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Midterm Paper

A Critical Defense of Pure Land Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhism occupies a contested position in the religion as a whole. While Buddhism in general emphasizes mindfulness and compassion for the ultimate goal of enlightenment, the accepted means of attaining that goal vary. When certain branches of Buddhism seem to advocate teachings at odds with core doctrines, the ensuing polarization runs the risk of distorting judgments. The issue of perspective compounds this problem: factors like class and gender can influence perceptions, and the very criteria for judging Pure Land Buddhism remain unsettled. However, since Pure Land beliefs (specifically, those rooted in sutras on Amitabha) figure so prominently in the evolution of Buddhism, assessing them fairly is vital for a more nuanced understanding of the religion.

Unfortunately, critiques of Pure Land teachings do not always fully recognize the purposes and impacts of the tradition. Common lines of criticism involve the negation of karma as a universal presence, the lowering of barriers to enlightenment, and an improper focus on death. All veins of Buddhism have weaknesses, and other purported flaws with Pure Land Buddhism exist, but these arguments collectively inform a worldview steeped in privilege and misunderstanding. A more balanced treatment of Pure Land Buddhism accounts for factors like worldly decline, the nature of death, and the value of accessibility to confront these negative judgments and advance a more accurate understanding of Buddhism.

The first issue framing the analysis of Pure Land Buddhism has to do with the context in which its beliefs took hold. In particular, the concept of an age of declining karma complicates the “lower barriers” trope. According to Buddhist cosmology, human spiritual faculties will

steadily decline after Buddha's death. Therefore, "In this context it is not surprising that Buddhists have anticipated a gradual erosion both in the quality and quantity of the transmitted teachings and in the karmic character of their practitioners."¹ When Pure Land Buddhism emerged, historical conditions perhaps justified belief in a more achievable path to nirvana. Inequality and political instability in areas like the Indian subcontinent and premodern China could serve as intuitive evidence of a downward trajectory. Without alternatives, this inevitability runs the risk of crowding out agency as the progression of time makes it impossible to escape past vices. In other words, lower barriers for the promise of enlightenment function as a response to the growing difficulty of liberation by conventional means.

The context of dying also plays an important role in Pure Land traditions. Critics identify promises for a non-retrogressive paradise from the mere affirmation of Amitabha's name as unreasonable. However, the experience of dying casts the process of Pure Land rebirth in a different light. Death and the liminal states do not offer an easy path by any means. Stevenson notes that, despite appearing straightforward, the plan to "just 'think good thoughts'" is "complicated by the belief that, with the waning of one's conscious powers, the mind is overwhelmed by subliminal karmic propensities or 'memories' that manifest as visions before the dying person. In this way, the habits and events of one's current and previous existences quite literally draw one toward one's future destiny."² If Buddhists see death as a reckoning experience full of harrowing obstacles, the task of concentrating on Amitabha becomes less trifling. By depicting deathbed ritual as spiritually facile, detractors rely on straw person characterizations. Moreover, the focus on death rituals and mourning has practical purposes like comforting loved ones and guiding their struggle. Finally, the opportunity for auspicious rebirth

¹ Jan Nattier, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., "Decline of the Dharma," in *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, MacMillan Reference USA, 2004, pp. 210-213

² Stevenson, "Death-Bed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful," p. 592

forces individuals to evaluate their karmic standing. Even if someone lived a life of dishonesty and crime, dying in this fashion would make them confront the reality of their mistakes in order to escape the cycle of suffering. This chance to “refashion one’s being”³ implies that morality is always possible, even when it seems too late. In contrast with traditional forms of Buddhism, the Pure Land understanding of death is both empowering and challenging.

The tenets of this sect have benefits outside the deathbed setting, especially with respect to accessibility and equality. Takakusu’s translation of the Sutra on the Contemplation of Buddha Amitayus includes an illustrative story. Imprisoned by her power-hungry son, Queen Vaidehi prays for comfort to cope with her anguish. Buddha responds to her discontent with “this world of depravities”⁴ with divine revelation on Pure Lands and the boundless compassion of Amitayus, their resident Buddha figure. That Pure Land beliefs about the afterlife emerged from this narrative speaks directly to the tradition’s broader mission: handling misfortune in this life by affirming a vision for the afterlife. Also, the fact that this text features a female protagonist has meaningful implications. Traditions predating Pure Land Buddhism fostered negative views toward women and their spiritual potential, labeling female inclusion in the monastic order as “the critical factor in Buddhism's early demise.”⁵ Many of the arguments against Pure Land beliefs bare an uncomfortable resemblance to the arguments against the inclusion of women. Both narratives assume that expanding the religion in any way weakens it, and that only members of an elite spiritual caliber can truly reach enlightenment. Queen Vaidehi therefore offers a unique case study on the value of a more accessible form of Buddhism.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Takakusu, “Sutra on the Contemplation of Buddha Amitayus,” <http://web.mit.edu/stclair/www/meditationsutra.html>

⁵ Stevenson, “Death-Bed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful,” p. 592

Texts like this do more than advocate gender equality in religion. These parables offer evidence that “anyone—even those thought to have severe karmic limitations—could at once escape the round of rebirth and achieve the Pure Land.”⁶ The universal availability of the Pure Land, apart from making Buddhism salient in an age of decline, challenges the privilege lurking behind certain criticisms. Opponents sometimes make the mistake of assuming traditional forms of Buddhism can be exported to all serious followers. This mindset reinforces inequality by reserving karmic advancement for those who can support a monastic lifestyle. If present station in society reflects past karma, then individuals who must work to support their families or who live in poverty have even weaker prospects for liberation. Carried to its logical conclusion, this philosophy would mean that fortunate practitioners spiritually advance, but only the most exceptional outsiders can catch up. By leveling the playing field, Pure Land Buddhism strengthens rather than weakens the Buddhist community.

No religious tradition can boast a clean record when it comes to doctrinal integrity and practicality. Since religions interact with power relations and popular customs in society, they sometimes mirror zeitgeist more so than they drive it. As a result, judging Pure Land Buddhism based on its philosophical tenets alone spotlights the wrong factors. In doing so, objections to this branch of the religion unwittingly reinforce inequality and determinism. Pure Land beliefs might weaken the strict protocols of other Buddhist philosophies, but they do so for the sake of a religion more supportive of its followers. By incorporating insights on karmic decline, the process of dying, and the power of accessibility, a defense of Pure Land teachings advances the understanding of Buddhism and corrects some of the worldviews that limit its potential.

⁶ Stone, “By the Power of One’s Last Nenbutsu,” p. 95