

## **Pure Land Buddhism and the Construction of Buddhist Studies**

### **Introduction**

Historically speaking, both the Japanese and pan-Asian "Pure Land Buddhist" discourses have been marginalized in popular literature and academic discourse<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand, Pure Land Buddhism is seemingly incompatible with Western notions of Buddhism as a "rational" philosophy. Additionally, early European scholars of Buddhism were concerned primarily with early Buddhist doctrine and philosophy. This resulted in the marginalization of most forms of Buddhist practice and devotion. On the other hand, Japanese suppression of Buddhism during the early period of modernization (c. 1890-) in favor of the nationalist ideologies known as "State Shintō" and "New Buddhism" disregarded and suppressed the role that Pure Land Buddhism had played in the creation of Japanese identity. As a result, Pure Land oriented devotional practices in both monastic and lay cultural spheres have been neglected as significant forces in the Buddhist worldview.

I will first provide evidence that many famous Buddhist thinkers, whom are often revered for their philosophical contributions, were also influential in the propagation of Pure Land soteriology. My subsequent examination will consist of a deconstruction of the biases present in pre-modern and modern "Orientalist" and "Occidentalism" discourses, essentially identifying how and why each position neglected such an important dimension of the Buddhist experience. I will then move to reassess the importance of Pure Land oriented devotionalism as a significant force in the broader Mahayana context. I will conclude by proposing a recalibration of the field of Buddhist Studies towards ritual, devotional, and popular/vernacular literature. It is my position that these methodologies and topics better serve to present Buddhist traditions as they have actually been practiced. If we are to use the term "Buddhism" as a reified category, it would serve our purposes, professionally and ethically, to base our work in the "on-the-ground" reality as it is understood by the majority of practitioners.

## **A Brief History of Pure Land Devotionalism**

According to basic Buddhist cosmology, the semi-historical Buddha who lived in India roughly 500 BCE was not the only Buddha. He was one of many Buddhas, or "awakened" ones, in a long line going back countless eons.<sup>2</sup> Many of these past Buddhas had accumulated great merits through their ascetic practices which were carried out over many eons. These merits came to form "buddha-spheres" or "buddha-realms" where advanced buddhas and bodhisattvas could go to purify and perfect themselves and their abilities to procure and transfer merit.<sup>3</sup> The concept of a "Pure Land" evolved in India as a product of the early Mahāsāṅgika and Mahayanist discourse. These realms were seen to provide a practitioner with the opportunity to study with a living Buddha.<sup>4</sup> As such, the term "Pure Land Buddhism" as I will be using it refers primarily to the praxis found throughout Asia designed to allow one to attain rebirth in these "buddha-spheres."<sup>5</sup>

The Pure Land devotional cults of the Buddha Amitābha have historically been very popular and important. This devotional path has commonly been referred to as the "easy path." As told in the *Sukāvataṅgīyāsūtra*, or Sutra of the Land of Bliss (commonly known as the Pure Land Sutra), countless eons ago, a king named Dharmakāra met a Buddha named Lokeśvararāja and renounced the throne to pursue the bodhisattva path. Dharmakāra vowed to transfer all of his bodhisattva merits towards the creation of a purified realm of bliss, known as Sukhāvātī, in which all sentient beings could be reborn so as to attain enlightenment more easily. Upon completion of his vows, Dharmakāra would attain Buddhahood as the Buddha Amitābha. As he is currently known as Amitābha, we can infer that Pure Land devotees believe that the Bodhisattva Dharmakāra did indeed complete all of his vows. Each vow discusses a different category of being that must be saved by Dharmakāra. These various beings included poor people, the wicked and socially transgressive people, women, and all sorts of other beings who were typically excluded from Buddhist enlightenment discourse. According to the story, Dharmakāra felt that this world was so corrupt that it would be nearly impossible for most sentient beings to attain enlightenment. Therefore, he created a place where this goal was more readily attainable.

In order to understand the Pure Land Sutras and Mahayana devotional practices in general we must discuss the ideas of *Samādhi*, or contemplation, and *buddha-anusmirti*, (Ch. *nianfo*; Jp. *nembutsu*) which means "buddha-remembrance."<sup>6</sup> Early Mahayana devotional practices were directed towards various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and their Pure Lands. The appropriate Samadhi visualization or chanting exercises associated with each Buddha or Bodhisattva eventually came to compose a rather significant body of literature.<sup>7</sup> One of the earliest Mahayana texts was the *Pratyutpannasamādhisutra* which focused upon Amitābha Buddha. There are strong similarities between this early sutra and the shorter versions of the Pure Land Sutras. Each text claims that the chief means of achieving birth in a Pure Land is through "buddha-remembrance" practices. This implies that a relationship exists between these two texts, supporting the idea that Amitābha centered practices come from early Mahayana developments.<sup>8</sup> Very little is understood about the context for the Indian practices associated with this cult. We can, however, examine the works of early Mahayana Buddhist thinkers so as to understand how they viewed these practices associated with the Buddha Amitābha.

Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250) founded the Mādhyamika School, and helped pioneer the idea of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness.<sup>9</sup> Briefly put, all things are interdependent and lack any substantial reality of their own. Realization of this, in a Buddhist worldview, is supposed to create within the practitioner a strong desire to save all sentient beings. Therefore, ideas such as *nirvana* and *samsara* ultimately collapse into a single holistic concept of the universe and the purpose of Buddhist practice within it. Nāgārjuna promoted devotion to the Mahayana celestial buddhas as part of his philosophical system.<sup>10</sup> His emphasis on the "easy practice" of the Amitābha Samādhi for attaining rebirth in the Pure Land places him as one of the first and most important proponents of this method of practice.<sup>11</sup>

Vasubandhu (c.320-400) belonged to the Yogācāra, or consciousness-only, school which teaches "how to meditate on the relation between one's consciousness and the world and reach Enlightenment through realization of the intrinsic unity between them."<sup>12</sup> This school became Faxiang in China and Hossō, one of the six Nara schools, in Japan.

Vasubandhu is one of the most important figures in Indian Mahayana and was highly influential in establishing systematic Amitābha visualization Samadhi meditations. His writing was influential upon several important contributors to the Pure Land discourse.<sup>13</sup>

As mentioned above, we know very little about Amitābha devotionalism in India. As Buddhism was transmitted into China, however, a much more solid picture begins to evolve. Buddhism did not come to China as one thing or at one time. Throughout the history of Chinese Buddhism, there have been many waves of translation and exchange between regions in what is now India, and what is now China. Within this historical, geographical, doctrinal, and devotional continuum, "Sinified Buddhism" evolved.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that there was never an "exclusive" Pure Land school or sect within Chinese Buddhism, but the texts associated with Pure Land oriented soteriological systems had a significant impact upon monastic as well as popular religious expressions.

Tanluan (476-542) was an important interpreter of the works of Vasubandhu, and in many traditions he is regarded that the first Chinese Pure Land patriarch. "With his background as a Mādhyamika scholar, in effect he unified the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra aspects of Pure Land thought."<sup>15</sup> Tanluan emphasized the "other power" of the Buddha Amitābha, and the efficacy of the recitative *nianfo*.<sup>16</sup> He was originally a practitioner of Daoism, so his work can also be seen as a bridge between native Chinese ideas of oral spells and charms, and Indic ideas of mantra and *dharani*.<sup>17</sup> Tanluan's ideas were influential in high monastic literature. A monk named Daochuo (562-645) was inspired by Tanluan's assertion that one could not attain Buddhahood in this body. *Nianfo*, reciting the name of the Buddha as a method towards rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitābha, was at the center of Daochuo's system of thought. He also asserted that devotion to Amitābha and the Pure Land was the very core of Mahayana Buddhism. Later, a monk named Shandao (613-681), who saw himself as the ideological descendent of Tanluan and Daochuo, became famous for his parables emphasizing the soteriological function of *nianfo* and the importance of faith. These three figures were highly influential in the development of Pure Land Buddhism in East Asia. It was only in Japan, however, that Pure Land Buddhism became a distinctive and exclusionary sect.<sup>18</sup>

Another figure, Zhiyi (538-597), the founder of the Tiantai School, emphasized the Amitābha Samādhi. His contribution to the worship of Amitābha rests within his utilization of various practices discussed in the *Pratypannasamādhisutra*. For example, he proposed four different forms of practice associated with this samādhi: constant sitting samādhi for ninety days, constant walking samādhi for ninety days, alteration between the two, and "unspecified posture" samādhi, all of which centered upon the Buddha Amitābha.<sup>19</sup> Tiantai would become the Tendai school in Japan, which formed the bedrock for most indigenous Buddhist elements in Japan.

Buddhism entered Japan as a part of the Korean political effort to build ties between the two nations. As Korean emissaries brought "Chinese culture," court officials began to a fondness for Buddhism. Pure Land texts came into Japan at this time, but were only a minor part of the emerging Japanese Buddhist culture. Later, the imperial court sponsored two monks to travel to China to learn more about Buddhism. Saichō and Kūkai left in 804 and each brought back their own version of what they had experienced in China. Saichō went on to found the Tendai sect and Kūkai went on to found the Shingon sect. Saichō traveled to the monastic complex of Mt. Tiantai in China where Zhiyi's "Four-Samadhi" Amitābha practices had been institutionalized.<sup>20</sup> Saichō's successor, Ennin (794-864) went to China and brought back a form of *nianfo* which could be sung in five tones. His successor, Ryōgen (911-985) further promoted and systematized these practices on Mt. Hiei in Japan.<sup>21</sup>

At that time, Japanese Buddhism was primarily limited to the imperial court and aristocratic circles. The complex rituals of the Tendai and Shingon schools required time and money that most peasants simply could not afford. Later, wandering ascetics known as *hijiri* left the monastic compound to preach among the laity. It was common for these ascetics to instruct laity in easy forms of Buddhist practice. It is during this time that popular *nembutsu* practices began to emerge. Though it is now common to associate these practices with the Buddha Amitābha (*Amida* in Japanese) there are many different types of *nembutsu*.<sup>22</sup> For example, one might intone the name of a famous Buddha or

Bodhisattva for the purposes of protecting oneself from demons or vengeful spirits, currying sickness, gaining wealth, and many other reasons. Another form of *nembutsu* practice is efficacious for rebirth in the Pure Land of a particular Buddha.<sup>23</sup> Among these forms of practice, the popular devotional cult to the Buddha Amitābha became the most popular due to the proselytizing efforts of Genshin (942-1017), a student of Ryōgen from Mt. Hiei. Genshin emphasized the great misery of the various hells in his *Ōjōyōshū*, a book that graphically depicted not only the fires and tortures of the many hells within Buddhist cosmologies, but also the bliss and serenity that awaits the faithful in the Pure Land of Amida. Genshin felt that the meditative *nembutsu* was the most efficacious.

Genshin and those like him came to be known as "dancing sages." They would go down from the mountains and into the market places and dance, chime bells, and bang on gongs while chanting the *nembutsu* of Amida, "*namu-amida-butsu*."<sup>24</sup> They would also hand out votive tablets and talismans with the name of Amida written on them. These and other forms of popular practice were sometimes at odds with the greater monastic establishment. This dynamic tension between the monastic complexes and popular devotion provided a "fertile field" for the eventual growth of the Pure Land movement as pioneered by Hōnen (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1262).

Hōnen became dissatisfied with the monastic establishment, and came to focus upon the invocation of the *nembutsu*. Though his theories and practices are complex and nuanced, and deeply embedded in a Tendai and broader Mahayana worldview, it will serve our purposes to discuss his contribution in terms of the simple utterance of the name of the Buddha Amida as the only efficacious practice for rebirth. The inherently simple nature of this practice strongly contrasted with the complexity of the rituals found on Mt. Hiei. Hōnen's position, though unorthodox, did not create waves until his movement had grown large enough to include the emperor. After two of his disciples were entangled in a scandal involving two court ladies, however, the monastic establishment was able to finally take the political leap it needed to do away with this thorn in their sides. The emperor agreed to exile Hōnen and his disciples. Despite persecution, Hōnen had built a strong movement. In many ways he sensed the changing

tide of popular practice and set about synthesizing his understanding of Amida-centered devotion in such a way as to ride this wave of religious developments. Among his many dedicated and successful disciples, Shinran became one of the most important figures in the continued Japanese Pure Land movement.

At the core of Shinran's system of thought is the idea that enlightenment is essentially something that must happen of its own accord. You can not *make* yourself become enlightened. Even within the orthodox Tendai concept of the Bodhisattva path, one must work through many lifetimes until *it* happens. Shinran believed that one could only rely upon the power of Amida Buddha. This idea locates agency outside the reach of the practitioner, but more importantly it established the notion that there can be no Earthly authority capable of granting enlightenment. Shinran's understanding of Amida's salvation differed from Hōnen in that he believed that only "faith" in the saving power of Amida as present in the *nembutsu* could offer liberation. According to Shinran the *nembutsu* could not *do* anything. Instead, the recitation of the *nembutsu* should be said as a sign of gratitude for salvation already guaranteed. He believed that all sentient beings were already saved and destined for rebirth in the Pure Land.

Another significant facet of Shinran's interpretation of salvation in the Pure Land was his denial of state support, priests, and *kami*, or Japanese nature spirits/cultural heroes, in favor of an egalitarian community based practice and devotion. The only authority was Amida. In Jōdo Shinshū, the religious organization that grew out of Shinran's movement, priests were able to marry, have children, and participate in trade and commerce. This gave Pure Land Buddhism a socio-economic structure that would never depend solely upon state sponsorship.<sup>25</sup> This decentralized form of Buddhism was uncontrollable by either the government or the monastic establishments. Shinran's articulation of Pure Land Buddhism displaced karma, emptiness, and other ideas that could be used to control a person's salvation out of the equation.<sup>26</sup> His simplification of Buddhism nonetheless paralleled many of the higher monastic ideas, only in a seemingly dualistic form.<sup>27</sup>

Economic growth and relaxed political restrictions allowed a middle class to eventually evolve in Tokugawa Period (1603-1868) Japan. This growing social class had the advantages of social mobility and enough freedoms provided by entrepreneurial success to allow interest in Buddhism. This non-aristocratic sphere of the populace was particularly interested in Pure Land Buddhism. Rennyō (1415-1499), the eighth generational descendent of Shinran, rejuvenated and systematized the pastoral position within the orthodox Honganji, the head temple for Jōdo Shinshū. He began a recruitment and proselytization campaign similar to Shinran. Despite the fact that Rennyō and his followers were persecuted by the monastic establishments, his work would soon establish Pure Land Buddhism as a significant political and economic force.<sup>28</sup>

We have seen that Amida-centered practices form a significant component of the larger Mahayanist Pure Land discourse, not only in Japan, but across Asian Buddhist history as a whole. Why then, has this important component of ritual and popular practice been relegated to the margins of academia, and all but neglected in popular writings? One the primary aims of this paper has been to express the degree to which Pure Land oriented systems have been important to the development and propagation of Buddhism. Now that we have established this, I will continue by examining the reasons for its dismissal, and possible corrective measures to be taken to account for this in the future.

### **Colonialism, Orientalism, and the Origins of Buddhist Studies**

In 1837, Brian Hodgson (1800-1894) delivered 147 Sanskrit manuscripts to Eugène Burnouf who published the *Introduction 'a l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* in 1844. Hodgson had discovered a large stockpile of Sanskrit and Tibetan texts in Nepal, thus "jump-starting" Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline. Due to the persecution of Buddhists under the Mughal Empire, however, Buddhism was all but dead in India and there were few living examples of Buddhism immediately within the Indic sphere. In addition, the British saw Tibetan, Nepalese, and Bhutanese traditions as "corrupted" and therefore unreliable.<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that Buddhism as an object of study was created while the British were "conquering" China and India.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the colonialist

agenda at work in the creation of this field of study no doubt served as a means by which to undermine the legitimacy of native and indigenous cultures.

Early Buddhism, i.e., that which was extrapolated from the earliest texts as being the original manifestation of "Buddhism," was elevated in the minds of European Sanskritologists like F. Max Muller. Sanskrit, the root language of Buddhism, was understood to be linguistically linked with Greek, Latin, and German. This grouping was later employed as a way to justify racist attitudes towards Indians and modern Buddhists, who were seen as perverting their pristine "Aryan" culture with debase rituals and idolatry. Buddhism, in the European eye, was linked with this "Aryan" past, and thus Europe. The existence of Buddhism in the classical Indian period located the earliest Buddhist texts within the cultural realm of the earlier Aryan culture. This logic was used by European scholars to emphasize how Indian and Chinese Buddhism had deviated from its golden age, thus becoming corrupt and defunct in the present age. Early Buddhism was seen as rational and psychological, but most importantly, Aryan. This showed great contrast to the cultures that Europeans had labeled primitive, backward, ritualistic, and superstitious.<sup>31</sup> Early European scholars of Buddhism operated under a few basic assumptions. First, the original philosophy of Buddhism was Sanskrit-Aryan, thus culturally related to Europe. Second, this earlier Buddhism was a rational rejection of "benighted" Hindu dogma and ritual. These two ideas, when combined, undermined the possibility for any positive portrayal of the various forms of Buddhism as they existed in modern Asia. Therefore, when Buddhism was finally portrayed in a positive light by later European scholars it manifested a vision that was essentially controlled by European thinkers. Modern Buddhism as it existed in Asia was devalued in comparison.

Early portrayals of Buddhism in Western scholarship were extracted from Pali/Sanskrit texts which circulated among the monastic elites of ancient India. Many of these texts are primarily concerned with doctrine and monastic codes or stories and parables. It is very likely that those texts had almost no influence upon the way Buddhism was first practiced (by laity or monks). In fact, through recent archeological and epigraphic analysis, we have learned that Buddhism was first practiced in coalition with

"animistic" local practices, and was not a rejection of them.<sup>32</sup> This would provide evidence that suggests that the initial portrayals of Buddhism never had an "on the ground" reality. The focus of modern scholarship, for the most part, has become increasingly and actively grounded in historical and verifiable evidence. The popular imagination, however, remains deeply rooted in the early colonial biases and ill-informed early depictions of Buddhism.<sup>33</sup>

### **Modern Japanese History and the Emergence of Occidentalism**

If I were to spend the whole of my paper critiquing and examining the European evaluation of Buddhism, I would only be reinforcing many of the academy's orientalist presuppositions. I would be portraying "the Orient" as the passive recipient of the active West. This would not only obscure the reality of the situation, but would send us back to square one in the orientalist discourse, and dislocate agency in this dialogue. For Japan, the time of colonialist exploitation was a time to react, in what I would call the "Occidentalism" reaction. If we are to understand Orientalism as an "othering" or an attempt to define and understand identity at the expense of an "other," then "Occidentalism" can be seen as a like-minded response formed by the need to build, maintain, and construct an identity that best suited the time and place. In this case, "Occidentalism" coming from the East Asian context consisted in the location and propagation of ideologies that were seen to be characteristically "Asian," or in our case, "Japanese," while simultaneously denigrating those ideologies and ways of life that were seen as characteristically "Western." This rearticulation of identity was simultaneously a rejection of and reaction to Western expectations of the East. Ironically, this "dialogue" was conducted primarily through the conduit of Western philosophy.

Japan had been in isolation from roughly the 1630's to the 1854 invasion of Commodore Perry. Perry was an American naval captain who had been sent by the president of the United States to investigate and open trade with this secretive island nation. The technological inequality was apparent to the Japanese who had missed the entire industrial revolution. Perry arrived with large black iron ships belching black smoke. Arguably, no one in the whole of Japan had seen such a machine. Due to the

inability of the *bakufu*, Shogunate, government's ability to respond in a timely or effective manner, a coup originating on the island of Kyūshū banded together and deposed the Shogun. In its place was positioned the young Meiji Emperor. This political reconfiguration is known as the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Rhetorically speaking, the emperor was "restored" to the throne.

During this time, a strong push to integrate all things Western was initiated by the new government. Not only was there a strong drive to build a technologically modern nation, there was also a perceived need to create a psychically unified "Japanese" nation. Before the Meiji Restoration, Buddhism, especially Pure Land Buddhism, had benefited from the existing social structure. With the removal of the old order, however, the favor held by Buddhism was lost.<sup>34</sup> One result of the Meiji Restoration was the creation of "Shintō" as a national religion at the expense of all "foreign," thus Buddhist, elements. The new government was consciously designing a nationalist identity that was "purely Japanese." A type of literature known as *nihonjinron*, which roughly translates to "theories about the uniqueness of Japanese people," was used as a foil for the establishment of this identity.

As a result of this nationalist ferment and the creation of Shintō as the official state ideology strong opposition and outright persecution of Buddhism was legislated. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Buddhist apologists had found a way to make themselves helpful to the growing nationalist and military interests. Zen and Nichiren Buddhisms were utilized as part of the *shinbukkyō* or "New Buddhism" agenda. "New Buddhism" arose for two reasons: first, to maintain a Buddhist identity as part of the changing Japanese identity, and second, to answer and adapt to the critiques of imported European (especially German) philosophy, science, and Christianity.<sup>35</sup>

At this time, international Buddhist Studies was dominated by European thinkers who viewed Mahayana in general as "inauthentic."<sup>36</sup> As a result, in the construction of a Buddhism that would best suit the Japanese national polity, or *kokutai*, Zen became the prime candidate. Zen's rhetorical emphasis on meditation and seeming antinomianism

(despite being in actuality highly literary and ritualistic) made it particularly pleasing to the Western eye. As a result, it was cast as the quintessential form of Buddhism, and the most exemplary expression of Japanese identity. The "globetrotting" priests who propagated Zen on an international scale were classically trained in Western intellectual thought in newly imported Western style universities, and tended to cast their interpretations of Buddhism as a form of generic transcendental monism that was transcultural, yet uniquely Japanese.<sup>37</sup> As many of these ideas were imported, Japanese Buddhists made attempts to show how their religion was more like the long-gone pristine Buddhism of earlier times. Pure Land was simply irreconcilable with the agendas at hand in modernization.

Japanese Pure Land Buddhism was left out of this nationalist model, and the international exportation of Japanese Buddhist identity, for a number of reasons. As mentioned earlier, medieval Pure Land social models denied *kami* traditions, the monastic establishment and veneration of the ascetic path, meditation, state control of religion, and established social hierarchies.<sup>38</sup> This was obviously at odds with the agendas of international cultural apologist and nationalist State Shintō ideologues. Pure Land devotionalism was also not looked upon fondly by European or Victorian scholars of Buddhism. This European construct called "Buddhism" was having a strong effect upon Japanese Buddhist scholarship and the Japanese nationalists bent upon creating a new and internationally acceptable image. Pure Land Buddhism as part of this identity was not necessarily beneficial to the evolving status quo. This reactionary construction of Japanese identity played upon orientalist assumption about the inhabitants of the 'Orient.' "In [the eyes of Japanese intellectuals], the war against the West was a war against a 'poisonous materialist civilization'....All agreed that culture—that is, traditional Japanese culture—was spiritual and profound, whereas modern Western civilization was shallow, rootless, and destructive of creative power....A holistic, traditional Orient united under divine Japanese imperial rule would restore the warm organic community to spiritual health."<sup>39</sup> Under this guise, Japan set about conquering Asia in order to "save it" from the encroachment of the West. Eventually, Japanese missionary efforts came to include all

Buddhist institutions. Pure Land schools therefore eventually jumped on the nationalist bandwagon in an effort to bring "True Buddhism" to Asia.<sup>40</sup>

According to Galen Amstutz's book *Interpreting Amida*, Buddhist Studies has been influenced by European as well as Japanese historical interests and ideologies. Though his argument is complex and nuanced, in summary, he asserts that Pure Land Buddhism in Japan was not well suited to being utilized by the nationalist agenda evolving after the Meiji Period. Japan at the time was importing many ideas from the West. Many Japanese thinkers were traveling to Germany to learn and study Sanskrit so as to understand "pristine" Buddhism. Given the predisposition of European studies of Buddhism at the time, Japanese scholars then started constructing an ideal form of Buddhism that was easily exportable and explained in terms of Western rationalism and religious thought. In essence, we have the orientalist discourse which presupposed that Buddhism was rationalistic and atheistic, while the "occidental" discourse was characterizing Buddhism to fit these expectations. According to Amstutz, Pure Land Buddhism had been pushed to the margins of Buddhist discourse by Japanese and the European and Victorian/American interests.

### **Japanese Pure Land and Buddhism for Westerners**

The history of Western interaction with Japanese Pure Land Buddhism is a history of near misses. Japanese Pure Land Buddhism was first discovered by Jesuits who saw its superficial similarities to Christianity as the trickery of the devil. Later encounters across Asia merely reduced it to idol-worship and there seemed little desire to equate such practices with the emergent European understanding of "Pristine" Buddhism. The ritual, structural, and devotional elements resembled Catholic liturgy, but the communal and egalitarian pragmatism resembled Protestantism. This was revolting to Jesuits. As a result, little was done by them to accurately assess or engage Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. American/Victorian existentialist "seekers" who encountered Japanese Buddhism were primarily interested in Shingon and Tendai Esoteric Buddhism. Popular devotional religion, though comprising the majority of Buddhist practice in Japan, both familial and communal, quite simply existed within social spheres that these early "seekers" were

unable to engage.<sup>41</sup> Tweed and Amstutz characterize these early existential seekers as needing something that was: a) utterly opposite of Christianity; b) an exact match for Christianity; c) or something likened to "post-Christian" rationalistic European Enlightenment thinking. I would add one category to this list. These existentialist seekers also desired something exotic and "other" enough such that it could be recoded as needed according to European interest. Likewise, its surface similarities to Christianity discouraged those looking for a replacement to Christianity. Furthermore, its deeper theoretical perspectives were so counter to many Christian beliefs, such as theism and the soul, that those seeking a complement to Christianity were likewise out of luck.

Pure Land Buddhism was so significant in Japan during the period of initial contact in the early to mid 1800's that it was not in the least bit compatible with Western interests. "Instead of meditation, preaching had an essential role in the Shin tradition because the basic operation of *tariki* was not based on mediation but on a spiritual openness to the working of Amida."<sup>42</sup> The Pure Land rejection of "self power," *jiriki*, of which Zen meditation was a part, no doubt limited the attractiveness of Pure Land Buddhism to those Westerners first interested in Buddhism. Academic orientalist were likewise dissatisfied with inquiry into Pure Land Buddhism. Most of these scholars, perhaps as a product of the William James "school" of religious studies, assumed that all religions were unified in their desire for a religious experience in which perception of the ultimate reality would be realized. This perspective was likewise incompatible with Pure Land pragmatist simplicity and this-worldly focus. Enlightenment is an explicitly insignificant component to Pure Land Buddhist soteriology. Therefore, focus is cast upon everyday activities and interactions in this world. In the end, the kind of Buddhism that was eventually propagated by the West was merely a creation of the West imagination. "Ultimately, what Victorian seekers most wanted out of 'Buddhism' was a metaphysical monism (a transcendentalist theism) combined with a liberal, individualist humanistic self-effort theory (not a 'grace' theory) and an elitist hostility to religious organizations (antisectionarianism)."<sup>43</sup>(43)

## Conclusion

In the beginning sections of this paper, I set out to establish that Pure Land practices and religious systems comprise a significant portion of the larger Buddhist discourse. I then set out to explain how and why orientalist and occidentalist presuppositions are still affecting Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline. The marginalization and dismissal of popular, vernacular, and in my opinion, more important, expressions of Buddhism is slowly coming to an end. This paper, has served as an attempt to synthesize current research on the topic of Pure Land Buddhism, both as an exclusively Japanese phenomenon, as well as a pan-Asian expression of popular Buddhist devotional practice. In conclusion, I will assert that the Pure Land discourse has been largely ignored. I will likewise add that by recalibrating the focus of Buddhist Studies, (if we are to view Buddhism as a *religion* in practice) we can better understand the nature of its diverse expressions as they serve to express the needs and desires of particular communities at various times and in various contexts. By reemphasizing local temple practice, popular and sub-monastic ritual studies, and soteriological orientations, a much more accurate picture of Buddhism emerges, of which, Pure Land practices form a significant part. It is my position that such efforts could perhaps serve as a bridge towards understanding Buddhism and Buddhist cultures in popular and academic spheres as we continually move towards a "melting-pot" of Buddhist traditions existing side by side.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In the Mahayana Buddhist context, a "Pure Land" is one of the many separate world-systems created by one of the many celestial Buddhas. The creation of such a place is meant to make it easier for karma-bound sentient beings to attain liberation. Beings in *samsāra*, or the cycle of rebirth, are supposed to find it easier to "break out" of the cycle when learning at the feet of a living Buddha. Since the historical Buddha has been dead for 2500 years, "Pure Land" thought evolved as an "easy path" by which sentient beings could seek teachings from a living Buddha in a "Pure Land" realm. Therefore, the desire for rebirth in a "Pure Land" in one's next life became quite popular. This concept differs significantly from the Judeo-Christian and Buddhist concepts of heaven. The Judeo-Christian "heaven" is seen as a final destination and reward for past good deeds. Buddhist "heavens" are seen as higher planes of consciousness which are nonetheless still part of *samsāra*. A Pure Land, however, in line with the rest of Mahayana thought, is seen as a place from which a being may attain liberation for the purposes of helping other sentient beings attain the same.

<sup>2</sup> The title *buddha* translates as "awakened one" or "the one who has awoken."

<sup>3</sup> Mahayana Buddhism is based upon the idea of the *bodhisattva*, or "awakened being." A bodhisattva is a being that has "awakened" to the nature of reality, but has postponed becoming a full Buddha until they can save all sentient beings. Mahayana means "great vehicle." The concept of the Mahayana and the bodhisattva evolved together, producing the idea that all being in the universe will attain "ultimate awakening" together as one "great vehicle."

<sup>4</sup> Inagaki 1997 (p. 27)

<sup>5</sup> Gomez 1996 (p. 130)

<sup>6</sup> Inagaki 1997 (p. 17)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid (p. 13-14)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid (p. 19)

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<sup>9</sup> Next to the historical Buddha, Nāgārjuna is the most important figure in Mahayana Buddhist history. Every sect in Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam draws their lineage back through him.

<sup>10</sup> By "practicality" I mean that devotional religion was an inherent part of the Indian religious experience. As such, devotional Buddhist practices would arise out of this Indian context naturally.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid (p. 62-63)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid (p. 68)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid (p. 70)

<sup>14</sup> Sharf 2002 (p. 13)

<sup>15</sup> Inagaki 1997 (p. 84)

<sup>16</sup> The concept of "other power" in comparison with "self power" places the power of Amitābha as being the primary acting force in the determination of ones rebirth. Practices may be engaged in, but without the "saving" power of Amitābha, they are of little efficacy.

<sup>17</sup> Sharf 2002 (p. 290)

<sup>18</sup> Inagaki 1997 (p. 114) This parable portrays a man running from bandits and wild animals who must then cross a path which runs between a river of fire and one of water. The symbolism states that the danger is samsara, and the other shore is the Pure Land.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid (p. 99)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid (p. 149). The "Four Samādhi" practices were systematized by Zhiyi when he founded the monastic complex on Mt. Tiantai in China. They include walking, sitting, walking and sitting, and no set stance meditations on the Buddha Amitabha.

<sup>21</sup> Amstutz 1997 (p. 6)

<sup>22</sup> The 2006, Volume 33 Issue 2, of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, published one month before this paper was written, emphasizes the diversity of Pure Land practice within Japan. This is particularly important because Pure Land is often understood singularly in terms of Amitābha centered practice.

<sup>23</sup> Early Mahayana practitioners often desired to be born in the Pure Land of Akṣobhya, or Ashuku in Japanese, which is said to be in the East, as opposed to the Pure Land of Amitabha, which is said to be in the West. Others wished to be born in the Pure Land of the Buddha Bhaiṣajya-guru, Yakushi in Japanese. Others would worship the Bodhisattva Maitreya, Miroku Bosatsu in Japanese, so as to be born in the Tuṣita heaven.

<sup>24</sup> Inagaki 1997 (p. 153-159)

<sup>25</sup> Amstutz 1997 (p. 10)

<sup>26</sup> Karma, or the idea of cause and effect as determinant forces in ones future rebirth, has been used to justify oppression at the hands of high "caste" elites since its emergence in India as part of the Hindu-Buddhist cosmology.

<sup>27</sup> Amstutz 1997 (p. 12)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid (p. 17)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid (p. 3)

<sup>30</sup> Lopez 1995 (p. 2)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid (p. 6)

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<sup>32</sup> For more on this issue, please see Robert Decaroli, *Haunting the Buddha, Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> Lopez 1995 (p. 8-9)

<sup>34</sup> At the time, however, there were other spheres of religious devotion among the imperial family which were devoted to *kami*, or divine nature spirits/ revered ancestors. Under the heading of *kami* worship also fell the various and diffuse forms of localized shrines or devotional cults. Throughout what we may call "Japanese History" *kami* were worshiped *as part of* the Japanese Buddhist Pantheon. Strong Chinese Buddhist, and Confucian elements can be seen within modern as well as historical expression of *kami* worship, so much so, that it is impossible to find much within *kami* worship traditions that are not also part of other Chinese imported elements.

<sup>35</sup> Sharf 1995 (p. 107-160)

<sup>36</sup> Amstutz 1997 (p. 32)

<sup>37</sup> Robert Sharf goes into great detail in his essay, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism." He outlines the intellectual histories of Shaku Sōen (1859-1919), D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) and many others who utilized militaristic nationalist rhetoric and imported German and American philosophies to craft a Zen-philosophy which was simultaneously pleasing to the eyes of the West for export, and likewise pleasing to the military nationalist agenda seeking doctrinal justification for its action. For more on this, see Brian Victoria's *Zen at War* and *Zen War Stories*. Victoria is a Zen priest whose investigations into the intellectual involvement of the Zen religious establishment and Japanese militarism prompted a public apology from the head of the Sōtō Zen sect regarding the institutions involvement in crimes against humanity in the name of religion.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid (p. 5)

<sup>39</sup> Buruma and Avishi 2005 (p. 3) Though this book focuses primarily upon the Middle-east, I found it highly useful in conjunction with Said's *Orientalism* because it initially focuses on East Asia, while Said is primarily focused upon the Middle-east. The theory works well in both cases for the Far-east and Middle-east as they were both very much the "recipients" of as well as participants in colonialism.

<sup>40</sup> Ketelaar, James. *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1990). This book spends considerable time examining how and why the Buddhist establishment moved from being persecuted to being absorbed by, and promoting, the militarist national agenda.

<sup>41</sup> Tweed 2000 (p. 2)

<sup>42</sup> Amstutz 1997 (p. 15)

<sup>43</sup> Ibid (p. 67)