13. *Triṃśikā*, 29, and Sthiramati's commentary.
14. Sthiramati's commentary on *Triṃśikā*, 25.
15. Dharmapāla's commentary on *Triṃśikā* (*Ch'eng-wei-shih-lun* as translated by Hsuan-tsang) provides a basis for just such an understanding in its concept of the "evolving of subjectivity" into seeing and seen parts.
16. The reversible aspect of emptiness is expressed in the Prajñāpāramitā sutras: "It is not that form is emptied through emptiness; the self-nature of form is emptiness." The irreversible aspect is seen in Nāgārjuna: "Form is broken through and made empty." The full structure of realization, including both aspects, was articulated by Asaṅga in *Mahāyānasaṃgraha*. He achieves this by developing a variation of the concept of the three natures and introducing the concept of the "transformation of basis" (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*) of the unenlightened person into that of an enlightened one. Samsara and nirvana stand in complete mutual negation, and through practice, samsara is eliminated and nirvana attained. In attainment, however, both sides make up a single whole. Although there is no direct influence, this concept of transformation may be compared with Shinran's. See Yoshifumi Ueda, "The Mahayana Structure of Shinran's Thought," Part I (*Eastern Buddhist*, XVII, 1, Spring 1984), pp. 66–68, and Part II (XVII, 2, Autumn 1984), pp. 47–49.

from SHINRAN: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS THOUGHT
by Yoshifumi UEDA and Dennis HIROTA
Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1989.

3 EMERGENCE OF THE PURE LAND PATH

The Mahāyāna Movement

In the preceding chapter, we have seen that the bodhisattvas' path to enlightenment is also, at every step, a path of return to this world, and that their wisdom naturally and necessarily unfolds as the compassionate activity of guiding others to enlightenment.

This view of religious attainment as a process of simultaneously transcending and returning is rooted in a conception of wisdom or true reality that began to be formulated from about the first century of the common era. This new conception of enlightenment held the implication that genuine religious practice is essentially directed to attainment for all beings—without distinction between oneself and others—and it manifested itself in a self-conscious break with the immediately preceding Buddhist traditions.

Since Buddhist paths lead out from samsaric existence to attainment of nirvana, they are often assumed to entail renunciation of mundane life. This image of Buddhist practice is reinforced by the legend of the Buddha Gautama Siddhārtha (c. 560–480), often known by the title Śākyamuni, "sage of the Śākya tribe." He is said to have been a prince who abandoned his family and throne in order to seek awakening through discipline and austerities in the forest. Even after his enlightenment at the age of thirty-five, he continued a life of mendicant wander-

ing until his death at the age of eighty. His religious pursuit, then, presents a thoroughgoing repudiation of the values of mundane society.

During Śākyamuni's lifetime, however, there were strong bonds between the disciples who had renounced homelife and the laity that, while venerating the Buddha and his teaching and giving support to the following, remained in the secular world. In the person of the Buddha, who embodied the transcendent, both his mendicant disciples and lay followers were able to find salvation. Nevertheless, for five centuries following Śākyamuni's death, his teachings were transmitted only orally, undergoing constant reformulation in the different communities, and in this tradition as a whole, the negative aspect of his teaching—that of transcending the mundane world—was emphasized. The religious ideal came to be defined as the arhat, the "worthy one" who has overcome passions and crossed to the other shore. For such a saint, there will be no more rebirth in samsara after the present life. Further, religious practice came to be formulated as the three learnings—strict precepts, meditation, and wisdom—which essentially required ascetic withdrawal; hence, renunciation of mundane life was viewed as the true Buddhist path. Permanent monastic centers grew up with formal orders, and the distinction between lay and monk solidified.

Around the beginning of the common era, groups of Buddhists appeared who took a critical stance toward the immediately preceding tradition, which they viewed as having fallen into formalism, scholastic analysis, and sectarian disputation. These critics had sought to realize the awakening that Śākyamuni attained and performed practices according to the Buddhist tradition up to that time, but though they strove, they could not reach perfect enlightenment. They found that monastic renunciation aiming at personal emancipation was a narrow and finally inadequate method of practice. Therefore they abandoned the tradition and, seeking a new path, at length discovered one

by which full, genuine attainment was possible. They called this new path the "great vehicle" (Mahāyāna) and asserted that it was superior to the existing institutions, which they labeled the "lesser vehicle" (Hīnayāna), because it holds as its goal the attainment of authentic enlightenment by all beings.

The new formulation of practice in the earliest Mahāyāna Buddhism was, as we have seen, termed prajñāpāramitā—wisdom that has gone beyond or attained the other shore. According to Mahāyānists, the Hīnayāna sages withdrew from society and ordinary life, performed practices and disciplines, and gained emancipation or extinction of passions by realizing the nonsubstantiality of their own person—the fact that the ego-self is no more than an illusory construction. Mahāyāna Buddhists, however, by practicing prajñā, realized the no-self or emptiness that pervades not only the self, but all things and all persons. Thus, for them, nirvana was not separate from the samsaric existence of all things; "Samsara is itself nirvana." To define their own position, Mahāyāna Buddhists asserted:

> Foolish beings are attached to samsara, and those belonging to the two vehicles (the Hīnayāna path) are attached to nirvana. Bodhisattvas see no distinction between samsara and nirvana. (*Mahāyānasaṃgraha*)

While "foolish," unenlightened people cling to their samsaric existence, practicers of the Hīnayāna path are said to strive only for attainment of nirvana. The "two vehicles" refers to two types of Hīnayāna sage: "hearers" (*śrāvaka*) who study the verbal teaching—originally referring to direct disciples of Śākyamuni—and "solitary Buddhas" (*pratyekabuddha*) who gain emancipation without the guidance of a teacher. The Mahāyāna Buddhists asserted that their own conception of nirvana, being free of all attachments—even to nirvana—differed from that taught by the Hīnayāna traditions, and that it was the supreme, perfect nirvana.

Our concern here is not to assess the historical validity of this

view, but to explore the self-understanding that the Mahāyāna movement exhibited. It should be noted that the Mahāyāna criticism of the preceding tradition centered on what it viewed to be an inadequate grasp of the depth of blind passions in human beings. Mahāyāna Buddhists found that, because of a failure to probe fully into the tenacious nature of self-attachment, the earlier paths did not free them from the final residue of passion in the form of clinging to the concept of nirvana. Moreover, because of this, the enlightenment that was attained was not the ultimate awakening.

Mahāyāna Buddhists therefore established the practice of prajñā, by which they sought to transcend the very dichotomies of samsara and nirvana, blind passions and enlightenment, and self and others. Through the realization of this nondualistic wisdom, they sought to "see suchness" or things just as they are and attain dharma-body (*dharmakāya*) or true reality. One of the central consequences of this new stance is the identification of self-benefit (reaching nirvana) and benefiting others (bringing all sentient beings to nirvana). Thus, realizing dharma-body includes the spontaneous and intrinsic benefiting of all who remain in samsaric existence. This is expressed as entering samsara and freely assuming various forms or "Buddha-bodies" to guide others to enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva Career

The path of realization based on the Mahāyāna conception of wisdom was elaborated as the career of the bodhisattva. In the early Buddhist tradition, the term "bodhisattva"—literally, "enlightenment-being"—meant "Buddha-to-be" and was used chiefly to refer to previous births of the Buddha Śākyamuni. There grew a sizeable body of tales, known as Jātaka, which related the practices and altruistic deeds of self-sacrifice that he had performed in various life forms, including animals, and in them he is referred to as "bodhisattva." It was in the Mahāyāna tradition, however, that the concept of the bodhisattva took on

a definite structure, becoming an ideal model for all practicers in contrast to the Hīnayāna ideal of the arhat.

The bodhisattva's career as described in Mahāyāna sutras begins with the awakening of the mind of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), the determination to become a Buddha whatever hardships one may encounter over the course of many lifetimes of endeavor. This resolution is formally expressed in vows that are proclaimed before a Buddha, and typically, the bodhisattva receives from the Buddha a prophesy of eventual fulfillment of those vows. The bodhisattva's aspiration has been formulated as the four great universal vows:

However innumerable beings are, I vow to save them;
However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them;
However immeasurable the dharmas are, I vow to master them;
However incomparable the Buddha-truth is, I vow to attain it.

Here, we see that attaining enlightenment and saving all beings are understood to be one. In addition to these four vows common to all bodhisattvas and expressive of their essential nature, they each make their own individual vows, which define the concrete modes in which their future enlightenment will manifest itself. A typical element of such individual vows is the establishment, through their vast accumulation of merit, of a Buddha land or field of influence (*buddhakṣetra*) in which they will carry on their activity to bring beings to enlightenment.

Upon making their vows to attain perfect enlightenment and save all beings, bodhisattvas undertake the practices and disciplines for their fulfillment, which must continue through countless lifetimes. It is said that vast aeons—"three great innumerable kalpas"—are required for the completion of a bodhisattva's practices. The process of practice has been formulated in ten stages, in which non-retrogression is attained in the first (or in some schemes, seventh). Further, "With all the virtues and roots of good that they accumulate thus, they do not

seek the sustained bliss for their own sake, but think only of freeing all sentient beings from pain'' (T'an-luan, quoted in Realization, 17). In the seventh stage, bodhisattvas perfect the skillful means by which to lead beings to enlightenment. They are able to go anywhere in the universe instantly and at will, and freely manifest themselves in any form. Where there are Buddhas, they pay homage and illuminate their great assemblies of listeners, and where there is no Buddha, they introduce the dharma to beings. With their powers to aid ignorant beings along the path to Buddhahood, such great bodhisattvas as Maitreya (Miroku), the future Buddha who will be the next to appear in this world-system, and Avalokiteśvara (Kannon), whose name means ''lord who looks down'' on beings with compassion, are widely revered by Mahāyāna Buddhists.

There is also an expanded version of fifty-two stages, with the previous ten stages numbered as the forty-first to the fiftieth. In this system, the penultimate fifty-first stage is called ''perfect enlightenment'' (等覚, *tōgaku*), and is the present stage of Maitreya; the final stage is complete Buddhahood. With the fulfillment of practices, bodhisattvas become Buddhas with the qualities they have defined in their vows, and their spheres of activity—their own Buddha lands—are established.

Implications of the Bodhisattva Path

There are several aspects of the structure of the bodhisattva's career that should be noted. First, the directing of merit accrued from one's good acts to other beings is an essential element of the bodhisattva's practice. All Buddhists have believed that good acts hold the power to counteract the effects of evil deeds and lead to better conditions in the next birth. In the earlier Buddhism, it was generally assumed that only one's own thoughts and acts could exert their influence on one's future conditions, although the evidence of inscriptions suggests that sharing merit with one's parents or teacher was also recognized. In the Mahāyāna tradition, however, bodhisattvas perform

good acts and practices for long aeons and thus accumulate vast stores of merit, but their practice is always undertaken with the thought of saving all living things. Thus, their merit is always freely given to beings in samsaric existence. This concept of giving or transferring merit (廻向, J. *ekō*) is a direct expression of the very nature of bodhisattvas, for they undertake their practice in nondichotomous wisdom. Because of such wisdom, the liberation of all beings is foremost in their minds, and they are able to share the merit generated by their good acts with others.

Second is the existence of many Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Even in the early tradition, Śākyamuni's attainment of Buddhahood was not regarded as the first occurence of enlightenment or a unique event. In fact, in stories of Śākyamuni's previous births, it is said that, like the later bodhisattvas, ages ago he made a vow to attain enlightenment under the Buddha Dīpaṃkara. Nevertheless, the appearance of a Buddha was a momentous event in the history of the world, and it was assumed in early Buddhism that two Buddhas could not appear in one epoch of a world system, any more than two ''universal monarchs'' (*cakravartin*) could rule simultaneously. Thus, in all only a small number of Buddhas have appeared, and ''it is rare to encounter and rare to behold a Tathāgata, even in countless millions of kalpas'' (*Larger Sutra,* Teaching, 3). As mentioned before, the path of religious attainment of the Hīnayāna sages—the ''hearers'' of the Buddha's teaching—led not to Buddhahood, with its role in the salvation of the world, but to becoming an arhat, one who has completely eradicated his blind passions and attained emancipation from birth-and-death, so that he will never return.

The Mahāyāna tradition, however, recognized the attainment of Buddhahood itself—not merely emancipation from passions—as the genuine goal of religious practice, and proclaimed it, along with the engagement with samsara that it implied, as the supreme fulfillment for all sentient beings. It is natural, then, that Mahāyāna Buddhists recognized the existence of vast

numbers of Buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout the cosmos. Our own universe—called the Sahā world, or "world in which pain must be endured"—is the Buddha field of Śākyamuni, the sphere in which he chose to appear in order to save the beings within it. While acknowledging the rule that only one Buddha will appear in this epoch of our world, Mahāyānists envisioned myriads of universes throughout the cosmos and infinite numbers of Buddhas presently residing in them.

Mahāyāna works often refer to the concept of the "great chiliocosm," which is made up of one billion universes. In the Mahāyāna cosmology, there are great chiliocosms countless as the sands of the Ganges throughout the ten quarters, and most are Buddha fields, or parts of Buddha fields, presided over by a Buddha who teaches dharma for the benefit of its inhabitants. Thus, the entire cosmos is a great panoply of numberless Buddha fields in which the drama of the salvation of all beings is carried out, with great Buddhas and bodhisattvas radiating the light of wisdom-compassion for all living things.

The third aspect to be noted is the transcendence of the dichotomy of monastic and lay in Mahāyāna thought. Monastic life had developed as the norm for religious practice in the early tradition, for the end was personal emancipation from samsaric existence. Practice was construed as observance of the monastic code and meditative practices, and withdrawal from ordinary lay life was itself seen as a crucial step in breaking bondage to samsara. Mahāyānists, however, sought to realize a fully non-dichotomous wisdom; hence, while in actual practice they continued to recognize the efficacy of monastic life as a means to the goal, renunciation of lay life was not in itself an intrinsic or requisite aspect of emancipation from samsaric existence. They therefore reformulated the three learnings and advocated in their place the six pāramitās—giving (*dāna*), precepts or virtuous action (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), effort (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). In this enumeration of virtues, we find selfless giving understood not simply as alms-giving or

"charity," but as the total, compassionate activity of bodhisattvas for whom meritorious action leading to enlightenment and the giving of their own merit to others are interfused. Other pāramitās also emphasize the resolution to fulfill the bodhisattva vows for the enlightenment of all beings. Moreover, precepts or morality was not necessarily construed as the rigid monastic rule governing sequestered life apart from normal society, but as a more general code of proper action observable in varying degrees in lay life also. Thus, true practice and attainment transcends the dualism of monk and lay, and the arena of the bodhisattva's practice is precisely the realm of samsara in which unenlightened beings wander. If methods for attainment of wisdom can be found and fulfilled while maintaining lay life, entrance into a monastic order or withdrawal from society is unnecessary. This attitude in Mahāyāna thought is clearly expressed in the figure of the layman Vimalakīrti, whose realization of wisdom is depicted as surpassing that even of the arhats and bodhisattvas who have renounced the world.

The Fundamental Attitude of Mahāyāna Teachings

Because the essential spirit of Mahāyāna is manifested in concern for a Buddhist path for all beings, including the laity, it is sometimes asserted that Mahāyāna Buddhism arose as a movement among the laity itself. There are two important elements in this notion, which reflect in part a refusal to recognize the perspective of the Mahāyāna tradition itself. The first is the assumption that the Mahāyāna sutras were composed by members of the laity or from a lay perspective. The second element, which underlies the first, is the idea that the Mahāyāna movement is based on the worship of Śākyamuni Buddha, or of other Buddhas, rather than the actual realization of Buddhahood by practicers.

Concerning the first, it must be acknowledged that the Mahāyāna sutras stem from a period many centuries after the Buddha's death. The language Gautama spoke cannot be iden-

tified, although many scholars believe it was Magadhi, about which little is known. There is no teaching whatever that may be claimed as the direct words of the Buddha in his original language, and there is little question that Gautama's disciples committed his words to memory but did not record them in writing. After his demise, the Buddha's teachings and precepts were compiled and handed down orally, no doubt undergoing editing, alteration and expansion in the various dialects, locales, and Buddhist communities. It was not until the first century BCE, about four hundred fifty years after the Buddha's death, that orally transmitted teachings were set down in writing, in Sri Lanka, in the literary language of Pali. This Pali redaction of the Buddhist canon, although partial, is the foundation of our knowledge of the teachings of the early Buddhist tradition.

It is also about the beginning of the common era that the earliest Mahāyāna sutras date, and they continue to appear until the seventh century. These works, like the Hīnayāna counterparts, take the form of expositions delivered by "Buddha," but they do not appear in writing until centuries after Śākyamuni's death, some more than a millenimum later. Moreover, they differ markedly in content from the earliest recorded teachings.

The Mahāyāna sutras, then, cannot be considered Śākyamuni's direct words. We must assume that people other than Śākyamuni composed them, and that the original authors of the early forms of the Prajñāpāramitā sutras were the earliest Mahāyāna Buddhists. In order to understand the Mahāyāna movement, however, it is important to grasp the attitude behind the composition of the sutras. Many scholars assert that Mahāyāna thought is lay-oriented, meaning that its attitude is essentially one of worship of Buddhas, and that the typical aspects of the Mahāyāna tradition developed out of cultic practices first centered on Śākyamuni.

After Śākyamuni's death, his cremated remains were divided into eight and enshrined in stupas or mounds that were built in various parts of India. These stupas became centers for devotional worship of Śākyamuni, and several centuries later, the Buddhist King Aśoka (r. 268–232 BCE) ordered the original stupas opened, their contents redivided, and new stupas constructed throughout India. Thus, it appears that stupa worship became increasingly popular and widespread. Through such worship, the figure of Śākyamuni became highly idealized, so that he came to be attributed with supernatural powers. Stories of his previous births were elaborated in which he is portrayed performing selfless, compassionate acts in order to fulfill his resolute vow to attain Buddhahood. In stories that relate, for example, that he once killed himself so that a starving tigress might eat his body, it is not difficult to imagine incipient forms of the Mahāyāna bodhisattva ideal.

Further, it is often said that out of the inclination to take the Buddha as an object of worship, numerous celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas were conceived. Thus, the Mahāyāna conception of many Buddhas is sometimes considered the product of longing and devotion on the part of followers, who sought thus to gain merit and improve their worldly condition.

We must bear in mind, however, that the self-awareness expressed in the advocacy of the "great vehicle" turns not simply on the inclusion of lay as well as monk—on "great" merely as all-embracing—but rather on a new conception of nirvana. Its critical stance reveals a firm conviction of having rediscovered the path to genuine enlightenment, which had been lost amid scholastic debate. Moreover, it proclaims not escape from samsara, but the attainment of Buddhahood as the proper religious goal for all beings. This attitude reflects not a lay devotion actively elaborating and idealizing Buddhas as objects of worship, but rather confidence in the possibility of all beings' attainment of Buddhahood based on personal experience. The earlier tradition was rejected not because it concentrated on monks and nuns and looked down on those who remained in mundane life, but because it failed to lead its practicers beyond the final hurdle of egocentric attachment to emancipation.

The Mahāyāna sutras do not represent the direct words of Śākyamuni; nevertheless, their perspective is not that of people who, while capable only of worshiping the Buddha, nevertheless took it on themselves to write out for him what they believed he should have said. They reveal not an attitude of lay believers and worshipers, but rather the awareness of having realized prajñā. Enlightened people—people who possessed the realization of already having attained Buddhahood themselves through the guidance of Śākyamuni's teaching—expressed their own awakening, their own experience, in the form of the sutras and thereby provided a path for others. We find that among the Mahāyāna Buddhists, people other than Śākyamuni were considered Buddhas if they actually realized and taught perfect enlightenment.[1] For Hīnayāna Buddhists, a sutra is the teaching of Buddha because it was taught by Śākyamuni, but Mahāyāna Buddhists recognized the reality of people other than Śākyamuni attaining and teaching enlightenment, and they regarded such teachings as that of Buddha. Thus, although not the direct words of Śākyamuni, the Mahāyāna sutras took the form of the teaching of "Buddha."

Further, the Mahāyāna conception of many Buddhas may also be rooted in the historical actuality of people other than Śākyamuni having been able to attain enlightenment, and not in the proliferation of objects of worship by believers. If people who have realized enlightenment appear, having attained Buddhahood through methods that can be transmitted and that lead anyone who practices them to Buddhahood, then the possibility of many people everywhere having attained Buddhahood would suggest that there are in fact Buddhas throughout the universe. It may be said that, for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the Buddhas are not objects of faith, they are oneself, one's own true reality. They are not absolute objects, but the actual subject, the genuine subjectivity functioning as self-knowledge.

The Emergence of the Pure Land Path

In Mahāyāna teachings, reality is not what we see around us in our everyday vision of the world, which is distorted by attachment to self, but neither is it a static substratum underlying temporal existence. True reality is alive and dynamic, and it realizes itself as each thing in existence through the activity of wisdom-compassion. Further, while transcending all human conceptualization, it accommodates itself to the unenlightened modes of perception that make up samsaric existence, manifesting forms as Buddha, as teachings and practices, and as the bodhisattvas' skilled means of guiding beings to enlightenment. Nevertheless, it is fully apprehended only in the self-awareness of wisdom-compassion—an awareness inseparable from the perception of unenlightened beings entangled in lives of pain. To awaken such awareness is the central aim of all Mahāyāna ways, including the Pure Land path.

The vision of wisdom-compassion at work in the world was articulated as the bodhisattva career, in which personal attainment of enlightenment is fused with the attainment of all beings. We have seen the crucial elements of this path: initial contact with the world of enlightenment, leading to the awakening of a determined aspiration to attain enlightenment; the resolute vows that inform lifetimes of effort; aeons of practice and discipline to fulfill those vows; the directing of the resultant merit toward realization of Buddhahood and the establishment of a Buddha land, and toward the awakening of other beings; and the tireless activity of bringing beings across to the other shore.

While these elements are common to all bodhisattvas, early in the Mahāyāna tradition they were developed into their most mature and essential expression—and a method for complete fulfillment of the aspiration to benefit all beings was formulated—in the Vows and enlightenment of Amida Buddha. It is on the basis of Amida's Vows and their efficacy in bringing all

beings to enlightenment that the Pure Land path evolved.

The Pure Land path is distinctive in presenting a way by which all people may realize awakening, whatever their moral or intellectual capacities. Other Mahāyāna paths—other methods of breaking the bondage to the delusional self and realizing wisdom—are based on the six pāramitās, and Buddhas other than Amida aid those who practice meritorious deeds or perform meditation and perfect wisdom. Thus, the tested path to awakening in most cases lies in monastic discipline and practice. Aspirants renounce home and family life and abandon social position and values in order to discipline themselves and engage in meditation. Such practice is a means to enlightenment, however, not an end in itself. As we have seen, those who have realized wisdom do not cling to the realm of nirvana, but return to ordinary life and the ordinary world; for them, there is no essential distinction between samsara and nirvana, the world in which we carry on our daily life and the world of enlightenment. Renunciation of life in society, then, may be a method for attainment, but it is in no way an aspect of the final goal.

In the Pure Land tradition, a path to the fundamental realization of no-self and to supreme Buddhahood was unfolded that did not require monastic discipline. It developed as a way by which the Mahāyāna ideals of compassion and of the attainment of Buddhahood by all beings could be fully actualized. Pure Land Buddhism turns not on observing precepts and undertaking contemplative practices—not, that is, on the realization of nondiscriminative wisdom or emptiness through stripping away self-attachment and objectifying thought—but rather on awakening to the compassion that emerges from the deepest sources of wisdom or reality, the compassion manifested as Amida Buddha.

Amida Buddha

In Sanskrit writings, Amida Buddha has two names—Amitābha ("immeasurable light") and Amitāyus ("immeasurable life"). Light and life are symbols of the essential activity of enlightenment—wisdom and compassion—and their "immeasurability" expresses their complete fulfillment: universality both spacially, being all-pervasive and embracing living things everywhere, and temporally, being timeless and immediate to all beings throughout the history of the world. The name "Amida," derived from the Chinese transliteration for both Sanskrit names, implies that the Buddha thoroughly embodies these highest ideals of Buddhahood.

It may be noted in passing that while Amida is referred to with masculine grammatical forms in Sanskrit, the Chinese translations that form the basis for the Buddhist tradition in East Asia are on the whole free of such gender-specific reference, and Pure Land Buddhists have not considered masculine gender a significant aspect of Amida Buddha. In fact, the Chinese Pure Land master Shan-tao calls Amida the "compassionate mother," and in Japan, Shin Buddhists use the term *Oya-sama* (inadequately, "parent"), which expresses the closest of personal relationships with Amida without identifying either gender, or perhaps implying both. English, like Sanskrit and unlike Chinese and Japanese, requires gender-specific reference, and the use of "he" or "his" with regard to Amida Buddha is not easily avoidable. Our usage, however, should be understood to reflect linguistic convention and not a feature of the way Pure Land Buddhists have thought of the Buddha.

Although no reference is made to Amida Buddha in the scriptures of the early, Hīnayāna tradition, he is mentioned in more than two hundred Mahāyāna sutras, beginning with the early period of their appearance, and an inscription indicates that statues to him date back to the second century CE. He is thus a Mahāyāna figure widely recognized from the early period of its development. Most sutra references simply name him as one among the many Buddhas—the Buddha of the western quarter, where his Buddha land is said to be located. His chief significance is revealed in three sutras, which have been regarded

as the foundation of the mainstream Pure Land tradition in East Asia since the sixth century. Two of these sutras survive in Sanskrit, both bearing the title *Adornments of the Land of Bliss* (*Sukhāvatī-vyūha*), "Land of Bliss"—or more literally, "Blissful"—being the name of Amida's Buddha field. These sutras are thought to have their origins in northwest India about the first century CE. Their order of composition is unknown. Since they differ in length, they are distinguished as the "Larger" and "Smaller" sutras, and are also commonly referred to by the titles of their most influential Chinese translations, the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* and the *Amida Sutra*.

The third major sutra of the Pure Land tradition survives only in Chinese: the *Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*. This sutra appears to be of later origin, and may have been compiled in Central Asia or even China. In the following discussion, we will in general refer to the three sutras as the *Larger, Smaller,* and *Contemplation Sutras*. The *Larger Sutra* is the central Pure Land scripture, for it relates the entire bodhisattva career of Amida. The other two sutras are also crucial, however, for they provide guidance in interpreting the significance of Amida Buddha and his Vow, and in understanding the nature of the Pure Land path.

The Vow of Amida Buddha

The story of Amida Buddha's origins is taught in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*. In this sutra, Śākyamuni Buddha relates that aeons ago in the remote past, when a Buddha named Lokeśvararāja appeared in the world, there was a certain king who, upon hearing that Buddha's teaching, awakened the profound aspiration for enlightenment. He abandoned his throne and became a mendicant monk with the name Dharmākara ("Treasury of Dharma").

Dharmākara went to Lokeśvararāja Buddha and requested instruction in how to attain enlightenment and thereby establish the most excellent of Buddha lands. Lokeśvararāja enabled

Dharmākara to see myriads of Buddha lands throughout the cosmos and explained to him their qualities and the natures of the beings in them. These Dharmākara contemplated for five kalpas, and then declared his aspiration in bodhisattva vows which, upon fulfillment, would result in the establishment of a Buddha land that embraced the finest aspects of all the various Buddha fields. His Vows are therefore said to be supreme and unexcelled.

Dharmākara made forty-eight Vows defining the modes in which his enlightenment would manifest itself. In a narrow sense, only three treat specifically the characteristics of the Buddha that he resolved to become (Amida), and another two the features of the Land of Bliss. All the remaining Vows express ways in which the beings of his Buddha field, and indeed those throughout the cosmos, will be benefited. In fact, the Buddha and his land have as their essence the functioning of enlightenment to awaken all beings; the Buddha is Buddha as the benefiting of beings. In each of his Vows, Dharmākara declares that he will attain highest, perfect enlightenment only on condition that the content of the Vow—that is, the benefiting of beings—is realized. Thus, the form of the Vows itself reveals the basic bodhisattva vision, in which self-benefit (attainment of enlightenment) as inseparable from the benefiting of others.

When Dharmākara finished declaring his Vows before Lokeśvararāja Buddha and a multitude of beings, the universe trembled, flowers showered down, and the prophesy that he would indeed realize highest enlightenment sounded from the skies. Thus he embarked on a career of practice that extended for countless aeons. Though reborn many times, he dwelled constantly in equinimity and tranquility, completely free of ill-will, greed, pride, or any form of falsity. Practicing the pāramitās and guiding others to practice through kind and gentle words, he amassed an immeasurable store of virtue. In his practice he was unrivaled among gods and human beings, and all the Buddhas revered him, rejoicing in his attainments (Shinjin, 22–23).

Finally, ten kalpas ago, he attained Buddhahood and is now dwelling in his Buddha field, the Land of Bliss, trillions of Buddha lands west of this world.

The Nature of Amida Buddha

Two interlocking questions concerning the teaching of Amida Buddha in the *Larger Sutra* have defined the central issues of the Pure Land tradition. First, what is the nature of Amida Buddha? Second, what is the significance of being born in his land, and how can one attain birth there? We will consider these questions in turn.

Concepts of Buddha-Body

We may approach the question of the nature of Amida Buddha from a general Buddhist perspective by considering once more the concept of various Buddha-bodies. For the early tradition, Śākyamuni Buddha represented the model and exemplar of Buddhahood. He was profoundly venerated as the "Awakened One," the sage who had fulfilled the highest human goal by breaking the bonds of samsaric existence and attaining nirvana, and by guiding others to nirvana. His personality was surely a decisive influence in the lives of his followers. After his death, however, it became clear that he had been the revered Buddha not simply because of his personality and the historical circumstances of his existence, but because of the reality to which he had awakened. He himself had taught, "Those who see dharma see me; those who see me see dharma" (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*). That is, to perceive dharma (true reality) is to perceive Śākyamuni who, as the "Awakened One," has come to manifest it, and genuinely to encounter Śākyamuni is to encounter the realization that makes him Buddha.

Thus, distinct aspects of Buddhahood came to be perceived, and to refine the notion of Buddha, the early tradition developed the idea of various "Buddha-bodies" or modes of

Buddhahood. First, a concept of two bodies of Buddha was evolved: dharma-body ("reality-body," *dharma-kāya*) and physical body (*rūpa-kāya*). Śākyamuni was of course a human being who carried on daily life in the world. But in attaining enlightenment, he also realized dharma-body, that which is true and real. While his physical body could be perceived and one could listen to his teaching, the dharma-body that he realized was not the object of our senses and could not be conceptualized through the words that he uttered. Further, while his physical body underwent the processes of birth, sickness, aging, and death, the dharma-body was transcendent and eternal. As the concept of these two Buddha-bodies developed and the sense of Śākyamuni Buddha's physical presence faded after his death, increasing weight came to be given to the timeless aspect, the dharma-body, as the essence of his Buddhahood.

It is common to see Śākyamuni as simply a historical figure, a person of ancient India who attained a religious experience under the bodhi-tree and then, for forty-five years, taught his realization to others. In this view, the content of his religious awakening is his own, personal experience, and though his teaching has been transmitted through his efforts and those of generations of followers, it has come down to us only with much adaptation and alteration. The Buddhist tradition, however, developed a fundamentally different perspective in the concept of the Buddha-bodies. For Buddhists, Buddha is not only—and not chiefly—the individual of the Śākya clan named Gautama who lived 2500 years ago; it is above all the wisdom or reality that rose to awareness in the history of our world through Śākyamuni's awakening.

For Buddhists, the historical experience of Śākyamuni is based on that which transcends time and history. Thus, between the historical (physical body) and transhistorical (dharma-body) there lies a reciprocal relationship. On the one hand, through his meditative practices, he awakened to dharma-body and thereby became Buddha, one who has touched true reality, which lies

beyond all conceptual frameworks, including time. On the other hand, through his awakening, that which is true and real—Buddha as dharma-body—emerged in human history in his awareness and in those who, guided by him, have also attained awakening and maintained the Buddhist tradition in different ages and cultures.

To his direct disciples, Śākyamuni was himself the sole Buddha-body; in him, the aspects of dharma-body and physical body were one. With the increasing historical distance from him and the growing importance given to the transcendent dharma-body, however, these two concepts lost their integrating center. The abstract concept of dharma-body, disembodied from the concrete existence of the Buddha, failed to give a satisfactory account of the nature of Śākaymuni's Buddhahood, and he gradually came to be attributed with various supernatural features and powers that expressed the virtues of his enlightenment. This tendency—often seen as the idealization of Śākyamuni—was further developed as the "concretization" of Buddhahood in the Mahāyāna tradition, which rejected the earlier ideal as a merely quiescent nirvana and emphasized, out of a deep insight into the tenacity of blind passions, the activity of wisdom-compassion.

As we have seen, at the heart of the Mahāyāna tradition lies a radically nondualistic wisdom or reality (suchness or dharma-body) that is characterized by sameness with all human beings and all of nature. Based on their own awakening to this reality, Mahāyāna Buddhists assumed that countless human beings in the past had already attained dharma-body and realized Buddhahood, and since these people were considered to possess Buddha-bodies, it was natural also to conceive of Buddha lands throughout the cosmos in which they carried on their activities. These Buddhas all followed the same pattern of attainment that Śākyamuni manifested, having made and fulfilled bodhisattva vows to attain enlightenment and establish their world as a Buddha field. Thus, they each have their own "form"—the

characteristics they have vowed to attain—and they adorn their lands in various ways according to their vows.

Such Buddhas came to be recognized as a third kind of Buddha-body. They are called "fulfilled" or "recompense" Buddha-bodies, meaning that they have arisen as the result of the fulfillment of their vows, achieved through aeons of practice and meritorious action. They are also called Buddhas as "enjoyment bodies" (*sāṃbhogika-kāya*), for they take delight in the fruit of their long practice by adorning themselves with marks of their enlightenment and exercising their powers by teaching dharma to the beings of their lands.

Thus, a scheme of three Buddha-bodies was developed. Bodhisattvas, through their practice, realize dharma-body, which is reality itself and completely transcends any spacial or temporal conceptualization. Having attained dharma-body, they become able to manifest two other kinds of Buddha-bodies: their enjoyment body, which is the form with which they appear to bodhisattvas in their lands, and transformed or accommodated bodies (*nirmāṇa-kāya*), which are temporary appearances as living beings in the historical time of samsaric existence, such as Śākyamuni. These three kinds of bodies do not indicate different Buddhas; every Buddha is said to possess all three bodies. The foundation of Buddhahood is dharma-body (true reality), but since this Buddha-body is formless, it must manifest the other bodies in order to carry on the work of wisdom-compassion in samsara. Although the other two kinds of Buddha-body are manifested, those bodies are always, in their foundation, the formless dharma-body.

Amida Buddha as Fulfilled Body

When the classification of Buddha-bodies is applied to Amida, he is said to be a "fulfilled" or "enjoyment body" Buddha, manifesting the perfect enlightenment achieved through the accomplishment of his bodhisattva vows (this was asserted by Tao-ch'o, 562–645). But while Amida accords with the basic

Mahāyāna thinking about Buddha-bodies, in the functioning of his wisdom-compassion he reveals a special nature that distinguishes him from other enjoyment-body Buddhas.

In the three-body classification, dharma-body is without form, but it accommodates itself to the perceptions of unenlightened beings by assuming "transformed bodies" that possess the characteristics of beings in samsaric existence. In addition, it manifests an enjoyment body, which is also said to have form. Enjoyment-body Buddhas are therefore often depicted in word and image. Their characteristics, however, are not the forms of samsaric life and cannot be apprehended by ignorant beings. They may be said to stand in a temporal framework in that their features originate in bodhisattva vows, but those features are the manifestations of enlightenment and of the virtues achieved through fulfilling practices; hence, they differ fundamentally from the forms of samsaric existence arising as the result of defiled karma. The essence of the enjoyment body is the formless and timeless true reality perceived by wisdom and the nondualistic wisdom itself. While possessing form, it is in fact empty and formless.

Like dharma-body, then, the enjoyment body stands essentially beyond human perception and conceptualization. It appears directly only to those who have entered into profound contemplative states—that is, into the realm of the Buddha's enlightenment. Through such manifestations, Buddhas support those whom they have vowed to aid—people who discipline the mind and body, perform meritorious deeds, or practice meditation.

The essential quality of Amida Buddha, however, is the ability to become present to all living beings of the world—wherever they are, whatever point in history at which they exist, and whatever their capacities for religious practice—and to dispel their ignorance and awaken them to that which is true and real. He is, then, the form of Buddhahood realized specifically to bring all beings, without exception, to enlightenment.

The nature of Amida Buddha is illuminated by T'an-luan (476–542), the early Chinese master who did much to clarify the Mahāyāna foundations of the Pure Land teachings:

> All Buddhas and bodhisattvas have dharma-bodies of two dimensions: dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as compassionate means arises from dharma-body as suchness, and dharma-body as suchness emerges [into human awareness] out of dharma-body as compassionate means. These two dimensions of dharma-body differ but are not separable; they are one but cannot be regarded as identical. (Realization, 17)

Adopting the terms of T'an-luan's explanation, we may say that Amida Buddha is dharma-body as compassionate means. Although T'an-luan speaks of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas here, his concept of "dharma-body as compassionate means" reveals an emphasis not found in other Buddhist schools of thought, and it clarifies in particular the nature of Amida. There are two points to be noted.

First, Amida is called here dharma-body. Drawing on basic Mahāyāna thinking about Buddhahood, T'an-luan points to the fundamental nature of Amida as transcendent reality. While Amida is said to emerge from true reality or dharma-body as suchness, he always remains nondifferent from this reality.

Second, at the same time that he is dharma-body, he differs from suchness in that he has taken on particular forms and activities in order to approach unenlightened beings. Other Mahāyāna schools stand squarely on the nonduality in which form is itself formlessness and each instant of time is itself timelessness. T'an-luan's concept of the two dimensions of dharma-body, however, presents a unique development of the Buddha-body theory. While dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means are inseparable, in addition dharma-body as compassionate means (Amida) manifests a movement in which the formless and timeless enters into form and

time in the samsaric world as Amida Buddha's presence to unenlightened beings. The ability to lead beings to the realization of Buddhahood arises from Amida's foundation in suchness or nirvana, but the liberation of *all* beings requires in addition the capacity to become active in the lives of the ignorant and not simply aid those are able to purify their own minds. This concept of the formless dharma-body actively approaching unenlightened beings by becoming dharma-body as compassionate means is found only in the Pure Land tradition.

The Characteristics of Amida Buddha

Amida's characteristics are directly described in three Vows made by Dharmākara Bodhisattva: that his light be boundless, illuminating millions of Buddha fields (Twelfth Vow); that his lifespan will be infinite (Thirteenth Vow); and that all the Buddhas throughout the cosmos will praise his Name (Seventeenth Vow). Amida may be said to have other characteristics, but apart from these three features—light, life, and Name—all are derivative, and are phrased in terms of the ways in which beings are concretely benefited by him. It may be said, therefore, that Amida Buddha is the Buddha who has vowed to take the forms of light, life, and Name in order to awaken sentient beings by enabling them to be born in his land. The first two aspects—light and life—are the qualities identified in Amida's names in Sanskrit and depict his universality and transtemporality. The third aspect—his Name—represents the way Amida's perfection of the qualities of enlightenment embodies itself and becomes effective in the world of unenlightened beings. These three aspects at once define his uniqueness as a Buddha and further express, in its highest development, the complex character of Buddhahood that is both rooted in suchness or true reality and active in the world of beings.

Immeasurable Light

In Pure Land texts, the light of Amida Buddha is said to be the functioning of Amida's wisdom or Buddhahood; it therefore has such qualities as purity and joy. Further, it pervades all worlds without hindrance and eradicates the ignorance and blind passions of beings. Perhaps the central metaphor for Amida's light is the sun. As Vasubandhu states, based on the Pure Land sutras:

> The Buddha's wisdom is a bright and pure sun;
> It eliminates the dark of the world's foolishness.

Amida Buddha as light is like the sun in that he dispels the darkness of ignorance; however, this light clearly differs from our usual conceptions of light in that it is "unhindered." In explaining the name Amida ("Immeasurable [light and life]"), the *Smaller Sutra* states, "The Buddha's light shines boundlessly over all the world of the ten quarters without hindrance." Further, among the names of Amida taught in the *Larger Sutra* is "Buddha of Unhindered Light," which Shinran succinctly explains:

> With the light of the sun or moon, when something has come between, the light does not reach us. Amida's light, however, being unobstructed by things, shines on all sentient beings; hence, he is named Buddha of Unhindered Light. (*Mida nyorai myōgōtoku,* SSZ II, 733)

This unhinderedness is a quality of Amida's light as wisdom. T'an-luan explains the concept of unhinderedness: " 'Unhindered' means to know that birth-and-death is itself nirvana" (Practice, 82). Amida's light (wisdom, enlightenment) is unhindered because, at the same time that it dispels ignorance, it does not stand in dualistic opposition to samsaric existence, but illuminates and embraces blind passions and takes them into itself. In this way, it is able to shine on all beings, not only those

who accomplish religious practices. Thus Shinran continues:

> Being unhindered by sentient beings' minds of blind passions and evil karma, he is called Buddha of Unhindered Light. (*Mida nyorai myōgōtoku,* SSZ II, 733–34)

Further, the light of wisdom is expressive of Amida's stance in both the realms of formlessness and form. Amida's light is said to pervade the universe, transforming those touched by it. Their defilements are swept away, and they become soft and gentle in body and mind (Thirty-third Vow). "They dance with joy, and the good mind arises in them" (*Larger Sutra,* True Buddha and Land, 4). It is also said that people are "grasped, never to be abandoned" by it (*Contemplation Sutra*). It transforms their lives into authentic existence—into new life that is always fresh and immediate—by freeing them from the compulsions of self-will. Nevertheless, we cannot perceive this light with our senses, nor can we clearly conceive of it, since, being unhindered, its concrete qualities differ essentially from what we know as light. The all-pervasive activity of the Buddha's wisdom and its power to bring beings to awareness is expressed in terms of the concept of light, but at the same time we are made to know that it transcends human conception. Shinran states:

> This Tathāgata (Amida) is light. Light is none other than wisdom; wisdom is the form of light. Wisdom is, in addition, formless; hence this Tathāgata is the Buddha of inconceivable light. (Passage 18)

Amida Buddha's wisdom-light is unhindered and inconceivable; it has no form and cannot be imagined as any thing whatsoever.

Immeasurable Life

Like light that is unhindered, life that is immeasurable in duration presents a paradoxical image that expresses Amida's complex nature. Unhindered light dispels darkness, and further manifests the nonduality of samsara and nirvana, blind passions

and enlightenment. In the same way, Amida's boundless life is eternal, and yet enters into time and history and fuses with the existence of beings of this world.

The narrative of Amida's attainment is related in historical terms: A king abandoned his throne and made vows as the bodhisattva Dharmākara, which he eventually fulfilled through accomplishing his practices. He thus became Amida Buddha and established his Pure Land, where he presently resides. The *Larger* and *Smaller Sutras* state that the fulfillment of the Vows took place ten kalpas ago. At that time in the history of the cosmos, Amida Buddha became an active reality.

Ten kalpas, however, expresses a point inconceivably distant—billions of years in the past. Moreover, Dharmākara's practice is said to have been carried on for countless kalpas before that, and prior to that the formulation of the Primal Vow alone required five kalpas. The story of Dharmākara becoming Amida, then, spans vast stretches of time far transcending the geologic epochs in which the existence of this planet is divided, and the entire event itself reached completion in what we can only call the infinite past. Shinran clearly points this out:

> It is taught that ten kalpas have now passed
> Since Amida attained Buddhahood;
> But he seems a Buddha more ancient
> Than kalpas countless as particles.
>
> *Mida jōbutsu no konokata wa*
> *Ima ni jikkō to tokitaredo,*
> *Jinden kuon-gō yori mo*
> *Hisashiki butsu to mietamō.* (*Jōdo wasan,* 55)

Amida's origins, then, are spoken of as if they belonged to the historical framework of our world, but in fact the inconceivable lengths of time that are described place them beyond our ordinary notions of time.

Although the Pure Land is said to lie billions of universes

westward of our world, in the *Contemplation Sutra* Śākyamuni states, "Do you know that Amida is not far from here?" Thus he indicates that our separation from it lies in a dimension different from what we think of as spacial distance. Likewise, Amida's attainment takes place in a primordial time that precedes the history of the world, and at the same time, the historical character of the narrative indicates that he is not apart from the temporal flow of life in the world. In his attainment of Buddhahood ten kalpas ago, we see that what lies outside time enters into time. Amida's life is not everlasting in the sense that it belongs to time and endures indefinitely; rather, it is eternal, meaning that it stands beyond our conceptual framework of time, but possesses the power to become present in every moment of time.

Name

Although Amida is said to possess the qualities of light and life in fullness and perfection, they are in some sense universal to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Moreover, these do not themselves afford a means by which we can know the Buddha. The uniqueness of Amida, then, is manifested in his third characteristic, his Name.

By making himself known to beings as his Name, Amida Buddha enters into the realm of human life at its essential and fundamental level, and into meaningful existence for those who genuinely hear it, for naming is the distinctive and central activity by which human beings apprehend the world. Thus, the invocation of the divine name is known to all the major religious traditions. The Name of Amida, however, is not an instrument for calling or identifying the Buddha; it is the Buddha himself. Amida gives the Name to beings to manifest himself. The Name, then, is meaningful as a term in the language of human beings, but it is above all, in the genuine hearing or pronouncing of it, the Buddha's presence. Like Amida's light and life, it embodies the fusion of samsaric existence and that which is true and real.

The bond between Amida Buddha and beings is further expressed in the form that the Name takes. In the *Contemplation Sutra,* the utterance of Amida's Name is expressed "Namu-amida-butsu" (as pronounced in Japanese). "Namu" is a transliteration of the Sanskrit *namas,* meaning "I take refuge." In the East Asian Pure Land tradition, the Name has been understood to refer not simply to "Amida Buddha," but to the entire formula, Namu-amida-butsu. In establishing his Name, Amida included the means by which beings would come to know and take refuge in him. That is, the awakening of beings has been from the beginning an integral aspect of Amida's Buddhahood.

The Seventeenth Vow declaring that Amida's Name shall be praised by all the Buddhas holds a double significance. First, it assures that the Name, which expresses the presence of Amida's compassionate activity, shall be heard by all beings throughout the universe. Second, the Buddhas' praise gives witness and testimony to the power of Amida's Vow embodied in the Name. Both these aspects are part of the essential nature of Amida Buddha, for he is none other than the Buddha who saves beings by means of his Name. Thus, a quarter of his Vows define virtues of hearing his Name: for example, sentient beings throughout the Buddha fields of the ten quarters who hear his Name will realize the wisdom termed "insight into the nonorigination of all existence" (34), and bodhisattvas in other Buddha fields who hear his Name will attain various samādhis or states of concentration (42, 45), be born in noble familes in the next life (43), rejoice in performing practices (44), and immediately attain the stage of nonretrogression (47).

Amida and Śākyamuni

Amida's basic characteristics of light, life, and Name—of transcendence of spacial and temporal dimensions on the one hand, and emergence into historical existence as human

awareness on the other—may be further clarified through considering his relationship with Śākyamuni Buddha.

Śākyamuni is usually regarded as a historical figure, a mendicant wanderer and religious teacher in ancient India, and among the teachings attributed to him is the story of Amida Buddha. Although historical evidence now suggests that the teaching of Amida first appeared around the beginning of the common era—five centuries after Śākyamuni's death—even if it emerged later in the tradition stemming from Śākyamuni, the basic question of the relationship between Amida and the person(s) who first taught him remains unchanged. Amida Buddha has never appeared in the world directly as a historical personage, and there are no teachings or words that can be attributed to him. Thus, it is common to view the story of Amida as a narrative fashioned by Śākyamuni (or a later figure) to express the content of his own religious insight. Since his awakening could not be conveyed directly, he resorted to the use of parables and myths, and the story of Amida is considered such a "skillful means" or device for teaching. In this view, Amida is a fiction, or perhaps a religious symbol, whose origins lie in the experience of Śākyamuni.

Mahāyāna Buddhists, however, take the opposite perspective: reality resides with Amida Buddha, and the historical existence of Śākyamuni was an accommodation or manifestation undertaken to reveal that reality to the beings of this world. The motive-force of wisdom-compassion that underlies the historical existence of Śākyamuni—that made him Buddha—is itself the life of Amida Buddha. It is Śākyamuni himself, among perhaps countless others, who is the historical manifestation of Amida.

As the sutras relate, before teaching dharma, the Buddha enters a specific samādhi, a realm of nondiscriminative wisdom that transcends words and concepts. On emerging from the samādhi, he begins to speak. While his words are those of ordinary human discourse, they arise from and give expression to

the particular samādhi he has attained. Thus, the source of Śākyamuni's teaching is the samādhi he entered, the transcendent reality or wisdom itself.

At the beginning of the *Larger Sutra,* Śākyamuni's disciple Ānanda observes that the Buddha has entered the samādhi of great tranquility (J. *daijakujō,* in the translation titled *Sutra of the Tathāgata of Immeasurable Life*), and from the gladness and serenity apparent in the Buddha's countenance, he surmises:

> The Buddhas of the past, future, and present all think on one another. Do not you, the present Buddha, also think on all the other Buddhas now? (Teaching, 3)

Perceiving the depth of the Buddha's samādhi, Ānanda requests him to explain its significance, and Śākyamuni proceeds to deliver the teaching of Amida Buddha. In other words, Śākyamuni has attained the reality that is the essential quality of all Buddhas—it is also called the "place where all Buddhas abide" (Teaching, 3)—and on this basis he reveals the story of Amida, for Amida is the primordial Buddha who embodies the essence of all Buddhas.

From the perspective of this sutra, were it not for Amida, whose Buddhahood lies at the heart of the samādhi of great tranquility, Śākyamuni himself would not be Buddha. At the same time, were it not for Śākyamuni, the teaching of Amida would not be disclosed to the world. More generally, Shinran states:

> Amida Tathāgata comes forth from suchness and manifests various bodies—fulfilled, accommodated, and transformed. (Realization, 1)

Here, Shinran states that Amida manifests various kinds of Buddha-body. In addition to the fulfilled or enjoyment body, there are two kinds of manifestation as living beings, accommodated and transformed. "Accommodated" appears to refer to manifestations as Buddhas in the world and "transformed" to

manifestations as other kinds of beings. The former refers specifically to Śākyamuni in our world. Examples of the latter would include Shan-tao and Hōnen, both of whom Shinran considered to be incarnations of Amida.

Thus, the relationship between Amida and Śākyamuni is not that between two distinct figures, or between the religious symbol taught and the teacher. Rather, it is viewed in a broader framework of Amida's characteristic as standing both in formless reality and the world of forms, in the eternal and in history. Śākyamuni is not separate from Amida, and in teaching dharma he manifests the activity or movement towards beings that is Amida's essential quality.

Amida's Pure Land

Purified Realms

In the Mahāyāna tradition, fulfilled- or enjoyment-body Buddhas are said to occupy fields of influence in which their wisdom acts to save beings. Bodhisattvas vow to establish such spheres, and their attainment of Buddhahood is, at the same time, the purification of their lands and the beings in them, resulting in a Buddha realm or pure land. These lands are characterized above all by the bliss of enlightenment, and in the sutra literature, this bliss is depicted in such concrete terms as jewel trees and palaces, pools strewn with golden sands, soft breezes and mild climate. These features are manifested to awaken and guide beings throughout the universe to enlightenment, and are said to differ from land to land in order to accord with the varying capacities and natures of beings.

Because of such descriptions, it is easy to assume that the Buddha lands were understood to exist much like our own world but in other locales, as a kind of heaven or paradise. Their fundamental nature, however, is identical with that of the enjoyment-body Buddha; in essence, they are none other than reality

as known to nondiscriminative wisdom, or the nonduality of reality and Buddha-wisdom. They are not distinct areas in the universe. From the perspective of wisdom, our world is not different from the pure lands of the Buddhas. When Śākyamuni appeared, this world also was purified, and was his Buddha land. Unenlightened beings perceive it, from the stance of their own attachments, as possessing both pleasant and painful features. In the eyes of the Buddha, however, it is totally impure, being the abode of samsaric existence in which ignorant beings have been transmigrating since the beginningless past, and at the same time, it is completely pure, being characterized by the sameness of nondiscriminative wisdom. Viewed by wisdom, the things of samsaric existence are themselves true reality, and the present instant is timeless, neither arising nor perishing. Only Buddhas and bodhisattvas, however, apprehend the world as pure or defiled, and they are able to transform it from impure to pure by guiding beings to enlightenment and thus freeing them of defiling passions. To unenlightened beings, the world is not a realm of purity and enlightenment, for in ignorance they constantly involve themselves in pain and delusion; but neither is it perceived to be defiled or samsaric, for at bottom they retain a desperate attachment to it.

The Pure Land of Amida Buddha

Bodhisattva Dharmākara sought a means by which to bring all living things to enlightenment, and realized it by becoming Amida Buddha and establishing a pure realm into which all beings throughout the universe are able to be born. Amida's Land of Bliss—in Chinese translation, Utmost Bliss, Land of Happiness, or Land of Peace—as the most highly developed example of the concept of a Buddha field or pure land, is widely referred to in East Asian texts simply as *the* Pure Land.

The nature of his land and the means by which beings can be born there were of crucial concern to Dharmākara, and according to the *Larger Sutra,* before formulating his Vows, he con-

templated the features of billions of Buddha fields and the qualities of their inhabitants for five kalpas.

Among Amida's Vows, only two directly specify the features of the Pure Land. Dharmākara vowed that his land be pure and illumine all the Buddha lands throughout the cosmos (Thirty-first Vow), and that everything in his land—"palaces, towers, ponds and streams, flowers and trees"—be formed of precious substances, possessed of supassing grace and excellence, and imbued with fragrances that pervade the universe (Thirty-second Vow). In addition, he vowed that his land be free of the realms of hell, famished ghosts, and animals (First Vow).

From these Vows, we understand that Amida's land is characterized chiefly by purity and light, qualities that express perfect nondiscrimination and the transcendence of all conceptualized forms. The essential character of both Amida and his land is identical; there is no distinction between them, for both emerge as the activity of wisdom. Their foremost characteristic is purity in the sense of accord with formless true reality or wisdom. Thus, Vasubandhu states that the Pure Land is "infinite, like space, vast and boundless." (True Buddha and Land, 39).

While the land is pure, it is also adorned by various features that arise as manifestations of great compassion. Life there is depicted as free of all discomfort, and dwellings, clothes, and food are naturally provided and suited to each being. The air is full of music and fragrances, and the inhabitants are all possessed of pure bodies and transcendent powers, so there is no enmity or strife. T'an-luan, however, points out that the adornments are essentially inconceivable, for they arise from the pure mind of Buddha and surpass our own realm of conceptions. The water of the Pure Land, for example, is not necessary for the consumption of beings, for they have meditation and samādhi for their nourishment, not the grain of our world. Neither is it needed for washing, for the land is pure in every respect. The

waters exist solely to delight the minds of beings, and those who listen can hear in them the sounds of dharma. They are so limpid and clear, the *Larger Sutra* states, "it is as though they had no form." Descriptions of the Pure Land, then, depict it above all as the realm arising from Amida Buddha's enlightenment.

Birth in the Pure Land

As a central element of the path to enlightenment, the Pure Land possesses two major characteristics. First, being the realm of the Buddha's wisdom, it stands in direct contrast to this world of samsaric existence. Thus the Pure Land sutras, while evoking the bliss of the Pure Land, also stress that this world is characterized by five kinds of defilement, including defilements of the age, such as wars, famines, and plagues, and the moral, intellectual, and physical corruption of beings. As Vasubandhu states:

> Contemplating the features of that world (the Pure Land),
> I see that it transcends the three realms (samsara).

Awareness of the Pure Land as the realm of enlightenment always includes awareness of one's own condition in this world of samsaric existence.

At the same time, however, the Pure Land arises from and embodies Amida's compassionate Vow to save all beings. He has made it possible for all human beings to depart from the realm of defilement and be born there. Thus, a commentary on the above passage states:

> When foolish beings possessed of blind passions attain birth in the Pure Land, they are not bound by the karmic fetters of the three realms. That is, without severing blind passions, they realize nirvana. (Realization, 9)

Here we find the basic structure of the Pure Land path as a way to enlightenment. The Pure Land and this world stand in

mutual opposition, and yet beings possessed of passions and delusional thinking are able to attain birth there without having rid themselves beforehand of such defilements.

The Mahāyāna tradition upholds and develops the perspective of wisdom, which perceives that all beings are pervaded by and inseparable from Buddha-nature or enlightenment. Thus, all beings—not only spiritual masters or those capable of ascetic practice—are seen to hold the potentiality for awakening. Moreover, Mahāyāna Buddhists recognize the reality in our lives of the activity and energy of many enlightened beings dedicating their merit to us to lead us toward enlightenment. Nevertheless, all forms of Buddhism other than the Pure Land tradition taught paths in which the eradication of blind passions and discriminative thinking was the essential step in realizing wisdom or Buddhahood. The Mahāyāna tradition recognized the possibility of a layperson surpassing renunciant disciples of the Buddha in wisdom, and further developed the fundamentally ascetic three learnings—precepts, meditation, and wisdom—into the six pāramitās, including such socially-oriented virtues as selfless giving, meritorious conduct, and a code of behavior adaptable in lay life. Nevertheless, even though people sought to live within the basic precepts, if they did not attain wisdom, they could not hope to break the bonds of samsaric existence. Their highest aim could be only birth into more favorable conditions in the future. The Pure Land teaching, however, affords a path that leads beings incapable of the three learnings to birth into the realm of Amida's enlightenment, free of samsara, where one receives the purifying influence of the Buddha.

The Pure Land sutras teach birth in the Pure Land at the end of life in this world; there, amid the adornments that manifest the Buddha's enlightenment, and with the Buddha's support, one is able to perform and fulfill the practices that result in Buddhahood. Since the Pure Land is free of the lower courses of existence, and all are born there as bodhisattvas whose eventual attainment of enlightenment is settled, there is no danger of falling back into samsara. For most of the tradition, the Pure Land represented an ideal environment for accomplishing the bodhisattva's practice, in contrast to this defiled world. Thus, prior to Shinran, the immediate goal of the Pure Land path was birth in the Pure Land, which signified attainment of the stage of non-retrogression.

Practice in the Pure Land Tradition

As we have seen, Amida is one of countless Buddhas throughout the cosmos, and each Buddha maintains a sphere of activity, a Buddha land. The prominence of Amida lies in the nature of his Vows, which delineate a path by which all people may attain enlightenment. The precise nature of this path, however—how one should perform practice, its significance, and why it is effective—was clarified only gradually through the developments of a long tradition in various cultures, and it may be said that it is in the works of Shinran, more than a millenium after the Pure Land sutras took written form, that the path stands most fully disclosed. Throughout the Pure Land tradition, the central questions were how and when one enters into the working arising from Amida's fulfillment of his Vows.

The Eighteenth Vow

According to the Pure Land sutras, the practice that enables a person to break the bondage of samsara by attaining birth in the Pure Land is the *nembutsu,* which literally means to think on or be mindful of (*nen*) the Buddha (*butsu*). In early Buddhist tradition, a form of "thinking on the Buddha" was practiced focusing on Śākyamuni Buddha. It included elements of remembrance of the Buddha's features, trust, and worship. Later, it came to embrace contemplation on other Buddhas as well. It was in the Pure Land tradition, in which nembutsu is taught as the means to birth in Amida's Pure Land, that it had its major development.

The central text concerning Pure Land practice is found in Amida's forty-eight Vows. Among the Vows, there are three—the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth—that set forth ways by which "the sentient beings of the ten quarters" can attain birth in the Pure Land. From the beginning of the Pure Land tradition, the Eighteenth Vow—which presents the simplest requirements for practicers—has been understood to be fundamental and central. It states:

> If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters who sincerely entrust themselves and aspire to be born in my land, performing even ten *nen,* should be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.

Here, it is stated that all people will attain birth in the Pure Land who 1) sincerely entrust themselves to the Vow and aspire for birth there and 2) perform "even ten *nen.*" *Nen* has been understood to imply nembutsu and interpreted to mean either "to think on" Amida Buddha and his Pure Land or "to say the Name." Thus, the ten *nen* in the Vow may mean literally that one must concentratedly entrust oneself to or be mindful of the Buddha for ten thoughts; or it may mean, as has been held from Shan-tao on, that one must say the Name of Amida at least ten times.

Why should such practice have the power to bring about one's birth into the sphere of enlightenment? In India, two seminal figures of the Mahāyāna tradition, Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, delineated frameworks for understanding the Pure Land path as forms of Mahāyāna.

The Path of Easy Practice

Nāgārjuna was the first great systematizer of the teachings expressed in the Mahāyāna sutras. In his *Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages,* he states that the initial problem for the Buddhist aspirant is reaching the first bodhisattva stage, the stage of non-retrogression. When a person finally attains this stage,

> He sees the dharma, enters the dharma, attains the dharma, and abides in the firm dharma, from which he can never be moved, and thus he ultimately reaches nirvana (Practice, 13).

The person in this stage must still perform bodhisattva practices to progress through the remaining nine stages, but with his realization of wisdom attained in the first stage, a decisive change has taken place. In the bodhisatta's practice prior to this, there is always the danger of falling into negligence or despair, or of sinking into eternal repose in an imperfect, self-centered form of nirvana. Nāgārjuna calls this latter the "death of the bodhisattva," who must exert himself with constant vigilance and a million times the energy of those who seek only their own salvation if he is to perfect his bodhisattvahood and ferry others as well as himself to enlightenment. Thus, attaining non-retrogression and becoming a bodhisattva whose eventual enlightenment is "definitely settled" is cause for great rejoicing, and the first stage is also known as the "stage of joy."

Reaching this stage, however, comes only after aeons of resolution and effort to fulfill the pāramitās. Later, Tao-ch'o termed such practice the "Path of Sages," suitable only for those of extraordinary capacities. Referring to Nāgārjuna's explanation, T'an-luan notes that "seeking non-retrogression in this world of five defilements at a time when there is no Buddha" presents great difficulties for the practicer (Practice, 18). It is hard to purify the mind and achieve the profound meditation in which the roots of delusional thought are sundered, particularly at a time when life is short, human intellectual and moral faculties are deteriorating, and social conditions are adverse. But above all, such practice is difficult when one lacks the guidance of a Buddha. Thus, in his commentary, Nāgārjuna

raises the question of whether there is a simpler, quicker path to this fundamental goal. While stating that such a question in itself betrays a faint-heartedness hardly befitting a bodhisattva, he teaches that there are countless paths to non-retrogression. Some bodhisattvas engage in difficult practice that may be compared to arduous travel overland, and others reach non-retrogression relatively swiftly and comfortably, as though riding in a boat.

Instead of laboring to purify one's mind and thereby manifest the Buddha-nature within one, it is also possible to take up, in Nāgārjuna's words, "the easy practice of entrusting as the means" for attaining non-retrogression (Practice, 15). The easy practice based on trust or faith works to overcome the difficulties of pervasive defilement and the absence of a guiding Buddha by bringing the practicer into relationship with the Buddhas and into contact with the realm of enlightenment.

This faith is not a simple acceptance of that which cannot be proved; neither is it belief in doctrine or assent to some teaching. For Nāgārjuna, the easy practice is to "think on the Buddhas (*nen-butsu*) of the ten quarters and say their names in praise." Trust therefore expresses itself above all as mindfulness of the Buddhas and great bodhisattvas throughout the cosmos, who manifest the wisdom-compassion of the Mahāyāna way through their own bodily splendor and brilliance and that of their lands. Since Nāgārjuna describes the virtues of the various Buddhas and their lands, to think on may be understood to include deep reflection or contemplation on the character of each Buddha. Thus, "thinking on" represents entrance into the Buddhas' activity through the entrusting of oneself to it.

Nāgārjuna does not restrict "easy practice" to focus on Amida Buddha, but he singles out Amida's Vows as a clear and representative example of it and therefore is considered by Shinran the first of the seven great masters of the Pure Land tradition.

T'an-luan, following Nāgārjuna, further contrasts the Pure Land path with the path of difficult practice by noting that it "is based solely on self-power and lacks the support of Other Power" (Practice, 18). T'an-luan was the first to employ the contrasting terms "self-power" and "Other Power," which express fundamental elements of the concept of trust in Buddhist practice. Sincere trust on the part of practicers implies, on the one hand, an awareness of the power and effectiveness of Amida's Vow (Other Power), fulfilled through the bodhisattva practice of Dharmākara, and on the other hand, an awareness of the inadquacies of one's own efforts and practice (self-power). Thus, in summarizing the Pure Land way as the path of easy practice, T'an-luan states:

> In the path of easy practice, one aspires to be born in the Pure Land with solely one's entrusting to the Buddha as the cause, and allowing oneself to be carried by the power of the Buddha's Vow, one quickly attains birth in the land of purity. Supported by the Buddha's power, one immediately joins the truly settled of the Mahāyāna. (Practice, 18)

Mindfulness

While Nāgārjuna set the basic parameters of the Pure Land path—the practice of "thinking on the Buddha and saying his Name" and the goal of non-retrogression—it was Vasubandhu who first provided a systematic account of nembutsu practice in the Pure Land path. In his *Treatise on the Pure Land,* a commentary on the *Larger Sutra,* he sets forth the nembutsu as encompassing "five gates of mindfulness," or five aspects of practice centering on Amida Buddha and the Pure Land:

1) worship
2) praise, particularly through utterance of the Name
3) aspiration for birth
4) contemplation of the Buddha and the Pure Land
5) directing of merit accrued through the first four aspects of practice to all beings.

The five gates of mindfulness may be viewed from several different perspectives. The first three "gates" describe acts of body, speech, and mind, respectively, the three categories into which all human activity is divided in Buddhist thought.

Further, the third and fourth, aspiration and contemplation, correspond to the basic meditative practice of *śamatha* (stilling the mind) and *vipaśyanā* (insight into reality). By concentrating on Amida and the Pure Land, practicers enter the samādhi of tranquility, in which all distracting thoughts are dispelled, and contemplating the adornments of the Buddha and the Pure Land in this state, they perceive them as manifestations of enlightenment or reality.

Moreover, the first four gates taken together form the practice for one's own attainment of the Pure Land, while the fifth gate, "directing of merit," signifies return from the Pure Land for the sake of all beings:

> With great compassion, one observes all sentient beings in pain and affliction, and assuming various transformed bodies to guide them, enters the gardens of birth-and-death and the forests of blind passions. (Realization, 17)

This concept of two directions—going and returning, or entrance into the Pure Land and emergence again in this world—concisely expresses the core of the bodhisattva path, and became a fundamental concept in Shinran's teaching.

We find in Vasubandhu's concept of the five gates of mindfulness a comprehensive course of practice that may be seen as an adaptation of the bodhisattva path to the Pure Land context. He speaks of wholehearted entrusting of oneself to Amida—"taking refuge with mind that is single"—as the proper attitude in practice, and also of the "power of the Primal Vow" as instrumental in its accomplishment. Nevertheless, while the path that he teaches might be called rapid and easy in comparison to other formulations of the bodhisattvas' practice, it still requires extraordinary religious and spiritual capacities. The core of this

nembutsu practice remains contemplation, in which one sees the features of Amida Buddha, the Pure Land, and the bodhisattvas born there as embodiments of true reality, and is led to an awakening to the formless, uncreated dharma-body.

Saying the Name

The *Treatise on the Pure Land* is the only systematic exposition of Pure Land thought and practice in India. From the late second century, however, Pure Land texts began to be translated into Chinese, and in the early sixth century T'an-luan wrote a commentary on Vasubandhu's work that laid the foundation for establishing the Pure Land way as a sufficient and independent Buddhist path in China. T'an-luan follows Vasubandhu in teaching the five gates of mindfulness with contemplation as their core, but he also recognizes the possibility of a person who has passed an entire lifetime in evil attaining birth through utterance of the Name at death.

In addition to the nembutsu presented in the Eighteenth Vow, there is another strain of nembutsu teaching in the *Larger Sutra.* It is taught in a passage that describes three levels of practice, differing in the difficulty and quality of the exercises undertaken, but all including the practice of thinking on Amida Buddha (*nembutsu*) and all resulting in birth in the Pure Land. Shinran understood this passage as teaching the fulfillment of the Nineteenth Vow.

This description of practice has two important features. First, a range of practice is described. The highest level is that of monks who perform religious practices; the middle level is that of lay people who do meritourious deeds, make offerings, and build stupas; and the lowest level is that of people who are incapable of meritorious deeds but still aspire for the Pure Land and think on the Buddha perhaps ten times. The concept of various grades of beings, all nevertheless attaining birth in the Pure Land, became a significant fixture of Pure Land thinking about practice.

Second, birth is attained by seeing Amida Buddha at the point of death and following him to the Pure Land. Those of the highest level see Amida directly, those of the middle level see a transformed body, and those of the lowest level see the Buddha in a dream. While bodhisatvas of the path of difficult practice may enter deep samādhi in the course of their exercises, those of the Pure Land are unable to accomplish this. Nevertheless, the Buddha appears to them at the point that their future lives are determined, and with the mind purified through perception of him, they are guided by him to the Pure Land and born there in the next life.

The most influential exposition of this strain of nembutsu thought is in the *Contemplation Sutra,* which teaches a similar grading of practice, with each level again divided in three. Concerning the very lowest level, it describes people who commit evil all through life, but chance to encounter the teaching at the point of death. It states that, even if unable to think on Amida, if they simply say the Buddha's Name ten times, taking refuge in him, they will attain birth. It is taught that with each utterance, the effects of their lifelong evil, which would have bound them to samsaric life for aeons, are eliminated, and when they die, they see before them a lotus that carries them to the Pure Land.

While the Indian tradition continued to view the Pure Land path in the context of bodhisattva practice, the mainstream Pure Land tradition in China turned greater attention to the aspect of reflection on the human condition inherent in Pure Land thought and sought the means by which all people, even those in mundane life and those incapable of religious practices, could attain birth. Since the sutras present a range of practice, consideration was focused on the minimal necessary practice, and the passage from the *Contemplation Sutra* on the lowest level of practicer came to be the basis for interpreting the meaning of nembutsu in the Eighteenth Vow. This is apparent in Tao-ch'o, who lived at a time when the concept of the historical decline in the practice and realization of the teaching deeply

troubled Buddhists. He paraphrases the Vow by fusing it with the teaching of the *Contemplation Sutra:*

> If sentient beings, though they have committed evil all their lives, should say my Name at the time of death, continuing for ten times, and yet not attain birth, may I not realize the supreme enlightenment. (SSZ I, 410)

Throughout the Pure Land tradition until Shinran, the *Contemplation Sutra* remained the basis for understanding the Eighteenth Vow. There are two basic consequences. First, nembutsu as utterance of the Name—in contrast to mental concentration—came to occupy an increasingly important position, for within the framework of practices, it was seen to be the essential, minimally required, act conforming to the Primal Vow. Shan-tao labels it the "act of true settlement," distinguishing it from such activities centering on Amida as worship and contemplation; he relegates these other practices to an auxiliary or supportive status. Hōnen develops such thinking further, and teaches that saying the Name is *the* practice selected by Amida Buddha in his compassionate Vow to save all beings, and that other practices are to be set aside.

Second, the idea that Amida Buddha comes to welcome one into the Pure Land became a strong element of the teaching, and practicers sought to prepare themselves for the final moment of life, which they regarded as decisive for their attainment of birth.

Shinran declares the *Contemplation Sutra* a provisional teaching and not the true message of Śākyamuni, which lies in the *Larger Sutra.* He follows Nāgārjuna in stressing that the stage of non-retrogression may be attained in the present, without depending on events at the moment of death. Moreover, he goes even further, declaring that the realization of entrusting itself signifies attainment of non-retrogression, and that thereafter one is the same as Maitreya bodhisattva—a bodhisattva of the highest stage—for one will realize supreme