

AN INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN PURE LAND BUDDHISM

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The purpose of this text is to provide a brief introduction to the teachings of Western Pure Land Buddhism (Post-Jodo Shinshu).

What is Western Pure Land Buddhism?

Western Pure Land Buddhism (WPLB) is one of the latest and most fullest development of the Mahayana Pure Land tradition. It shares with all other Buddhist groups the ideal of attaining Nirvana, not just for oneself, but for all beings. Thus the goal of one's life is to attain Buddhahood in order to transform this world of birth-and-death into Nirvana. WPLB differs from most other Buddhist groups in teaching that Buddhahood is a gift to us from Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, through the saying of Nembutsu (Namu Amida Buddha).

From where did Western Pure Land Buddhism originate?

The teachings of WPLB ultimately derive from the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha who lived in Northern India over 2500 years ago. Now Shakyamuni Buddha taught many teachings, but few understood them. So before his Parinirvana (his return to Mythological reality) he taught the Three Pure Land Sutras in order to enable all people, especially those unable to take the path of monk/nun-hood, to follow him into Nirvana. Then his lay followers traveling the world's trade routes spread the teachings throughout Asia. By the time Buddhism reached Japan it had started to degenerate into a state religion supporting the aristocracy and the rich land owners. Temples even raised armies to attack each other and to put down peasant uprisings. By the 13th century Buddhism had reached a moral low point and it was at this point that reformers appeared. It was this moment which gave birth to Soto Zen, Nichiren Shu, Jodo Shu and Jodo Shinshu (also known as Shin Buddhism). The Western Pure Land Buddhist movement owes its beginning to the founder of Jodo Shinshu, Shinran.

This is not to imply that the other 47 vows are in anyway lesser to this Vow. It is just that historically this one vow has been seen as pivotal. In this day and age I feel we need to

Who is Shinran? and see how we can apply them to our current situation (see my commentary on the 48 vows in this book).

Jodo Shinshu was founded by Shinran, when he made a collection of passages from the Sutras and the commentaries concerning the Pure Land. This collection is called the Kyogyoshinsho. It outlines the way to Buddhahood by saying the Nembutsu and taking birth in the Pure Land now. Shinran was born May 21, 1173 near the city of Kyoto, (teachings).

Japan. His parents died in his early childhood and he was sent to a Tendai Buddhist temple to become a monk at age eight. Over the next 20 years he spent practicing the methods of self-power (more on this latter) to try and force his way into enlightenment. He suffered a spiritual crisis when he came to realize enlightenment was impossible by his own efforts. Abandoning the temple at age twenty-eight, he met the monk Honen who was then teaching the Other-Power path of Amida Buddha and birth in the Pure Land. Through abandoning all practices and responding to the awakening of faith through Amida's Important Vow (that Amida would not become a Buddha if all human beings who with sincere mind, faith serene, desire birth in the Pure Land and who recites the Nembutsu even just once, did not take rebirth there and achieve supreme enlightenment), Shinran received the certainty of enlightenment (shinjin) as a gift from Amida. Then Shinran spent the rest of his life teaching the Pure Land path to the common people of the land.

How did the Pure Land teachings come to the West?

Like all other forms of Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism arrived through the efforts of the Asian immigration during the late 1800's. Specifically, the Japanese immigration to Hawaii and the West Coast gave rise to the first Buddhist missions. The present organization the Buddhist Churches of America is the main branch of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in the U.S.

What is the meaning of Other-Power?

Within Buddhism there are two main groups in which the various Buddhist practices are organized. These groups are the paths of self-power and the paths of Other-Power. Self-power paths are those ways (like sitting meditations, koans, visualizations, ritual. etc) in which one tries by one's own will to force oneself into an enlightenment experience. And yet, many of us find that these practices are difficult to impossible for us, as laypersons, to undertake. We have neither the time or the will to complete them successfully. And unless one abandons secular life and take up monastic practice then one will have great difficulty in following the paths of self-power. Yet we are not without hope, that hope is the Other-Power. Amida Buddha out of great compassion took upon itself all the burdens of practice. The Pure Land Sutras teach that the merits Amida Buddha created by practice are transferred to us as a gift of awakening faith.

Who is Amida Buddha? For various reasons, the BCA is basically a Japanese cultural organization in practice. Non-Japanese, though officially welcome in most churches, are made to feel as outsiders. This is the reason for the growth of non-BCA Western Pure Land Buddhism groups like EKO, the White Lotus Society and the Wider Shin Buddhist Fellowship.

Amida Buddha is the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life. There is no place within this universe where the light of the Buddha's compassion does not shine. And through infinite life, there will be no being within the universe left out of Nirvana.

Amida Buddha is the universal personification of one's own innate buddha-nature. When awakening arises it is the union of the savior (Amida/buddha-nature) and the saved (the body). Awakening to the certainty of enlightenment takes place within the body. The body becomes the Pure Land in which Amida Buddha dwells. The descriptions of the Pure Land found in the sutras are symbolic descriptions of the awakening body and its possibilities.

Amida Buddha is not a god. The Buddhas do not have the power to create, maintain or destroy worlds as people have historically envisioned the gods and goddesses doing. It is to free beings from the sufferings of birth-and-death. For all purposes of our daily lives this world is eternal and uncreated. It is driven only by the power of karma and constant change.

Amida Buddha is neither a he or a she. But since we human beings insist on personifications, we can refer to Amida as of either gender. The Japanese traditional address Amida as our father and mother (our spiritual parents).

What is the Vow?

This is the promise made by Amida that all beings who say its name will be reborn in the Pure Land and quickly achieve enlightenment. This is realized in the present moment through an experience of awakening, the certainty of enlightenment (shinjin). It takes place within this body and within this lifetime.

What is the Certainty of Enlightenment (shinjin)?

This is the single moment of experience in which one becomes personally aware of the reality of one's certainty of enlightenment. It is to be grasped by Amida Buddha's promise, never to be abandoned. It is the point of non-regression; one cannot fall back into a lower rebirth (unless one does so in order to fulfill one's vow to become an Enlightening Being). It is the awakening of oneself through the awakening of all others; the awakening of others through one's own awakening. And it is, the complete equality between oneself and the future Buddhas of all worlds.

At the same time there are 47 other vows which are equally important (and historically neglected) and should be explored further (see my commentary in this book).

How does one practice Western Pure Land Buddhism?

Shinran taught us to view practice as no practice. Other Buddhist groups taught that one had to practice precepts, do rituals, meditations, visualizations, etc., to win Nirvana. WPLB sees the awakening of the certainty of enlightenment as a gift from Amida Buddha and not as a reward for successful practice. Due to past good actions we have arrived at this life and this time. It is this point of time in which we have the good fortune to receive these teachings. We respond to the hearing of these teachings by saying the Nembutsu (Namah Amida Buddha) once. And yet, when awakening arises one cannot keep it to oneself (since one is linked to all) and one goes on to chant the Nembutsu out of gratitude. In the light of this gratitude one may then go on, if one likes, to experience the many facets of Buddhist experience. Thus we can do the other Buddhist practices. If one does not go on to practice other ways, then at least do not slander them. Many come to awakening in other paths; no one has a monopoly on awakening.

How does one become a Pure Land Buddhist?

Becoming a Buddhist who follows the Western Pure Land Path is mostly a matter of self-identification. One may make a public declaration through a public ritual and take the Three Treasures Pledge. After which one then associates with other Buddhists in an organized manner face-to-face. Study groups or basic Buddhist communities could be formed. Be a light unto yourselves, but grow with others. Do not let others dominate you just because they started on the Buddhist way before you did. Remember the teachers you may meet are to serve you and not the other way around!

Is conversion the equal to the Awakening to Certainty?

Deciding to follow the Western Pure Land Buddhist way is not the same as awakening to the certainty of enlightenment. This awakening is a personal experience between you and Amida. No teacher or organization can give this awakening (they can only be an example of the possibilities which others have found and wish to share). Also, there is no certification of "enlightenment" as found in some other Buddhist sects. While joining WPLB groups is not equal to awakening, rest assured that all who try to live a life of Nembutsu will awaken in this life and in this body.

What is a life of Nembutsu?

~~The life of Nembutsu consists of chanting the Nembutsu and teaching~~
These include Buddhist and other religious practices done in this life, prior to awakening, even if "unsuccessful." Ultimately everything that happens leads, with proper awareness, to the possibility of awakening.

others the way. To live life without fear. And to join with others to better achieve these goals.

Should I accept WPLB teachings on faith alone?

No, for we should always test the value of teachings in our everyday life. Shakyamuni Buddha taught the Kalama people, who were being confused by the conflicting claims of roaming religious teachers (very much like today!), to test all teachings first. That is, not to accept a teaching purely on authority, tradition, logic, conformity, faith, etc., rather one should only accept a teaching after first putting it into practice and realizing its truth.

What now?

As of March 1995 there are no national WPLB groups, only individuals trying to put something together. I have been posting this document and others from a now defunct newsletter (EKO) in order to prepare the way for individuals to start Basic Buddhist Communities in their own homes. And after practicing in that way for a while a national federation of BBC's may then be formed. I am willing to aide in this effort and to provide information (and to receive it). I can be reached at:

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