

Buddhism, Pure Land

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Pure Land Buddhism teaches that faith in the power and grace of Amitabha Buddha, who presides over the western Pure Land, will lead to final salvation. This originally Indian Mahayana form of Buddhism has not only been transformed into a uniquely Chinese Buddhist school but has also become one of the most popular religions in East Asia.

Pure Land Buddhism is a devotional form of Mahayana Buddhism originating in India. The term “pure land” (*jingtu*) derives from *sukhāvati*, a Sanskrit word for a blissful “Buddha realm” in the western region of the universe. The Buddha presiding over the Pure Land is Amitābha (Measureless Light 阿彌陀佛) or Amitāyus (Measureless Life), called *Amito Fo* in Chinese. Amitābha, before becoming a Buddha, makes a series of bodhisattva (a being that refrains from entering nirvana in order to save others and is worshipped as a deity) vows to establish a land free from evil and suffering. He promises that anyone who has faith in him will be reborn in his Pure Land, where the devotee will easily achieve spiritual perfection and eventually enter nirvana.

Scriptures

Pure Land Buddhism is based on three principal scriptures written originally in Sanskrit. The *Shorter Pure Land*

Scripture (*Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*; Chinese: *Amito jing*) tells the story of Amitābha and depicts the wondrous qualities of his paradise. The *Longer Pure Land Scripture* (Chinese: *Wuliangshou jing*) is an expansion of the shorter one. Finally, the *Scripture of Meditation on the Buddha of Measureless Life* (*Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra*; Chinese: *Guan wuliangshou jing*) contains thirteen practices of visualization on Amitābha and his Pure Land.

The *Longer Pure Land Scripture* was translated first into Chinese by Samghavarman around 252 CE. However, the *Shorter Pure Land Scripture*, translated by Kumārajīva (344–413? CE) in 402, gained wide popularity among Pure Land devotees. The *Scripture of Meditation on the Buddha of Measureless Life* is said to have been introduced to China by Kālaya’sas around the first half of the fifth century, but many scholars speculate that it is actually an apocryphal text composed in China or central Asia.

Doctrine and Practice

According to the Pure Land teaching, this world is full of suffering and defilements, and people alone can hardly save themselves. Salvation, therefore, is achieved best at another time (in the next rebirth), in another place (the Pure Land), and through another power (that of Amitābha). One of the theories developing in Pure Land Buddhism, furthermore, is the coming of the “Age of the Final Dharma” (*mofa*). It is believed that after the age of the “Orthodox Dharma” (*zhengfa*) and then the age of

the “Semblance of the Dharma” (*xiangfa*), Buddhism will enter its final stage, during which people are no longer capable of achieving enlightenment, and all the traditional Buddhist practices are impossible to carry through. The only path to nirvana is via rebirth in the Pure Land by having faith in the power and grace of Amitābha Buddha.

Pure Land scriptures thus contain a variety of practices to help people cultivate their faith in Amitābha and his Pure Land. In China mindfully reciting Amitābha’s name, known as *nianfo* in Chinese, has been the most popular practice; daily repetition of the simple phrase “Homage to Amitābha Buddha” (*Nanwu Amito Fo*), often counted with the beads in a rosary, is believed to ensure the devotee’s rebirth in the Pure Land.

Faith in the reward of paradise usually coexists with the fear of punishment in hells. In Pure Land painting and writing the joys and blessings of the Pure Land are often shown in sharp contrast to the horrors and miseries of hells. Fearing to be reborn in hells, people will become even more motivated to do meritorious deeds and cultivate the Pure Land faith.

Devotion to the bodhisattva Avalokite’svara, the chief assistant of Amitābha, is also popular. Originally an Indian male deity, Avalokite’svara is transformed into a goddess of great mercy and compassion, called “Guanyin” or “Guanshiyin” in Chinese. Belief in her efficacy and miraculous aid in times of need makes Guanyin a widespread religious cult throughout China.

Pure Land Patriarchs and Masters

In China, Pure Land Buddhism never developed into a distinctive, full-fledged sect (*zong*); its transmission lineage was actually established through the monks of Tiantai, another Chinese Buddhist school, in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). Throughout most of Chinese history Pure Land teachings and practices were mingled with or incorporated into other forms of Buddhism.

Nonetheless, many monks were known for their influential roles in popularizing Pure Land devotion. The first Chinese Pure Land center was the White Lotus Society founded by the monk Huiyuan (334–416 CE) on Mount Lu (present-day Jiangxi) in 402 CE. Huiyuan was later regarded as the founder and first patriarch of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. After Huiyuan, a series of masters contributed further to systematizing the Pure Land doctrine and popularizing the practice.

Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542 CE) began to advocate *nianfo* among lay people. Daochuo (562–645 CE) wrote the *Collection of Essays on [the Land of] Peace and Happiness* (*Anle ji*) to emphasize the point that to be free from suffering and defilement, all one needs to do is have faith in Amitābha. His disciple Shandao 善導 (613–681 CE) laid out the definite framework for Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. In his influential *Commentary on the Scripture of*



Golden offerings, Buddhist Nunnery Ling Wan, Hong Kong, New Territories, China. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



Historical illustration of a monk in meditation.

Meditation on the Buddha of Measureless Life (Guanjing su), moreover, Shandao made a significant shift of emphasis from the practice of visualization on Amitâbha to the devotion through *nianfo*, insisting that the latter was not only the right practice but also the most efficient one to ensure a rebirth in the Pure Land.

After Shandao the two important Pure Land masters who sought to synthesize Chan (Japanese: *zen*) and Pure Land were Cimin Huiji (680–748 CE) and his disciple Fazhao (c. 800 CE). In later times continued efforts were made to align the Pure Land *nianfo* with Chan *gong'an* meditation. The question “Who is the one reciting Amitâbha’s name?” becomes a *gong'an* for people to contemplate in their meditation.

Pure Land Buddhism has also enjoyed a wide appeal in Japan. Monk Hônen (1133–1212) founded the Jôdo shû sect, while his disciple Shinran (1173–1262) founded the Jôdo Shinshû sect. Both sects remain active today.

Pure Land Revival in Modern China

Yinguan (1861–1940) was one of the modern Chinese monks propagating the Pure Land faith. Insisting that

Amitâbha’s western paradise really exists, he encouraged his followers to practice *nianfo* on a daily basis. His lay disciple Li Bingnan (1890–1986), who moved to Taiwan in 1948 when the Communists began to take over China, continued to promote Pure Land Buddhism. Monk Xingyun (b. 1927), founder of the Foguangshan monastic organization, urges people to make Taiwan a Pure Land in this world. On the whole, Amitâbha worship and the belief in the Pure Land have been always popular among Chinese Buddhists.

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