendant Bodhisattvas. Once accomplished each feature is individually inspected (*kuan-ch'a*). This leads to the next step in the attainment of a vision (*chien*). Properly done, the vision of the object appears clearly before the practitioner, whether the eyes are open or shut. *Samādhi* and its attendant psychological and spiritual tranquility or resolve are thereupon realized.⁵³ For example, the sutra remarks, “Therefore, when you perceive a Buddha in your mind, . . . your mind becomes a Buddha and your mind is a Buddha; and the wisdom of the Buddhas, true, universal and ocean-like, arises from this mind.”⁵⁴ The Pure Land soteriological scheme generally conceived such *samādhi* states as assurances to practitioners of their rebirth in the Pure Land and their ultimate Buddhahood.

Compared to the more difficult visualization discipline, oral recitation is more accessible to the faithful. The *Kuan-ching* offers recitation to spiritually inferior beings on their deathbed. For instance, beings in the lowest of the nine grades of birth, who had committed the five grave offenses and the ten transgressions, cannot be mindful of the Buddha as instructed by even a virtuous teacher. But if they follow their teacher's exhortation to recite with sincere mind the name of Buddha Amitābha, they

thereby eradicate their karmic retribution (*tsui*) of eight billion Kalpas and are assured of rebirth.⁵⁵

Recitation brought with it the eradication of karmic retribution. The prototype of recitation occurs in earlier Buddhist scriptures but invariably exemplifies a magical nature that often wards away imminent dangers. In the *Mahāvastu*, for example, 500 merchants in a boat were devoured by a giant fish but were saved when collectively they recited aloud: “We take refuge in the Buddha.”⁵⁶ The type of recitation, however, found in the *Kuan-ching* differs in its nature and application from this early self-serving form. A related genre of sutras that dealt primarily with visualization or contemplation (*anusmṛti*) and with Buddha names (*Buddha-nāma*) also represented this type of recitation. Almost invariably these sutras closely associated recitation with practices of repentance (*ch’an-hui*). Recitation and repentance together led to the elimination of karmic retribution. This, in turn, promoted the realization of *samādhi* as the ultimate soteriological goal.⁵⁷ However, recitation in the *Kuan-ching* differed in that recitation led, not to *samādhi*, but to rebirth in Sukhāvātī.

A fifth century Chinese translation (ca. 529) by Bodhiruci of a work attributed to Vasubandhu (ca. 400–480), the *Rebirth Treatise* (*Sukhāvātī-vyūhopadeśa*), discussed both visualization and recitation.⁵⁸ While its primary concern lies with visualization, it also advocates oral recitation. The recitation assists in explaining “praise,” which along with worship, aspiration for rebirth, visualization and transference of one’s merit comprise the “Five Contemplative Gates” (*wu-nien men*). To praise the Tathāgata means to orally recite the name of Buddha Amitābha as a form of verbal action (*vāk-karman*).⁵⁹ The treatise then elaborates extensively the issue of visualization, which has as its object the seventeen features of the physical aspects of the Pure Land, the eight features of Amitābha, and the four features of the two attendant Bodhisattvas. These visualizations are, for the author of the treatise, none other than “insight” (*vipaśyanā*), a traditional Buddhist expression of meditative realization.⁶⁰

Stage five: Critical commentarial tradition

Very few treatises on Pure Land have been found in India. In fact the only extant work devoted exclusively to Amitābha Pure Land Buddhism is the previously mentioned fifth century work attributed to Vasubandhu that survives only in its Chinese translation, the *Rebirth Treatise*. There are, however, a few older writings that comment on aspects of Pure Land doctrine. Among these the earliest documents are attributed to Nāgārjuna (hence, dated around 200 C.E.), the *Ta chih tu lun* (Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise) and the aforementioned commentary on the

Daśabhūmika-sūtra.⁶¹ In the latter text's chapter on "Easy Practice," the author discusses the attainment of the non-retrogressive state and then distinguishes two paths. The first follows the "easy practice" (*i-hsing*) of devotion, which is likened to riding on a vessel over water. The "difficult" (*nan*) path resembles a Bodhisattva walking on land to his destination.⁶² Amitābha is one among numerous transcendent Buddhas to whom devotion of easy practice may be directed. In East Asia, the distinction between the difficult and the easy path served as one of the primary doctrinal bases for the establishment of Pure Land as an independent school.

In the *Mahāyānasamgraha* (Compendium of the Mahayana), Asaṅga criticizes Pure Land doctrine as an expedient teaching solely to lure spiritually inferior and morally indolent people. In a doctrine called "intended for another time" (*kālāntarābhiprāya*; *pieh-shih-i*), he argues that Pure Land teaching encourages rebirth in the Pure Land and enlightenment as benefits to be attained in the immediate future. But in actuality, he adds, enlightenment is only realized in the distant future after one consummates long and arduous practice.⁶³ This doctrine had a lasting impact on Pure Land Buddhism. It became a standard criticism by Yogacāra advocates in India and China.⁶⁴

In the previously alluded to *Rebirth Treatise*, the author sets forth the five kinds of practices for rebirth, the Five Contemplative Gates: worship, praise, aspiration for rebirth, visualization, and the transfer of merit. Significantly, the author places the five practices within traditional Mahayana categories. He identifies the aspiration for rebirth with concentration (*śamatha*) and visualization with insight (*vipaśyanā*). He further correlates the first four gates with the concept of benefit for oneself (*svārtha*; *tzu-li*) and the fifth gate with the benefit for others (*parārtha*; *li-t'a*).⁶⁵ The treatise also disqualifies Hinayanists, women, and the disabled for rebirth in the Pure Land. This exclusion provoked harsh criticism in China and preoccupied Pure Land apologists.⁶⁶

Thirty-one Sanskrit texts and over one hundred Chinese and Tibetan translations refer to Amitābha and/or Sukhāvātī.⁶⁷ For example, the author of the *Ratnagotravibhāga-śāstra* (Treatise on the Buddha-womb Theory) concludes his highly technical work on the *tathāgatagarbha* (Buddha-womb or embryo) doctrine by stating: "By the merit I have acquired through [writing] this [treatise], may all living beings come to perceive the Lord Amitāyus endowed with infinite light."⁶⁸ Such references attest to the influence wielded by Pure Land thought in the devotional lives of the commentators. Some reference, however, did not presuppose the Amitābha devotion of the *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtras*. For example, the Bodhisattva names in Amitābha's previous life do not include Dharmākara but range over fifteen other appellations.⁶⁹ This suggests a more diffused Pure Land thought.

The processes of disassociation had disengaged Amitābha not only from Sukhāvātī, as discussed earlier, but also from the Dharmākara story.

These surviving literary sources imply that despite numerous passing references, a Pure Land commentarial tradition in India was virtually nonexistent. Further, as seen above, the questions surrounding the authenticity of the major Pure Land treatises attributed to Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu leave little solid evidence of active scholarship on Pure Land doctrine in India. In fact, many doctrinal categories associated with Pure Land doctrine awaited the creative contributions of the Chinese commentators. Their innovation bears particularly on the following discussion of the Three-body (*trikāya*) doctrine and Amitābha as either Transformed-body or Rewarded-body.

Chinese development

First scriptural transmission

Of the Chinese translations of the *Larger Sukhāvātīvya Sutra*, two of the five extant recensions belong to what we are calling the “first transmission” that occurred around 200 C.E. The earliest was translated either in the second half of the third century or possibly even in the second century. Chih-ch’ien may have translated the *A-mi-t’o san-yeh-san-fo-sa-lou-fo-t’an kuo-tu-jen-tao ching* (hereafter, by its common title the *Ta a-mi-t’o ching* (Great Sutra on Amitābha) between 222 and 253. Yet, Lokakṣema (Chih Lou-chia-ch’ien) may have translated it around 167. The translation of the second, *Wu-liang ch’ing-ching p’ing-teng-chüeh ching* (hereafter, *P’ing-teng-chüeh ching*, Sutra on the Enlightenment of Equanimity) ascribed to Lokakṣema, has recently been attributed to Po-yen and dated almost a century later around 258.⁷⁰ Strictly speaking, the *Pan-chou san-mei ching* (Sutra on the *Samādhi* in which the Buddhas Stand Before One) is not considered a Pure Land sutra because its primary concern centers on meditative practice, the Pratyutpanna-samādhi.⁷¹ But because it refers to Amitābha and his land as the object of Pratyutpanna-samādhi, this sutra played a crucial role in the early phase of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.⁷² It served as a canonical source for Lu-shan Hui-yüan in his promulgation of the Pure Land practice of the “*samādhi* of contemplation on Buddha Amitābha (*nien-fo san-mei*).⁷³

Pure Land devotees

Western Chin accounts identify the earliest known Pure Land devotees to be Ch’üeh Kung-tse (d. 265–274), his student Wei Shih-tu (d. ca. 323) and

Wei's mother, who reportedly aspired to and gained rebirth in the Western Realm.⁷⁴ Then there was also a certain Seng-hsien, who left the war torn North and arrived in the Eastern capital of Chien-k'ang in 321. According to *Biographies of Eminent Monks*:

Later when he became seriously ill for a long time, he concentrated his thoughts upon the Western Realm as he endured extreme pain. He then saw the Buddha of Immeasurable Life descend in his true appearance to shine upon his body, at which time his pain completely disappeared.⁷⁵

Chih-tun (314–366) represents one of the earliest known Pure Land practitioners among the intellectual non-ethnic Chinese. The aristocracy and the learned circles of the newly established Western Chin society respected him as a scholar of Neo-Taoist philosophy of Dark Learning (*hsüan-hsüeh*). He interpreted contemporary religio-philosophical issues and offered a metaphysical meaning for the term *li* (noumenal).⁷⁶ Besides his philosophical writings, he composed several eulogies, one of which expresses his faith in Buddha Amitābha and Sukhāvātī. E. Zürcher's translation captures the sense of the deeply introspective and intimate expression of the earliest surviving personal testimony of Amitābha Pure Land devotion:

In this country there is no arrangement of royal regulations, ranks and titles. The Buddha is the ruler, and the three Vehicles are the [state] doctrine. . . . Whosoever in this country of Chin, in this era of sensual pleasures, serves the Buddha and correctly observes the commandments, who recites the Scripture of Amitābha, and who [furthermore] makes a vow to be [re]born in that country of [Sukhāvātī] without ever abandoning his sincere intention, will at the end of his life, when his soul passes away, be miraculously transported thither. He will behold the Buddha and be enlightened in his spirit, and then he will realize the Way. I, Tun, born at this late time, [can only] hope to follow the remaining traces [of the doctrine], and I do not dare to expect that my mind is bound for that spiritual country. Hence I had a painting made by an artisan, and erected this as a manifestation of the divine [power]; respectfully I look to the noble appearance [of this Buddha] in order to confront myself with Him whom [I adore like] Heaven.⁷⁷

He envisioned an unstructured and egalitarian Pure Land, perhaps in keeping with his Neo-Taoist orientation. Here also are the germs of some of the common themes that appear in the "mature" writings of later Pure Land Buddhists: the acknowledgement of the degeneracy of his time, the low estimation of one's spiritual capacity to realize the goal on his own,

and the reliance on Buddha's power. The painting of Amitābha constitutes one of the earliest examples in China of an icon used for devotional purposes.

The devotion expressed by Chih-tun was overshadowed approximately fifty years later by Lu-shan Hui-yüan who led perhaps the most famous event associated with Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. Hui-yüan figured as a prominent contemporary Buddhist. The courts of the Eastern Chin dynasty in the South and the Yao Ch'in dynasty in the North as well as local rulers regarded him as the paragon of Buddhist virtues. He fostered translation activities and also composed the influential treatise *Sha-men pu-ching wang-che lun* (Monks Do Not Pay Homage to the Ruler), which defended the autonomy of Buddhist clergy.⁷⁸

Moreover, his Pure Land devotional groups exemplify his most enduring influence on Chinese Buddhism. In 402, Hui-yüan and his coterie of 123 lay and clerical disciples made a collective vow to be reborn together in Sukhāvātī. Accompanied by an offering of incense and flowers, the participants expressed before an icon of Buddha Amitābha their desire to be reborn together in Sukhāvātī. But because of individual differences in karmic maturity, they realized that some participants would gain rebirth before others. Thus, they vowed that the early arrivals in Sukhāvātī would not simply revel in their bliss but exert themselves to share their salvation with those lagging behind. If they could adhere to this pact, they would in the end all be reborn and together "miraculously behold the great appearance [of Amitābha] and open their hearts in [his] pure brightness."⁷⁹

Upon Hui-yüan's death, his disciples transmitted their master's teaching to much of southern China, including Chiang-ling, Ch'eng-tu and Chien-k'ang. Also, Hui-ch'ih (d. 412), an active proponent of in the Ch'eng-tu area, was known for his devoted Pure Land faith. Having had two known disciples, he undoubtedly transmitted Pure Land devotion to them.⁸⁰ Hui-yüan's name heads the list of Pure Land masters of the first half of the seventh century and is resurrected as the "founder" of several Pure Land lineages later in the Sung dynasty. The transmission lines of his direct disciples, however, apparently did not continue for more than a few generations. None of his disciples are credited either with any writings or with the formation of identifiable Pure Land groups. This may have resulted from the exclusivistic, other-worldly nature of Hui-yüan's Pure Land group that did not reach out to the larger society for broader support.⁸¹

Second scriptural transmission

In the first half of the fifth century, the translation of another group of Pure Land sutras played a more substantial role in subsequent develop-

ments of Pure Land Buddhism than did those of the first transmission two centuries earlier. The translation of the *Wu-liang-shou ching*, one of the recensions of the *Larger Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sutra*, is ascribed to a Sogdian K'ang Seng-k'ai (Saṃghavarman) of the Wei dynasty (220–265). The Pure Land tradition has long accepted this ascription. But modern scholarship regards Buddhābhaddra (359–429) and Pao-yün (376–449) as its actual translators, thereby moving back its date of translation nearly two centuries to about 421.⁸² The commentators of the Sui and T'ang periods and the entire Pure Land tradition of China, Korea, and Japan quickly rated this text, known in the catalogues as the *New Sutra on the Buddha Amī-tāyus* (*Shin wu-liang-shou ching*), as of greater importance than its two earlier recensions.⁸³ Around 402, Kumārajīva (344–413 or 350–409) translated the *Smaller Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sutra* (*A-mi-t'o ching*). Catalogues report another translation by Guṇabhadra (394–468). But it was lost, probably as early as the beginning of sixth century.⁸⁴

Kālayāśas (383?–442?) is credited with the translation of the *Kuang-ching* between 424 and 442 during the Yüan-chia era of the Liu-Sung period. Unlike the previous two, this sutra has no Sanskrit, Tibetan, or variant Chinese recension.⁸⁵ Consequently, as discussed below, scholars contest the date and general location of its compilation. The *Kuan-ching*, nevertheless, played the most central role of the three sutras in the emergence of Pure Land Buddhism as a major Buddhist school in Sui-T'ang China.

Devotional and scholastic activities in the South

Along with the translation of the *A-mi-t'o ching*, the translations in the South of the new *Wu-liang-shou ching* and the *Kuan-ching* attracted the attention of scholar-monks who lectured on them. For example, Fa-tu (d. 500) on Mt. She, a devotee of the Pure Land teaching, lectured on the *Wu-liang-shou ching*.⁸⁶ Pao-liang (d. 509), a noted scholar of the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* in the Liang capital of Chien-yeh, lectured to large audiences of over 3,000 on a wide range of sutras. While he favored such sutras as the *Nirvāṇa* and *Śrīmālādevī* (Queen Śrīmālā), Pao-liang lectured on the *Wu-liang-shou ching* on nearly ten occasions.⁸⁷

Despite this attention, Pure Land scriptures remained relatively minor texts, overshadowed by such better known sutras as the *Lotus*, the *Nirvāṇa*, the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom), and the *Vimalakīrti* (Questions of Vimalakīrti). No lecturer appears to have written Pure Land treatises or commentaries on these sutras. In contrast, the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* boasted numerous commentaries by the early sixth century. Pao-liang and others compiled these commentaries into a voluminous seventy-one scroll

commentary, the *Ta-nieh-p'an-ching chi-chieh*, in response to Liang Emperor Wu's edict of 509.⁸⁸ The nonexistence of Pure Land commentaries attests to weak scholarly interests in Pure Land scriptures. In such a climate, any school or lineage of scholarly Pure Land transmission would not likely arise in the South.

Devotional and scholastic activities in the North

In contrast, the North exhibited both popular and scholarly activities. Popular Pure Land found expression in the stone images built primarily by lay supporters during the Northern Wei period. The two oldest surviving images of Amitābha were both erected by lay women in 518, and constitute two of twelve extant from this period. The inscription of one of these surviving images in the Lung-men Cave records the widow's desire that her deceased husband be quickly reborn in the Western Realm. Earlier images reveal syncretistic devotion in which the image is of Maitreya, Śākyamuni or other Buddhas. But their inscriptions affirm desires for rebirth in the western quarter or Sukhāvātī.⁸⁹

The earliest known lineage of Pure Land transmission compiled by Tao-ch'ō suggests an active scholarly development in the North. The Six Worthies (*liu ta-te*) of this lineage were Bodhiruci, Hui-lun, Tao-ch'ang, T'an-luan, Ta-hai, and Fa-shang.⁹⁰ Although the status of some of these Worthies as actual devotees of Pure Land teaching has not been fully documented, Bodhiruci and, especially T'an-luan did make major contributions. Bodhiruci translated the *Rebirth Treatise* in 531. This gave impetus to Pure Land studies as the treatise gained the attention of scholars associated with the so-called Ti-lun school that Bodhiruci helped to found. In addition to T'an-luan's commentary on the *Rebirth Treatise* is another commentary, now lost, attributed to Ling-yü, a scholar monk also associated with the Ti-lun school.⁹¹

T'an-luan was not only a believer of the Pure Land path but also the first major Pure Land writer with three works to his credit. His major work, the *T'an-luan Commentary*, is a commentary to the *Rebirth Treatise*.⁹² His search for immortality with a Taoist master, his subsequent conversion to Pure Land, and his successes as a healer greatly esteemed by the emperor have been well-chronicled in the Pure Land tradition.⁹³ T'an-luan's memorial epitaph inspired the conversion of Tao-ch'ō, to Pure Land teaching, who in turn served as teacher to Shan-tao.⁹⁴ A later Pure Land lineage of the Yüan period included T'an-luan as a member.⁹⁵ T'an-luan's doctrinal insights profoundly influenced Shinran of the Japanese Pure Land tradition, who venerated him as the first of the three Chinese patriarchs, the others being Tao-ch'ō and Shan-tao.⁹⁶

The doctrinal justification for the independence of the Pure Land Buddhist path constitutes one of T'an-luan's contributions. He took Nāgārjuna's division of the "easy and difficult paths," which originally applied to the attainment of the non-retrogressive stage on the Bodhisattva path, and ingeniously adapted the "easy path" to the Pure Land teaching.⁹⁷ As we saw above, he is credited with the earliest known term that denoted Pure Land practice as a distinct path, "the Dharma-gate for the rebirth in the Pure Land."⁹⁸

His successes derived partly from his ability to synthesize Pure Land practice with indigenous Chinese religious elements.⁹⁹ He explains, for example, the efficacy of reciting the name of Amitābha by citing a spell from the *Pao p'u-tzu*, a Taoist text, for curing edema and an incantation for protecting soldiers on the battlefield. Also, after noting the common use of quince moxibustion to cure sprains, he remarks that everyone is aware that the sprain can also be cured simply by reciting the name "quince."¹⁰⁰ T'an-luan further utilized phrases from Taoist and Confucian classics including the *Lao-tzu*, the *Chuang-tzu*, and the *Lun-yü* (Analects).¹⁰¹ His expertise in non-Buddhist literature was later acknowledged by Tao-hsuan, who describes him as being "well versed in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist scriptures."¹⁰²

In terms of doctrinal contribution, T'an-luan stressed the concept of the "vow power of Buddha [Amitābha]" (*fo-yüan li*) or "other power" (*t'a-li*) in his soteriological scheme to a much greater degree than did the Pure Land sutras in their original formulation. In T'an-luan's scheme, the devotee's practice carries little weight in comparison to that of Buddha's vow power. Recitation of the name with firm faith sufficed for rebirth since the efficient cause lay not in the devotee's action but in the vow power of Amitābha. The following statement epitomizes T'an-luan's emphasis on "other power":

"The way of easy practice" means that simply by resolving to be reborn in the Pure Land, through faith in the Buddha, and by availing oneself of the power of the Buddha's vow, one attains rebirth in that Pure Land. Sustained by the Buddha's power, one joins the assembly of those who are properly settled in the Mahayana.¹⁰³

Thus, his stress on the centrality of the Buddha's vow power, which belonged implicitly to his inherited Pure Land tradition, contributed decisively to the development of that tradition.

But, despite the creative identification of the Pure Land path as a unique and independent path, neither the *T'an-luan Commentary* nor T'an-luan's other writings generated sub-commentaries by subsequent writers. In fact, its absence in any of the catalogues after *Nei-tien lu* (Catalogue

of Buddhist Scriptures) (compiled 664) or in the Sung and Ming canons has led to a suggestion that this work was excluded from the canon sometime during the T'ang period after the compilation of the *Nei-tien lu*.¹⁰⁴ While Tao-ch'o and Shan-tao inherited and developed the legacy of the "other-power" doctrine, their major writings instead comprise commentaries on the *Kuan-ching*, not on the *Rebirth Treatise* or the *T'an-luan Commentary* as one might expect.¹⁰⁵ T'an-luan actively propagated the Pure Land teaching during his years at Hsüan-chung Monastery in Fen-chou, which was his residence in his latter years.¹⁰⁶ But very little is known about his direct disciples; apparently his following was confined predominately to lay persons in the proximity of Hsüan-chung Monastery.