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Introduction

Pure Land Buddhism

The Pure Land is one of the main traditions of the Greater Vehicle (Mahāyāna), that branch of Buddhism that emphasizes the possibility for all beings to become Buddha themselves.

According to the Greater Vehicle, all Buddhas possess a Pure Land which they build as they progress as candidates (*bodhisattva*) along the path to Awakening, or Enlightenment. In the Far East, however, the expression was eventually applied to *the* Pure Land *par excellence*, the one known as Sukhāvatī ("The Happy One"). This is the domain in which a Buddha named *Amida* 阿彌陀 is currently preaching. His name, which can be shortened to 'Mida, is the Sino-Japanese abbreviation of the double name of his in Sanskrit, *Amitābha* ("Infinite-Light") and *Amitāyus* ("Infinite-Life).

The Pure Land is the most widespread Buddhist current throughout the Far East, whether in China, Vietnam, Korea, or Japan. Over the centuries, it has given birth to various traditions, grouped under the generic term "teachings of the Pure Land" (Japanese: *Jōdokyō* 淨土教), sometimes rendered by "Jodoism" but more often than not by the questionable term "Amidism", or even "Amidaism" and "Amithābism". These latter designations are best avoided, as they suggest that the Pure Land teaching is a doctrine expounded by the Buddha Amida himself, or even that it constitutes a teaching distinct from that of Buddhism. Outside the sphere of Chinese cultural influence, teachings related to the Buddha Amitābha / Amitāyus also occupy an important place in Tibetan Buddhism.

A. Doctrinal basis

The expression "Pure Land" or "Purified Land" (*jōdo* 淨土) is the most common term used in Far Eastern Buddhism to designate in all its fullness what Indian sources call a "Buddha-field" (*buddhakṣetra*). In general, a Buddha-field can be defined as the field covered by the radiance of the realization of a Perfectly Accomplished Buddha. This concept is based on the principle that a Buddha does not remain inactive after attaining Awakening but that, on the contrary, he accomplishes "Buddha work" (*buddhakārya*) by sharing the fruits of his realization with beings as yet unawakened, essentially through his teaching of the path leading to deliverance.

1. Buddha-fields in the Greater Vehicle

According to Mahāyāna, the progression of a Bodhisattva on the path to Awakening is a conquest of oneself, assimilated to the accomplishments of a heroic prince who conquers a territory to build the kingdom of which he will become the sovereign. A Buddha's field is therefore presented as his "kingdom" or "realm" (*kokudo* 國土), or his "Buddha land" (*butsudo* 佛土), which he has gradually built up as a Bodhisattva and decorated with his merits through his purification of passions (*bonnō* 煩惱, *kleśa*), according to a process that explains the expression "Pure Land". After achieving the supreme, perfect and complete Awakening (*anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*), the former Bodhisattva reigns as a Buddha in his Pure Land, where he delivers his teaching. For the preaching of the Law is the main function of such a field: it is through teaching that a perfectly accomplished Buddha achieves his Buddha-work.

Moreover, as the Greater Vehicle postulates the universality of Buddha-nature inherent in all beings (*buddhatā*), it also affirms the current existence of multitudes of Buddha-fields surrounding our own universe, which coexist but do not overlap. Thus, even after the disappearance of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, beings can, by following certain practices, go to be born at the moment of death in the field of a Buddha, and there to hear the Law preached directly from the very mouth of an Awakened One.

However, the presence at the present time of various Buddhas in some of the universes surrounding ours is denied by the “Southern” tradition of Buddhism, including the Theravāda School established in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. This tradition is admittedly familiar with the notion of “Buddha-fields” (*buddhakkhetta*), and describes three types of them³.

The first is the field of birth of a Buddha (*jātikkhetta*), the framework of his existence, from his birth until his entry into the final nirvāṇa; in practical terms, it constitutes a world gathering ten thousand universes similar to ours.

The second type is the field of authority of a Buddha (*āṇākkhetta*), in which certain formulas of protection derived from his words (*paritta*) take effect, and which encompasses one hundred billion universes.

The third type is the field of investigation of a Buddha (*visayakkhetta*), the field of his omniscience, which, by definition, is unlimited.

Still, the existence of Buddhas of the Present in all directions around our universe is categorically denied by the Exegesis (*Abhidhamma*) of the Pāli canon. It may even be said that this point of divergence is one of the most significant between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions. It appears clearly in the treatise *Kathāvatthu* (“Points of Controversy”)⁴:

“That the Buddhas persist in all directions. Do you mean that they persist in the eastern quarter? You deny. Then you contradict yourself. You assent. Then I ask, How is this Eastern Buddha named? What is his family? his clan? What the names of his parents? Or of his pair of elect disciples? Or of his body-servant? What sort of raiment or bowl does he bear? And in what village, town, city, kingdom, or country?” (the same questions are repeated for the other five directions)⁵.

From the standpoint of the Greater Vehicle, this controversy is well documented by the *Treatise on the Larger Sūtra of the Perfection of Wisdom* attributed to Nāgārjuna (~243-300), and translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva in 402-406 AD (*Daichidoron* 大智度論). This text identifies the opponents of the existence of Buddhas of the Present as the Sarvāstivāda School that argues that according to the scriptures there cannot be two Buddhas at one and the same time:

“It is impossible, monks, it cannot come to pass, that in one world-system at one and the same time there should arise two Arahants who are Fully Enlightened Ones”⁶.

³ Buddhaghosa (5th century AD): *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, ch. XIII, 31.

⁴ *Kathāvatthu*, XXI-6 (*Sabbadisā kathā*): “Sabbā disā buddhā tiṭṭhantīti? Āmantā. Puratthimāya disāya buddho tiṭṭhantīti? Na hevaṃ vattabbe – pe. Puratthimāya disāya buddho tiṭṭhantīti? Āmantā. Kiṃnāmo so bhagavā, kiṃjacco, kiṃgotto, kiṃnāmā tassa bhagavato mātāpitaro, kiṃnāmaṃ tassa bhagavato sāvakayugam, ko nāmo tassa bhagavato upatṭhāko, kīdisaṃ cīvaraṃ dhāreti, kīdisaṃ pattam dhāreti, katarasmiṃ gāme vā nigame vā nagare vā raṭṭhe vā janapade vāti? Na hevaṃ vattabbe – pe”, etc. *Kathāvatthu*, (ed. by Arnold C. Taylor; London, Pali Text Society, 1894, 1979), vol. I, pp. 354-355.

⁵ Td. Shwe Zan Aung & C.A.F. Rhys Davids (London, Pali Text Society / Luzac 1915), pp. 354-355.

⁶ *Āṅguttara-nikāya*, I, xv, 10 (td. F. L. Woodward; London, Pali Text Society / Luzac, 1970), p. 26. See *Chū-*

The *Daichidoron* refutes this objection by stating that, although two Buddhas cannot cohabit simultaneously in any given universe, this does not exclude the existence of other Buddhas in other distinct universes. It then presents what amounts to a treatise in itself, presenting the following arguments in favour of the existence of Buddhas currently present in the Ten Directions. First of all, they respond to a necessity: if there is suffering in the universes of the Ten Directions, how could a Buddha not manifest himself there? Secondly, as there have been countless Buddhas in the past and as there will be countless in the future, there must necessarily be countless in the present. Thirdly, if the Buddha Śākyamuni did not mention them in his sermons to the listeners of the Smaller Vehicle (*Hinayāna*), this was in order to prevent them from sinking into laziness; however, Śākyamuni did not affirm in these sermons that the Buddhas of the Present do not exist. And the *Daichidoron* concludes with an argument resembling a form of Pascal's wager:

"If the Buddhas of the Ten Directions exist and you say they do not exist, you commit an immeasurable fault. If the Buddhas of the Ten Directions do not exist and I say they do exist, I conceive of infinite Buddhas and I receive the merit for worshipping them. For, it is my good intention that causes the greatness of the merit. (...)

With the physical eye, a human being cannot know them at all. But if, just through the faith of his heart, he says they do exist, his merit is infinite. (...) Common sense already makes it clear that man must, of himself, have faith in their existence. And all the more, how can there be no faith when the Buddha himself has proclaimed in the Mahāyāna that the Buddhas of the Ten Directions really exist?"⁷

Let us return to the concept of Buddha-fields according to the Greater Vehicle. As a field of radiance of an Awakened One, all of them share the same general qualities. However, the various Buddha-fields in their diversity also have their own specific characteristics. Indeed, all Buddhas obtain an identical realization of the perfect Awakening through their *general vow*, which is none other than the "thought of Awakening" (*bodhicitta*), that is, the vow to achieve Awakening in order to help all beings to obtain deliverance themselves. Through this general vow, all Awakened Ones therefore share the same realization, as indicated by the title of "buddha" common to all of them. On the other hand, during his career as a Bodhisattva, a future Buddha also produces a second type of vow, in order to adapt his realization to the circumstantial needs of the beings to be delivered: these are his *particular vows*, which will distinguish his personal realization and earn him his own proper name.

Several sermons of the Buddha Śākyamuni describe the specific characteristics of the fields of different Buddhas and the various methods of being born there. Throughout the history of the Greater Vehicle, some of these Buddhas enjoyed greater popularity than others. Among the more famous Pure Lands, one can mention "Joyful" (*Abhirati*), the domain of the Buddha Akṣobhya, located to the east of our universe and the fruit of his twenty vows; and "Beryl" (*Vaidūrya*) of the Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru, also to the east of our universe and the fruit of his twelve vows⁸. The same is true of the Buddha Śākyamuni with

Agongyō 中阿含經 (*Madhyamāgama*): "若世中有二如來者, 終無是處" (T. 1, 26, pp. 723c-724a); *Jō-Agongyō* 長阿含經 (*Dīrghāgama*): "欲使現在有二佛出世, 無有是處" (T. 1, 1, pp. 78c-79a).

⁷ Nāgārjuna, *Daichidoron* (Ch. *Dazhidulun*), vol. 9: "若有十方佛, 汝言無得無限罪。若無十方佛, 而我言有生無量佛想得恭敬福。所以善心因緣福德力大故。(...) 肉眼人雖俱不知, 但心信言有其福無量。(...) 人自用心尚應信有。何況佛自說摩訶衍中, 言實有十方佛而不信耶" (T. 25, 1509, p. 126b).

⁸ Dantinne, Jean: *La Splendeur de l'Inébranlable* (*Akṣobhya*) (Louvain-la-Neuve, Institut Orientaliste, 1983); Birnbaum, Raoul: *The Healing Buddha* (*Bhaiṣajyaguru*) (Boulder, Shambala Publications, 1979).

his five hundred vows⁹: his Buddha-field is none other than our own universe called "Endurance" (*Sahā*), which appears as a soiled land (*edo* 穢土) only to those unawakened beings, as explained by the *Sūtra of Vimalakīrti*¹⁰, while its purified aspect is presented in the *Lotus Sūtra*¹¹. Buddhas are not the only ones to enjoy such a domain: having reached the eve of perfect Awakening, the greatest Bodhisattvas have also almost completed their own Buddha-field, even if it is not yet comparable to that of a perfectly accomplished Awakened One. This is the case, in particular, of the Pure Land Potalaka of the Bodhisattva Avalokitasvara, considered the paragon of compassion of the Greater Vehicle.

The most famous Pure Land by far, however, is "The Happy One" (*Sukhāvātī*), translated into Chinese as "Ultimate-Happiness" (*Gokuraku* 極樂), "Peaceful-Happiness" (*Anraku* 安樂), or "Peaceful-Sustenance" (*Annyō* 安養). Established by the Buddha Amida through his forty-eight special vows, it is this Pure Land which was to enjoy incomparable success in Far Eastern Buddhism.

2. The Scriptures dedicated to the Buddha Amida

The Chinese Buddhist canon, also used in Korea, Vietnam and Japan, contains translations from Sanskrit of about one hundred eighty sermons of the Buddha Śākyamuni (*sūtra*) mentioning the Buddha Amida and his Pure Land, and about twenty treatises by Indian masters; many of these texts also feature in the Tibetan canon. In addition, there are many commentaries, sub-commentaries and original works by teachers of the respective schools in each of these countries.

Pure Land Buddhism has developed mainly from two types of *sūtras*, which have given rise to two main doctrinal trends: on the one hand, the *Sūtra of the Samādhi for Encountering Face-to-Face the Buddhas of the Present*; and on the other hand, the *Trilogy of the Pure Land Sūtras*.

a) The *Sūtra on the Samādhi for Encountering Face-to-Face the Buddhas of the Present* (*Hanju zammaikyō* 般舟三昧經) was translated by Lokakṣema in 179 AD, making it one of the oldest dated texts of the Greater Vehicle¹². Sanskrit fragments are preserved (*Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*), as well as three other Chinese versions and a Tibetan translation. The method recommended by this *sūtra*, which is characteristic of the Greater Vehicle, is intended for both men and women, clerics and laity. Besides arduous preliminary exercises, it consists of a one-week retreat during which the Buddha Amida is commemorated, day and night, with great faith. At the end of this practice, the practitioner may see, in front of him and in the here and now, the Buddhas of the Ten Directions and hear their teaching. The remarkable feature of this method is that it requires neither the

⁹ Yamada, Isshi 山田一止: *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka*, 2 vol. (London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1968).

¹⁰ McRae, John R.: *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (BDK English Tripitaka, 26-1; Berkeley, Numata Center, 2004); Watson, Burton: *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Lamotte, Etienne: *L'enseignement de Vimalakīrti* (Louvain, 1962).

¹¹ Hurtvitz, Leon: *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (1976; New York, Columbia University Press, 2009); Kubo, Tsugunari 久保継成 & Yuyama, Akira 湯山明: *The Lotus Sūtra* (BDK English Tripitaka, 13-1; Berkeley, Numata Center, 1993); Robert, Jean-Noël: *Le Sūtra du Lotus* (Paris, Fayard, 1997).

¹² Three volumes version (T. 13, 418), td. Paul Harrison: *The Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra* (BDK English Tripitaka, 25-II; Berkeley, 1998); one volume version (T. 13, 417), td. Inagaki, Hisao 稲垣久雄: "Pan-chou-san-mei-ching", in *Indo-tetsugaku to bukkyō*, Indian Philosophy and Buddhism: Essays in Honour of Professor Kōtatsu Fujita on His Sixtieth Birthday" (Kyoto, 1989), pp. 49-88.