Some Remarks on Amida and his Pure Land

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Does the Pure Land of Amida really exist in the west far away from our world, or is it our own minds? Furthermore, might it not be a mere myth or a symbol? This kind of question presently agitates the community of those concerned by this tradition, on both an academic and a religious level, including the various forums on the Internet. This is not a novelty though. During the Edo period, a dispute called “the squabble of the Jōō era” (Jōō no gekishō 徳王の闘議) developed within the Honganji around the same topics. Saigin 西亭 (1605-1663), chief of studies (nōke 能化) at Honganji’s College (Gakuryō 学院), was accused by his fellow student Gekkan 月感 (1600-1674) of mixing the Jōdo-Shinshū doctrine with interpretations from the Zen tradition. But discussions about the exact nature of Amida and his land go back further in the past, and can be traced to the 5th century in China. Accordingly, it is necessary to begin by looking at this development.

First of all, the notion of “buddha field” (buddhaśetra) or “buddha realm” (佛國土) is not exclusively Mahāyāna. The Pāli literature distinguishes three of them: the Field of life (jātikketa) of a buddha, which quaked at the time of the main events of his life and extends to ten thousand universes like our own; the Field of authority (āṇikketa) of his words, which extends to ten billion universes; and the Field of scope (visayakketa) of his knowledge, which is boundless (Buddhaghosa, Visuddhimagga, XIII-31). The entire Buddhist tradition acknowledges also
there can be only one buddha in one universe at any one time. Moreover there have been many buddhas in our universe in the past, the last one being Śākyamuni, and there will be many buddhas in our universe in the future, the next one being Maitreya (পালি: Metteya).

But one of the main Mahāyāna specificities is to add that, although our own Sahā universe is presently devoid of any buddha, many buddhas do presently teach within their own fields, where it is possible to go to be born at the end of this life in order to hear directly a living buddha. This development could well be considered a natural answer to the disappearance of Śākyamuni from our world, while seeing a buddha and listening to his teaching are of utmost importance in the process towards buddhahood. The bet on the existence of present buddhas all around our universe appears clearly in the Treatise on the Great Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra attributed to Nāgārjuna and translated by Kumārajīva in 404-406 AD:

If the Buddhas in the ten directions (十方佛) exist (有) and you say they don’t exist (無), you get a misused-without-delay. If the Buddhas in the ten directions do not exist and I say they exist, I am producing the ideation of infinite Buddhas and I get the merits of respecting them. (...) Although a human being can not know them all by his eyes of flesh, if through mental faith alone (但心信) he says they exist, his merits are infinite.

(Taishō shinshū daizokyo 大正新修大藏経 (T.) 25, 1509, p. 126b) Accordingly the existence of Amida was never denied. The questions evolved around the exact nature of this buddha and his land.

The Pure Land sūtras adopt quite a realistic stand, such as the Amidākyō, translated by Kumārajīva in 402 AD:

Westward from here (從是西方), beyond one thousand billion buddha lands, exists (有) a universe called "Utmost-Happiness". In that land exists (有) a buddha called "Amida". At present he dwells there and preaches the Law.

(T. 12, 366, p. 346c / Shinshū shōgyō zensho 真宗聖教全書 (SSZ) 1, p. 67)

The Pure Land is thus far away in another direction (他方), outside of our own universe. The point is that this kind of cosmography clashes head-on with the Mādhyamika philosophy of universal voidness. According to the Treatise on the Great Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra, the great voidness (大空) of Mahāyāna is the voidness of the ten directions (十方空):

Within the Mahāyāna doctrine, it is due to the relative truth (世俗諦) that the directions exist (有). But in absolute truth (第一義諦), the things (dharma) as a whole are ungraspable, how much more the directions! (...) What is metaphorically called ‘direction’ is the distinction between here (此間) and there (彼間) within the assembly of the four elements.

(T. 25, p. 288a)

No wonder then that scriptures used by the Mādhyamika take a different stand from the Pure Land sūtras. Thus the Sūtra of Vimalakīrti, also translated by Kumārajīva in 406 AD, says:

It is in compliance with his [the bodhisattva's] purity of mind that a buddha land is pure (隨其心淨即佛土淨).

(T. 14, 475, p. 538c) This famous assertion was enforced by Kumārajīva's direct disciples, who are the fountainhead of the Chinese Mādhyamika school (三論宗). Thus Songzhao 僧肇 (374-414) states:

A pure land built by a tathāgata has no-direction as substance (無方為體). However due to their diversity of practices, the beings look at it likewise (同視) but see it differently (異見). It is due to the differences of their seeing that purity and blemish are produced. (...) The buddha land is the reverberation (影響) of the beings.
And Daosheng 通生 (360-434) adds:

The enlightenment of Great Vehicle is fundamentally not to abandon births-and-deaths that would be near 近 to aspire to further (遠).

(T. 38, 1775, p. 392a)

This last statement was - so to said - answered by the Sūtra of the Contemplations of Infinite-Life (觀無量壽經), translated towards 430 AD. Like the two other Pure Land Sūtras, it says that the buddha field of Amida is in the west, but it adds that “the Buddha Amida is not far from here” 阿彌陀佛去此不遠 (T. 12, 365, p. 341c). Still Daosheng takes the Mādhyamika logic further:

A [buddha] realm is a territory delimited by beings. When there is no blemish in it, it said to be pure. Without blemish, it is non existent (無); delimited, it is existent (有).

(T. 38, 1775, p. 334c)

A deep connoisseur of the Mādhyamika, the Pure Land master Tanhuan 唐鸞 (476-542) says about Amida's realm:

It transcends existence (有), and still it exists (有). It transcends existence means that it transcends the three existences (三有) [within the World of Desire, the World of Form and the World of non-form]; still it exists is the Pure Land's existence (淨土有). (T. 40, 1819, p. 830a / SSZ 1, p. 293)

Shrewdly enough, Tanhuan also quotes the above-mentioned passage from the Sūtra of Vimalakīrti only to apply it to the cause of the Pure Land itself: that is the Pure Land is pure because when the future Amida produced his vows his mind was pure (T. 40, 1819, p. 829a / SSZ 1, p. 289).

Nevertheless, the Mādhyamika inspired the Chan/Zen tradition, whose 4th patriarch Daoxin 道信 (560-651) states:

If one knows that the mind originally neither arises nor perishes but is ultimately pure, then it is the pure buddha realm (即是淨佛國) and one doesn't have to turn towards the western direction (不須向西方). The Buddha makes the beings of obtuse faculties turn towards the western direction, but he doesn't preach that to men of sharp faculties.

(T. 85, 2837, p. 1287c)

The refutation by the Pure Land school came from Daochuo 道绰 (562-645). He had been a Chan practitioner but he was also the first to develop a distinctive and self-conscious Pure Land school (宗) by establishing its own set of Scriptures (經) that "encourage to leave here and search over there" (離此循彼), its own Masters' lineage (師承) and its own classification of teachings (教). In his refutation, Daochuo states:

In [our continent] Jambudīpa, where the sun rises is called "birth" and where it sets is called "death". (…) For this reason, the Bodhisattva Dharma-Treasure who became buddha through his vows dwells in the west to compassionately receive the beings. (…) If they were saints (聖人) and able to master levitation, they would not discriminate between the localizations of the directions (不辨方所). But due to their human psycho-physical characteristics, if ordinary beings (凡夫) turn to other directions, their going to the west would inevitably be difficult. (T. 47, 1958, p. 18a / SSZ 1, p. 426-427)

Daochuo also elaborates on the philosophical level:

If the conditioneds (緣) are embossed in compliance with their source (本), then there is nothing outside this mind (是心外無法). But if the meaning is explained by the division into two truths (二諦)
Buddha (念佛往生) will be difficult to reach. (3)

This was rebuked in turn by Shandao 普教 (613-681):
Do not believe others who say: “If only you purify your mind; this world is completely purified”! If they mean that this world would be the same as the Buddhas’ realms, why would there be such births-and-deaths within the six destinies?

(T. 47, 1981, p. 452b / SSZ 1, p. 707)

Shandao also refuted the interpretation of Amida as the elementary body (dhammakāya) of mere consciousness (唯識法身) that was then developed by the Chinese school of the Vijnānavāda (法相宗). Congruent with his teacher Daochuo, he also admits that the Buddhas can manifest their reflections without being bound to any direction (影現無方), but he insists that the Sūtra of the Contemplations points to one direction and establishes marks (指方立相) because ordinary beings would be unable to meditate on the markless. However, the Daochuo-Shandao tradition did not survive long in China and new idealist interpretations of the Pure Land developed during the Song Dynasty. Such an eclectic master as Lingzhi Yuanzhao 靈芝元照 (1048-1116), for example, says:

That Pure Land, that is my own mind (彼淨土即我自心), it is not in another direction (非他方). (T. 37, 1754, p. 280a)

In Japan, the immanentist interpretation of Amida was first developed by esoteric Buddhism, as summarized by Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212):
According to Shingon teaching (密教), Amida is the tathāgata in our own mind (己心如來) and one should not seek him outside (不可愛外). According to Pure Land teaching (淨土教), the Buddha Amida

[T. 47, 1958, p. 9a / SSZ 1, p. 394]
became buddha in accomplishment of the vows produced by the
bhikṣu Dharma-Treasure and he dwells in the western direction (在
西方). This is a big difference (大異).

Eventually, Chinese Pure Land idealism reached Japan by the
time of Shinran 観音 (1173-1263), who inherited Shandao's interpretation
through Hōnen. In his Kyōgyōshinshō, Shinran laments:

Clerics and laymen of the Declining Age and masters of recent
times are plunged in [the doctrine of Amida and his Pure Land as]
one's own nature and mind only (自性唯心) and they degrade the
true realization of the Pure Land. (Vol. III, Preface)

Shinran does not quote the names of those "masters of recent times" (近
世宗師), but it may be an allusion to Shunjō 勝蔵 (1166-1227) of Sennyūji
泉涌寺, who brought back to Japan the teachings of Lingzhi Yuzhanzhao
after a long stay in China. Later within the Jōdo-Shinshū, Zonkaku 存覺
(1290-1373) was also to refute the Tendai 天台 interpretation of "Amida
as my own mind" (己心の阿彌陀) and he insisted on the phrase "to go to
be born" (妙行 生) which stresses that the Pure Land is outside our
own world.

During the 17th century, the syncretic interpretation of Zen and
Pure Land by Chinese masters of the Ming dynasty – such as Yunqi
Zhuohong 善検査 (1535-1615) – also reached Japan, to the point that
some scholars of Honganji converted to the Rinzai school of Zen, like
Sessō Sōrai 雪窗宗耀 (1589-1649), Tetsugen Dōkō 鐘根道光 (1630-1683)
and Jitsuden Dōkin 富田達村 of Kōtokuji 光徳寺.

At the time of the Squabble of the Jōō era (1653-1655), Gekkan ac-
cussed Saigin of favouring the Zen interpretation of the Pure Land, that
is to contemplate it in one's mind (観心禅). In his defence, Saigin explains
that whenever he used Zen interpretation it was in order to prepare his
students not to be mislead if they encounter such ideas in other schools' com-
mentaries; as for his own teaching, he insisted that Jōdo-Shinshū re-
sorts to the interpretation by objectification of the marks (事相體) from
the Shandao tradition, which amounts to establish marks over markless
(無相之上相). Referring to the famous Sūtra of the heart of
Prajñāparamitā, Saigin says that Zen takes the standpoint of "voidness,
that is form" (空即是色), and Pure Land the standpoint of "form, that is
voidness" (色即是空).

Gekkan also accused Saigin of using allegorical interpretation (表事
淺). For example, Queen Vaidēhi would represent one's own original na-
ture (自己の本性), and her son Ajātaśatru the ignorance of the muddled
consciousness (妄識の無明). Saigin answers by a complicated explanation
referring to the Nirvāṇa Sūtra; he also recalls how Genshin 源信
(942-1017) already used allegorical interpretations in his Commentary on
the Amidadō. But the real answer of Saigin lies in the definition of his
method which is a synthetical approach of the facts and the meaning (事
理統合):

Sometimes I state the terminology according to the text (文), and
sometimes I provide its allegorical interpretation on the basis of its
meaning (義), in the hope of clarifying the meaning of the topic in
order to lead our students into the wisdom of faith (信智) within the
insurance (安心) of our doctrine.

In so doing, Saigin freely appropriated one of the most classical rules of
Buddhist hermeneutics, which is to rely on the meaning (義) and not
on words (不依語), as stated in the Treatise on the Great Prajñāparamitā-
sūtra, also quoted by Shinran in the Kyōgyōshinshō (VI-71).

* Let us now turn to the interpretation of Amida by Shinran himself as it
appears in his Ichinen-tannen mon'i:

From this precious ocean of unique suchness (一如) was manifested form, assuming the name of "Bodhisattva Dharma-Treasure". With the production of his unobstructed vow (無礙のちかび) as seed, he became the Buddha Amida, and this is why he is said "one-who-came-from-suchness as reward body" (報身如来). He is called "Buddha Unobstructed-Light filling-the-ten-directions" (十方無礙光佛).

This one-who-came-from-suchness is also said "dharma-body in adapted means" (方便法身). "Adapted means" means to manifest a form and reveal a name as to make itself known to the beings. This is the Buddha Amida. This one-who-came-from-suchness is light.

Light is wisdom. Wisdom is the form of light. Wisdom is also formless (...).

(T. 83, 2657, p. 698a / SSZ 1, p. 616)

The main focus here is name and form, because name-and-form is the classic Buddhist definition of a person (namarūpa). Accordingly, Dharma-Treasure/Amida is the personification of the absolute. It should be stressed that he is not a transformation of the absolute, but a modal personification of the absolute without any ontological change. The Buddha Amida is not subordinated to the absolute, but the personified absolute itself, which explains why Shinran calls him "dharma-body in adapted means". This unique definition provides an important clue for interreligious dialogue with Christian theologians, as the topic of the "person" is central in their philosophical criticisms of Pure Land amounting to deocretism or - worse - monism.

As far as the name of Amida is concerned, Shinran particularly favours the translation "Unobstructed-Light" (無礙光), as it bears a special meaning, as explained by Tanluan: "Unobstructed is knowing that births-and-

deaths are nirvāṇa" (知生死即是涅槃). Daochuo also applies to the reward body (報身) the phrase "unobstruction of globality" (圓通無礙). In short, if we were to use today's vocabulary, the Buddha Amida – with his unobstructed wisdom manifested as light and acting through his vows – functions somewhat like an interface between the absolute truth and the relative truth.

How are we then to consider the "story" of the Bodhisattva Dharma-Treasure becoming the Buddha Amida?

To use such expressions as "story" or "narrative" is rather neutral, while "legend", "tale" or "fable" would influence the interpretation of the very nature of this "story" (the Japanese is also ambiguous: hanashi 話, seisuwa 説話, monogatari 物語). How much more the terms "symbol" (shōchō 象徵), or "myth" which is translated into Japanese as shinwa 神話: "gods' tale", unless it is merely transcribed as misu ミッス. "Myth" in particular is now defined in very different ways by specialists, be it in anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, religious studies, folklore and so on. To use the term "myth" presupposes spending enough time to explain very precisely what kind of definition of a myth one is referring to. Another point is that applying such a Western concept as "myth" to Amida's "story" is an exogenous method that can throw a culturally self-centred light on our topic. It is therefore worth exploring first the endogenous method.

The most convenient Buddhist word seems to be "relation" (inmen 因縁, skr. nidāna). In the twelvefold classification of texts (十二部綱), it is used to relate the circumstances surrounding the origin of the Buddha's teachings (諸佛法本起因縁). Applied to Dharma-Treasure/Amida, the relation in the Sūtra of Infinite-Life shows how the bodhisattva originally produced his vows, accomplished his practices and built his Pure Land
in the West up to the moment when, as a consequence, he realized perfect enlightenment. The Commentary by Tanluan has two interesting passages related to *innen* 因縁, that can be read in various ways; the first reading being:

The way of easy practice is only aspiring to be born in his Pure Land with faith in the relation of the Buddha [Amida] (信佛因縁). (...) Ordinarily beings of the lowest grade who have faith in the relation of the Buddha (信佛因縁) will all be born in the Pure Land, so long as they don’t slander the correct Law.

(T. 40, p. 826b and 834a / SSZ 1, p. 279 and 308)

This first reading parallels Shinran’s definition of “hearing” (聞), which, in many respects, is the core of his teaching:

Beings hear the genesis (生起) and full process (本末) of the Buddha’s vow without having the mind of doubt. This is “hearing”.

(*Kyōgyōshinshō*, III-65)

But the word *innen* 因縁 means also “causality” (the relationship between cause and circumstances), in which case Tanluan’s quotations would read:

The way of easy practice is only aspiring to be born in the Pure Land through the causality of faith in the Buddha. (...)

Ordinarily beings of the lowest grade will all be born in the Pure Land through the causality of faith in the Buddha, so long as they don’t slander the correct Law.

Accordingly, the amphibology of Tanluan’s text would confirm the relevance of the word *relation* in designating Amida’s “story”.

Methodologically speaking, it would be awkward to apply the myth’s concept to the relation of Amida alone: it should also be applied to other similar Buddhist topics, such as Šākyamuni’s previous lives (jātaka). Eventually it should be applied to the whole Buddhist cosmology as well, which would lead one to address in addition such notions as *dharma-dhatu*. Already, during the 19th century, a great debate around the reality of Mount Sumeru (須彌山說) agitated Japan after the introduction of Western sciences.

Moreover, the myth is related to the notion of *historicity*: did it really happen or exist in the past? Historical criticism is one of the two main criteria of the classic Catholic apologetics, the other one being philosophical analysis. The great Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), for example, wrote:

What is their story of the Vow of Amitabha? And what is this Amida himself? What is this phantasmon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in which he figures? What, finally is all this great machinery, half mythological, half metaphysical, of the Mahayana? He who adheres to the Christian mystery does not have either, it is true, direct evidence. His adherence is an act of faith. At least he trusts to precise, dated, explicit testimonies, whose value he is enabled to appreciate. But here, what shadow of a guarantee do we find?

Historicity, however, is not relevant to Buddhism, because of its own hermeneutic rules which privilege direct experience (現證, *pratyäkṣa*). Here, maybe, lies the biggest gap with the Western and/or modern mind. This irrelevancy leaves plenty of room to address the other side of our topic, which appears as the indispensable prerequisite, that is to answer this question: what does “to really exist” mean in the light of Buddhist philosophy? One wonders whether attempting to answer this question would not contribute to filling the gap.
Notes:
* My heartfelt thanks to Prof. Helen Loveday for checking my English.


(2) Fujita Kōtsatsu 藤田光達 uses the English phrase “world of another dimension” (他方世界) and shows that it should not be merely confused with the other-world (他界). See his “The Origin of the Pure Land”, Eastern Buddhist, N. S. 29-1 (Spring 1996), p. 33-52; and his fūdo-sambukyō no kenkyū 滅土三部経の研究 (Iwanami shoten, 2007), p. 391-395.

(3) T. 47, 1958, p. 13c, 14b, 19a / SSZ 1, p. 410, 413, 430.


(6) T. 37, 1753, p. 267a, b / SSZ 1, p. 518, 519.


(11) Saigin, Mana tōshō 真名答書: Shinshū zenshō 真宗全書 (Sszs), 50, p. 64a, 64b.

(12) Mana tōshō: Sszs. 50, p. 67ab and p. 64a.

(13) Mana tōshō: Sszs. 50, p. 62ab.


HUMANITY AND RELIGION
IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

HOZOKAN
Kyoto 2010
蘇州學士館有明四家詩稿

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