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# Foundations of Ethics and Practice in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism

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## I. Defining the Problem

This paper grew out of a longstanding dissatisfaction that I have had with Pure Land (jingtu, 淨土) studies, and that is the dominance of a particular historical narrative which takes Kamakura-period Japanese Pure Land Buddhism as either the norm or the telos (or both) of all Pure Land Buddhism. Hindsight seems to make it easy to believe that, somehow or another, a kind of logic intrinsic to belief in Amitābha and his Pure Land led inexorably to the doctrines and practices of the Jōdoshū (淨土宗), the Jōdo Shinshū (淨土真宗), and the Jishū (時宗). The systems elaborated by Hōnen (法然), Shinran (親鸞), and Ippen (一遍), which negated the efficacy of human action and vested Amitābha's "other-power" with exclusive salvific potency, became, as it were, the Omega Point of Pure Land Buddhism's development, and all forms of Pure Land teaching prior to these figures are to be seen in their relationship to this Omega Point. They simultaneously point to it and, insofar as they fail to conform to it perfectly, await their fulfillment in it.<sup>1</sup>

Such a construal of Pure Land history, of course, misconceives it as a linear development, a chain of events moving from one link to the next. In reality, this history is more like a tree than a chain: branches appear at various points, and then continue their growth parallel to other branches. In my own study of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist thought and practice, what has struck me is that, right up to the present, it has continued on its own path, and never taken on the theologies of Shinran and Ippen in any serious way. It never has denied the necessity or effectiveness of self-power, of human moral striving and spiritual cultivation. While recognizing the need for reliance on the "other-power" of Amitābha, it has seen the path to rebirth more as a cooperative venture involving both, captured in a phrase I saw once in a modern Taiwan Pure Land text: "the twin powers of self and other" (Ch. zi ta er li, 自他二力).<sup>2</sup>

Even if one grants that the Japanese Pure Land schools provide no appropriate service as either a heuristic or a telos by which to understand the Chinese Pure Land experience, a comparison of the two still has the virtue of alerting scholars to doctrinal and practical issues previously unexamined. Historical circumstances peculiar to Japanese Buddhism (such as Hōnen's problems with antinomian behavior on the part of his disciples or the crisis Shinran underwent as a result of the perceived failure of his practice and his forced return to lay status) led the Japanese to think long and hard about the relationship between self-power and other-power, and their deprecation of human religious striving came about at the conclusion of their reflection.

Knowing this to be the case, I began to wonder if any Chinese Pure Land thinker had ever examined the relationship between human religious activity and the saving power of Amitābha in a systematic way. I knew that the Chinese had certainly never come to the same conclusion and had never judged self-effort useless, but had they ever formulated their own systematic account of this relationship as the Japanese had? Had the issue been addressed at all? The primary goal of this project was to find a Chinese text that took on this topic and treated it rigorously, but alas, such a text has so far eluded me. However, by looking at several texts, I have been able to find hints and indications here and there which, added together, constitute a fairly complete and consistent soteriological scheme that relates self-power to other-power. Fully aware of the hermeneutical dangers one faces

in collating proof-texts from works spanning greatly-separated times and places around the Chinese empire, I will venture to lay it out as best I can with some confidence that it indeed represents a characteristically Chinese way of approaching the relationship of self-power and other-power, human striving and the Buddha's original vow-power. I will do this by focusing on a particular arena of human religious activity: ethics and precepts, "ethics" indicating general norms of human behavior, and "precepts" meaning specific vows taken in ritual contexts.

First, however, a couple of qualms about the very question I am asking call for our attention. It may appear that, in asking whether Chinese Pure Land thinkers ever formulated a soteriology that methodically related the roles of moral effort and the Buddha's power in effecting rebirth in the Pure Land, I am assuming the existence of a self-contained Pure Land "school" or "sect" with its own religious agenda pursued independently of other "schools." The idea that such a "school" ever existed in China has been convincingly critiqued in recent years,<sup>3</sup> and in fact I would also contend that Pure Land has never enjoyed or even sought such autonomy from the rest of the Chinese Buddhist world. In China, Pure Land is the common property of all Chinese Buddhists, one of a number of "dharma-gates" (famen, 法門) open to those with a need or an aptitude for it. This being so, it is reasonable to ask: Why look for a "Pure Land account" of the need for ethics and precepts? "Pure Land" could simply stand for the mythologem of Amitābha's vows and his Land of Ease and Bliss along with the soteriology that it undergirds, while an account of morality and vows could be sought elsewhere, in the writings of vinaya masters and preceptors.

To this I would respond that, far from obviating the present inquiry, this point only adds to its urgency and relevance. If the Pure Land mythologem really belongs to all Chinese Buddhists and not to just one "school" of them, then the questions to be raised in the next section must perforce be of concern to all Chinese Buddhists. Unlike Japanese Buddhism, in which well-bounded autonomous schools may indeed look only to their own literature for answers to their own problems, Chinese Buddhism's boundaries are quite porous, and so the introduction of Amitābha's "other-power" as an element of the path to Buddhahood raises problems for everyone, including the vinaya masters and preceptors. In fact, as we shall see, very few of the thinkers whose works we shall consult thought of themselves exclusively as Pure Land sectarians. Many, such as Ouyi Zhixu (藕益智旭), wrote on a wide variety of topics that included both Pure Land soteriology and precepts.

A second qualm might justifiably arise with respect to the focus on ethics and precepts in this article. At its most general level, the question being raised is: How exactly did Chinese Pure Land thought relate the practitioner's own self-power to Amitābha's other-power. "Self-power" is an extremely broad and inclusive term that can denote anything that a Buddhist does to achieve liberation from suffering: meditation, making vows, joining the monastic order, study, ritual, ethical living, and so on. I choose to single out precepts and ethics from this list for two reasons. First, whatever is said about any one of these topics can apply to any other term in the list; sorting out the relation of ethics and precepts to Amitābha's other-power provides the key to understanding the relationship of the other areas of religious endeavor to other-power as well. Using ethics and precepts to stand synechdochally for "self-power" in general allows me to narrow and simplify my presentation.

Second, ethics and precepts have historically been the most problematic items on the

list. One may choose not to meditate, or study sūtras, or chant mantras if one wishes, and it will only affect one's own progress. Dismissing ethics, however, affects one's relationships with others and can negatively impact the image of Buddhism itself in the wider world. When the founders of the Kamakura Pure Land schools in Japan took the step of negating the efficacy of ethics as a way of attaining rebirth in the Pure Land, it led immediately to the problem of antinomian behavior justified as "licensed evil," a development ably documented by James Dobbins.<sup>4</sup> This makes ethics, and to a lesser extent precepts, the most potentially problematic aspect of "self-power"; a soteriology that, even in potential, gives people a reason to disregard that ethics has the capacity to do great harm to the image and credibility those who teach it.

Even in China, where no thinker ever seriously contemplated such a soteriology (although they were sometimes accused of doing so), Pure Land thought still had the potential to lead one down the road to antinomianism. This potentiality will be laid out in the next section, and the following section will show how it was neutralized.

## II. The Disjunction of Precepts and Rebirth in the Pure Land

Throughout the Pure Land literature that I have surveyed, I have frequently noticed the simultaneous affirmation of two seemingly contradictory messages; this constitutes a paradox requiring explication. On the one hand, all Chinese Pure Land thinkers maintain that human moral efforts, such as ethical living, taking and keeping precepts, and making vows, are integral to Buddhist practice; they never question the need for them as essential elements of the Buddhist path. On the other hand, they are also aware that, as stated in texts such as the Meditation Sūtra (T.365), Amitābha's original vows are enough to deliver even the deathbed convert, who has not done one single good deed in his or her entire life, to the Pure Land; their rebirth in the Pure Land will in turn lead inevitably to their attainment of Buddhahood. This means that ethics and precepts are not essential to Buddhist practice.

In most texts, both of these ideas are maintained as simple assertions that the authors affirm without any effort at reconciliation. For example, if one looks at Siming Zhili's (四明知禮, 960-1028) ritual for transmitting the bodhisattva precepts, one finds statements such as the following:

[If] one wishes to receive the Buddhist precepts, [but] there is none from whom to obtain them, [then] it is right that each should exert him/herself and strive to find them. Abandon the conditions of this world; discipline oneself in the precepts (zhaijie 齋戒) and [practice] nianfo 念佛; bring it all to a successful conclusion and complete these endeavors, and one will most certainly gain passage and obtain rebirth into the Pure Land of Peace and Nurture.<sup>5</sup>

In one sentence, Zhili exhorts his preceptees both to exert themselves ceaselessly in Buddhist discipline, and to practice nianfo in order to gain rebirth. This example also shows how authors of works such as this typically did not even see the need to harmonize these counsels to diligence with the Meditation Sūtra's assurance that those who do not engage in these practices at all and even commit great evil may still attain rebirth and eventual

Buddhahood. While Zhili himself may not be proposing anything inconsistent here (since for him nianfo was not an “easy way” at all but a serious practice), the scholar is still confronted by a tradition that, among its various authorities, presents two seemingly conflicting propositions: ethics and precepts are absolutely essential, but one can still attain rebirth and Buddhahood without them.

At this point, we must acknowledge that Pure Land thought and practice throughout Chinese history are far from uniform,<sup>6</sup> so that this dilemma does not arise in all authorities. For example, in the earliest versions of Pure Land practice to be found in China, the kinds of practice found in the Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra, or in the “constantly-walking meditation” (changxing sanmei, 常行三昧) of Zhiyi’s (智顓) Mohe zhiguan (摩訶止觀) are based on the assumption that the practitioner’s own efforts will carry him or her to rebirth in the Pure Land, and so no contradiction arises; clearly the practitioner’s own moral purity constitutes one of the essential components of these paths. Even at later points in Chinese Buddhist history, we find exceptions. Yongming Yanshou (永明延壽, 904-975) regarded nianfo as a process of purifying the mind so that the Pure Land will manifest before one, and he sees morality as part of the purification process.<sup>7</sup> It is with the popularization of the three sūtras traditionally taken as foundational for the Pure Land school in China that the paradox emerges, and the passages that give rise to this paradox with special force are those in the Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra (hereafter Larger Sūtra) and the Meditation Sūtra that posit levels or grades of rebirth based on the level of a person’s practice, realization, and ethics.

The problem arises when one considers the situation of those at the “lowest level, lowest grade” in these schemes (xia bei 下輩 in the Larger Sūtra; xia pin xia sheng in the Meditation Sūtra). The point of these passages is that even the most evil person that Buddhism can imagine still gains rebirth through the power of Amitābha, an idea that entails the complete independence of the practice of morality from the attainment of rebirth.<sup>8</sup> This teaching becomes the hallmark of Pure Land thought after the time of Tanluan (曇鸞), Daochuo (道綽), and Shandao (善導), and the tradition that flows through them into the later “patriarchs” of the Pure Land teaching continued to affirm, right to the present day, that this other-power was the sine qua non of rebirth in Sukhāvati.

Historical developments kept this belief alive over the centuries, and even strengthened it. As a result of continued polemics between Pure Land masters and various opponents, mostly from the Chan school, later Pure Land writers continued to emphasize the futility of depending upon one’s own efforts to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land and Buddhahood. In order to refute Chan critics who insisted on the need for efforts in the Way, Pure Land masters such as Yuan Hongdao (袁宏道, 1568-1610), Jixing Chewu (際醒徹悟, 1741-1810), and Yinguang (印光, 1861-1940) consistently denigrated the efficacy of human effort, pointing out that attainment of the goal depended upon a thorough realization of reality that eliminated even the most subtle obscurations; the achievement of moral perfection; and profound attainments in meditation. Who, they pointedly asked, could hope to achieve this in one human lifetime within this Sahā world? Yinguang, for example, phrased the critique in this way:

Even though a person may be thoroughly enlightened and may have illuminated the mind and seen into their own true nature within a Chan lineage, they still cannot easily cut off the disturbances of views and thoughts. One must practice continually for a long period

of time and bring oneself to the point where one is completely and utterly purified; only then can one cut off saṃsāra and find escape. It does not matter if [only] one hair's-breadth remains to be cut off. One is still one hair's breadth away from complete purification, and one will revolve around in the six paths as before, and escape will be difficult. The ocean of saṃsāra is deep, and the road to wisdom long. The end of their lives comes, and they still have not made it home.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Yinguang and others continued to promote the practitioner's need for the other-power of Amitābha to get them to the Pure Land, and deprecated human striving as futile in and of itself.<sup>10</sup>

What exactly did Amitābha's power do? Most Chinese Pure Land thinkers understood the point of their practices as tapping into the power of ganying (感應), a term that Robert Sharf translated as "sympathetic resonance."<sup>11</sup> Whereas the Japanese Pure Land founders deprecated efforts in cultivation and made faith shinjin (信心) the sine qua non of gaining rebirth in the Pure Land, the Chinese saw ganying as the key, and this provided the rationale for engaging in nianfo. To focus the mind on Amitābha, or to repeat his name, or to engage in any form of nianfo put one's mind "in tune" with the Buddha's, and the more that one engaged in nianfo, the stronger and more enduring this resonance became. The ideal, then, was to keep one's mind focused on the Buddha as much as possible, so that it became more and more likely that the resonance of mind and Buddha would be at its peak at the critical moment of death. Such a practice was not easy, and required constant vigilance and effort on the devotee's part.<sup>12</sup> The difference between this practice and those of other dharma-gates, such as Chan, lay in the fact that the "resonance" brought Amitābha's power into play in cooperation with one's own, creating the cooperation of self-power and other-power mentioned in the introduction. This, as Yinguang explains, was why deathbed recitation could be effective even for the worst sinner: with a vision of hell looming before one, the mind became "wonderfully concentrated" on Amitābha with a special intensity that created a very strong resonance even without prior practice.<sup>13</sup>

As indicated above, however, the very authors who pointed to this teaching as a source of hope also continued to live as monks or pious laymen, keeping their precepts strictly and advising others to do so (some were even vinaya masters who conferred the precepts on others), and generally continued to pursue traditional Buddhist ideals. The mainland China scholar Liu Changdong points out that, in the latter half of the Tang dynasty, the records of those who attained rebirth included several renowned vinaya masters.<sup>14</sup> The ninth "patriarch" of the Chinese Pure Land school himself, Ouyi Zhixu (1599-1655), was active in transmitting precepts and wrote on philosophical issues relating to Tiantai (天台) notions of the problem of defining the concept of "precept-essence" (jie ti, 戒體).<sup>15</sup> Clearly, precepts, and by implication ethical living, were still necessary components of the path, even if one counted on the power of the ganying, one hoped to establish with the Buddha Amitābha to reach the goal in the end.

Even though one did not rely solely on the power of one's own practice, one still needed such practice to elicit Amitābha's support and deployment of other-power through the connection of ganying. However, the deathbed convert still seemed to negate the first half of the equation: precepts and morality. If ganying without precepts and morals was sufficient for achieving rebirth, and if even the worst malefactor could achieve rebirth at the last minute, then why be good? This may not immediately strike the reader as an in-



soluble problem, and as we shall see, indeed it is not. That, however, is not the real puzzle I am investigating. It is not that the problem of reconciling the claimed need for precepts and morality with a strain of thought that seemed to negate the need was difficult; rather it is that no Pure Land thinker in China ever tried to delineate a relationship between their continued insistence on practice with the sufficiency of Amitābha's other-power in gaining rebirth. Indeed, I have yet to find any indication that any significant thinker even perceived the need for reconciliation, and thus, no systematic attempt was made to the best of my knowledge. What, then, can we find in the literature that might serve as a foundation for ethics within the framework of Chinese Pure Land thought?

### III. Establishing a Basis for a Pure Land Ethic

As mentioned before, no single work or treatise has come to my attention so far that treats this subject systematically. This leaves the matter of elucidating a Pure Land rationale for moral striving in the hands of the researcher, who must look through several sources to collect the necessary clues.

One of the first threads that one may utilize is given in Wang Rixiu's, (王日休, ?-1173) *Longshu jingtu wen* (龍舒淨土文, T.1970). Wang points out that the nine grades of rebirth taught in the Meditation Sūtra can serve as much as an incentive for moral action as a disincentive. While it is true that even the lowest of the low gains rebirth, which might seem to undermine one's motivation to practice, Wang calls attention to the fact that rebirths at the nine grades are not at all equal. Those immoral wretches who, in desperation, make the last-minute deathbed appeal to Amitābha to rescue them attain a lower kind of rebirth in the Pure Land. At the opposite extreme, those born in the highest level of the highest grade (shang pin shang sheng, 上品上生) are escorted to the Pure Land by Amitābha himself with the two high bodhisattvas and a large entourage in attendance. They assume their place on a vajra-throne, and achieve highest enlightenment instantly upon hearing the Buddha preach.<sup>16</sup> The lowest of the low (xia pin xia sheng 下品下生), on the other hand, are reborn in a lotus bud on the outskirts of the Pure Land, which only opens after the passage of twelve great kalpas. After it opens, they receive no instruction from Amitābha himself, but only from the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and only then begin serious Buddhist practice with the generation of bodhicitta.<sup>17</sup> While both the highest and the lowest practitioners attain rebirth in the Pure Land, and thus break free of saṃsāra, in all other respects the first type of rebirth is greatly preferable to the second.

Thus, Wang asks: All things being equal, would it not be better to aspire to a higher rebirth in the Pure Land? For example, the essay entitled "Food, Drink, and Sex," is largely devoted to discussing the evil consequences of gluttony and lasciviousness, and drawing out the interconnection between the two. In the essay's last sentence, though, he says, "Although these [two vices] may be [too?] hard to avoid, one can still practice Pure Land and liberate oneself from the wheel of saṃsāra. Nevertheless, one who wishes to practice the way of the highest grade—they cannot but restrain these!"<sup>18</sup> He repeats this idea in another essay, in which he says:

The Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra says "Today's pleasure is the seed of future suffering." A gāthā says: Practice fortune and wisdom together / and recite

[or contemplate] Ami [tuofu] as well. / In the nine levels of the Lotus land, / What doubt is there that the first is attained? This is because a practitioner who observes fasting and the precepts and has bright understanding is born in the highest rank of the highest level.<sup>19</sup>

To state Wang's point another way: While it is true that even the lowest of the low attains rebirth, and this is indeed a cause for comfort and assurance that all will be saved through Amitābha's other-power, one still has a chance to better one's level of rebirth in the Pure Land, and the benefits of doing so are significant: rapid attainment of enlightenment, instruction by Amitābha himself, and so on. Thus, one should make some moral efforts at self-restraint.

Another presentation of this view comes from the modern master Jingkong (1927- ). In a series of lectures given in America, he commented on the "three grades" (san bei, 三輩) of rebirth in the Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra. As with Wang Rixiu, the issue was not whether one will attain rebirth in the Pure Land—this is assured—but at what grade. In fact, Jingkong does some calculations: If one practices 100 percent of the morality contained in Buddhist scriptures, one is born in the "top of the top" (here he diverts his commentary from the three grades of the Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra to the nine levels of the Meditation Sūtra); 90 percent and one can be reborn in the "middle of the top"; 80 percent leads to rebirth in the "bottom of the top," and so on. Following this on down, one sees that even to be reborn in the Pure Land at the "bottom of the bottom" requires that one keep 20 percent of the precepts.<sup>20</sup> This, he says, is in keeping with the tenor of the Larger Sūtra itself. Jingkong points out that the person ranked at the lowest grade (xia bei, 下輩) in the Larger Sūtra is not the vile sinner of the xia pin xia sheng 下品下生 of the Meditation Sūtra. The lowest grade practitioner in the Larger Sūtra still generates bodhicitta, concentrates on Amitābha, joyfully believes with no doubt or delusions, and sincerely aspires to rebirth. One sees the Buddha in a dream, goes to rebirth, and accumulates wisdom and merit. The only real difference between them and the shang (上輩) and zhong bei (中輩) is that they do not keep all the precepts, or their situation does not allow them to formally receive precepts.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, in order to emphasize the importance of keeping precepts, Jingkong looks for examples of eminent Pure Land practitioners in China's past, bringing up figures such as Zhiyi (538-597) and various respected scripture commentators of the Republican period who pursued other practices (study, chanting, meditation) all their lives, and then right at the end performed the ten nian (念) and attained rebirth.<sup>22</sup> By this he sought to demonstrate that the ten nian recited on the deathbed do not necessarily represent the last, desperate plea of a terrified sinner; they can just as well be a ritual that caps a lifetime of serious cultivation and study. The effect of combining Buddha-recitation with these other lifetime achievements is to assure the highest possible rebirth in the Pure Land.

We find a third example of this teaching in the autobiographical statement that opens Yinguang's Treatise Resolving Doubts about the Pure Land (Jingtu Jueyi lun, 淨土決疑論). Yinguang describes his religious attitude after joining the monastic order as a mixture of both despair and aspiration. He despairs of his poor fortune and lack of good karma, disabilities that lead him to believe that it would be impossible for him to attain Buddhahood through his own intelligence and exertions. Thus, he says, "The Buddha was my only thought, the Pure Land my only goal." Nevertheless, he did keep the precepts to the best



of his ability, as well as engaging in study and meditation. The purpose of these, according to his testimony, was to “attain the necessary qualifications for a superior-level (shang pin 上品) rebirth in the Pure Land.”<sup>23</sup> Yinguang clearly took Wang Rixiu’s counsels seriously.

A final example comes to us in narrative form in a death testimonial in Zongxiao’s (宗曉) Topical Anthology of the Land of Bliss (Lebang wenlei, 樂邦文類, T.1969) in the story of Lady Yueguo (越國夫人) (Jing wang yueguo furen wangsheng ji, 荆王越國夫人往生記, T.1969, 47.189c9-190a27), which Zongxiao collected from the writings of Huang Ce (黃策, 1070-1173). Lady Yueguo, an ardent Pure Land devotee, converts her entire household to Pure Land practice with the exception of one young maid-servant. One day, the lady admonishes the maid, who awakens to her own sinfulness and sloth and repents. Not long afterward, the maidservant dies, and the lady has a dream of her in which the maid takes her to the Pure Land. Once there, the lady is shown a pond with lotus blossoms of varying color and splendor. In Daniel Stevenson’s translation, the maid interprets these differences to the lady as follows:

The lady of the house set off with the maid, and in time they came to two pools of water, both of which were filled with white lotus blossoms of varying size. Some were glorious. Others were withered or drooping. However, each one was different. Her ladyship said, “Why are they like this?”

To which the maid replied, “They all represent persons of the mundane world who have made the resolution to seek rebirth in the western pure land. With the arousing of the [first] flicker of thought [of the pure land], one’s wholesome [karmic] roots will have already sent forth a sprout. Eventually it will form a single blossom. However, because people’s degrees of diligence are not the same, there are differences in the quality of the blossoms. For those who are unrelenting in their efforts, [the blossom] is fresh and resplendent. For those who are sporadic, it is withered. If people continue to practice for a long time without giving up, to the point where their mindfulness becomes stabilized [in samādhi] and their contemplation reaches fruition, then when their physical bodies perish and their life [in the mundane world] reaches its end they will be reborn by miraculous transformation in the center [of one of these lotus blossoms].<sup>24</sup>

As the lady looks on, one of the blossoms opens, and a person presented as an exemplary practitioner emerges from his blossom decked in regal garments covering an adamantine body. Another opens, but this blossom is withered and the occupant’s raiment and body are far less distinguished. The lady responds by asking in what estate she will be reborn, and the maid assures her that her high level of practice and virtue will gain her rebirth at the highest level.<sup>25</sup>

It is important to recognize that both of the figures that the lady sees emerging from their lotus calyxes have achieved rebirth in the Pure Land; thus, for both of them, salvation is assured. Nevertheless, the story shows a great concern for the level and quality of their rebirth, and the lady’s own desire to know the degree of rebirth she will attain in the future demonstrates that this was not an insignificant question for the Chinese Pure Land practitioner. Rebirth was assured, but at what grade or level still mattered.

Thus, for Wang Rixiu, Jingkong, Yinguang, and Huang Ce, the point is that, even when one puts one’s faith in the other-power of Amitābha’s vows, practice still matters because it gives one a higher level of rebirth in Sukhāvātī after death. This in itself could

constitute a fairly persuasive rationale for ethical action within a Pure Land context, but it might strike one as rather weak or selfish. After all, one who has attained rebirth in the Pure Land at whatever level has achieved freedom from further rebirth in saṃsāra. As Yinguang observes,

Regardless of whether one's good roots have ripened or not, or whether one's bad karma is light or heavy, one need only be willing to generate faith and make the vows, and to recite the Buddha's name, and at the end of one's life, Amitābha Buddha will compassionately descend to meet and guide one to rebirth in the Pure Land in order that those whose good roots have ripened may immediately attain to the sudden fruition of perfect buddhahood, while those whose evil karma is heavy may enter the holy stream.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, one obtains good results even without serious ethics or practice. In addition, the Pure Land is pleasant enough even at the lowest rebirth, so it should not really matter how long one resides there. Why then tax oneself with moral striving in order to shorten one's stay or improve one's status within it? In order to answer this question we must alert ourselves to the relationship between two factors: the nature of the Pure Land as a subsidiary goal, and the normative Mahāyāna Buddhist motivations for practice.

It is absolutely essential to remember that Pure Land Buddhism in any region or time posits two goals on the path: rebirth in the Pure Land first, and then the attainment of Buddhahood. Furthermore, whenever Pure Land authors speak about relying on Amitābha's other-power, it is in terms of the first of these goals, and not the second (although they are surely not unrelated). The Pure Land is a subsidiary goal, a way-station on the path to Buddhahood, a place within which realization of the final goal becomes more feasible.<sup>27</sup> The fact that one relied upon Amitābha's vow-power to establish ganying and attain rebirth in the Pure Land does not imply that his other-power will take one all the way to Buddhahood. This depends upon completing one's practice while there, which one must do for oneself, albeit with the Buddha's teaching and support. The Pure Land simply provides a place where the environment, the absence of distractions and temptations, the provision of all requisites, and the presence of perfect teachers, gives one the ideal daochang (道場) within which to achieve Buddhahood by self-exertion.

Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610) makes just this point in his Colloquy on the West (Xifang helun, 西方合論, T. 1976.) The fourth fascicle deals with the characteristics of various levels of teaching, and has six sections. The first pertains to non-Buddhists who lead ethical lives, and the last five correspond roughly, though using different terms, to the Huayan fivefold panjiao (判教) scheme. The first section is very interesting for the purposes of this essay. It is called "The Teaching of the Existence of Purity" (chun you jiao, 純有教), and it describes all the values of ethical conduct and the practice of virtue. According to Yuan, moral conduct helps even non-Buddhists avoid rebirth in the hells, or as hungry ghosts or animals, keeping them in the realms of humans and gods. Buddhist practitioners attain the final goal proposed by the form of Buddhism in which they have taken refuge: some become arhats, some pratyekabuddhas, some bodhisattvas. At the highest level of the Mahāyāna, Yuan teaches that one does not achieve the final goal of becoming a Buddha without practicing ethical conduct. It allows one to develop a stock of "good roots" (shan gen, 善根) over many lifetimes, and, as Yuan says in other places (along with many other

Pure Land writers), one's very ability to practice Pure Land depends upon having these good roots. All of this necessarily involves taking the Three Refuges, then receiving and keeping the various sets of precepts.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Yuan emphasizes that Buddhahood, not the Pure Land, is the goal.

Yuan's presentation depends for its coherence on the assumptions that (1) the final goal is the attainment of Buddhahood; (2) rebirth in the Pure Land is a step along the way to this goal; and (3) ethical conduct is essential for producing the "good roots" that both goals require. He clearly distinguishes the first two as separate goals, and posits the third as a prerequisite for both. While this supports my major point that rebirth in the Pure Land is not the final goal, it also makes the very interesting case that, while Amitābha's other-power is necessary for gaining rebirth, one's own ethical practice, undergirded by the formal reception of precepts, is essential for generating one's very ability to call upon the Buddha's power for help in the first place.

The second factor that we will consider serves to bring all of the above arguments together. These thinkers clearly granted that if a Buddhist devotee engaged in religious practice, then some level of attainment was possible in this present life, and this would be "credited" toward the attainment of Buddhahood, which we now understand is the final goal. While it might be quixotic for one to plan on achieving complete and perfect Buddhahood in this life, or to assume that one will continue on a trajectory of uninterrupted progress in lives to come, one's practice in this life still had some value in gaining one rebirth at a higher grade or level in the Pure Land, and this affected the length of time that it would take to achieve Buddhahood once there. This difference in time could be considerable: from the instantaneous achievement of the highest of the high to the twelve kalpas that the lowest of the low spends locked in the lotus bud before even beginning practice. The final question we must answer is this: why should it matter how long one dwelt in the Pure Land?

The answer had to do with the normative Mahāyāna motivation for practice. The generation of bodhicitta that put one on the Mahāyāna path set one's motivation for seeking Buddhahood in the first place as the salvation of all beings. If one was serious about this motivation, then it made sense to choose the path that led to Buddhahood sooner rather than later, for the sooner one reached the goal, the sooner one could get about the task of saving all other sentient beings. This makes sense of the section in Siming Zhili's ceremony for the conferral of the bodhisattva precepts where he administers the Four Great Vows (si hong shiyuan, 四宏誓願) with the admonition that all the recipients keep these vows in order to attain rebirth in the highest grade (shang pin, 上品) of the Pure Land.<sup>29</sup> The Four Great Vows are precisely about the bodhisattva's desire to attain the highest Buddha-way in order to save all sentient beings, and rebirth at the highest grade brings one to completion of this vow in the shortest possible time.

Yuan Hongdao also makes this connection. In the first fascicle of his Colloquy on the West, in a brief section devoted to the abstract philosophical issue of the "inconceivability of cause and effect," he uses the progression from practice to attainment to subsequent service as his example:

For example, practicing nianfo is the cause, and seeing the buddha is the effect. Seeing the buddha is the cause, and becoming a buddha is the effect. Becoming a buddha is the cause, and saving all sentient beings

is the effect.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Yuan brings this up as a casual illustration to make another point demonstrates that he took it very much for granted: the purpose of Pure Land practice was Buddhahood, and the purpose of Buddhahood was compassionate service to liberate other sentient beings.

Jixing Chewu makes the same point in much the same way. As a way of illustrating the simultaneity of past, present, and future, he says:

The very moment of contemplating the buddha (nianfo) is the very moment of seeing the buddha and becoming the buddha. The very moment of seeking rebirth is the very moment of attaining rebirth and the very moment of liberating all beings (du sheng, 渡生). The three margins of time are all a single, identical time; there is no before and after.<sup>31</sup>

Like Yuan, Chewu takes this progression so much for granted that he uses it without further elaboration to illustrate another point, knowing that his audience will accept it unquestioningly. Compassion for other suffering beings and the vow to liberate them are, after all, the main motivations for practice and attainment in any branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Yinguang is more explicit in connecting rebirth in the Pure Land with the aspiration to achieve Buddhahood for the sake of others:

Because of this [most beings' inability to achieve Buddhahood on their own], the Tathāgata leads people to rebirth in the Pure Land, where they can see the buddha and hear the teachings, and realize the Forbearance of the Unborn. Afterwards, riding on the power of the buddha's compassion, and the wheels of their own aspiration, they can reenter the Sahā world and bring other sentient beings to liberation.<sup>32</sup>

Yinguang is quite clear here that the aspiration (yuan, 願) impelling believers into Pure Land practice is the desire to save other beings. In fact, the concluding section of his Treatise Resolving Doubts About the Pure Land contains a ritual formula to be used by those embarking on the Pure Land path in which the new convert makes this aspiration explicit:

I, N.N., from this day forward, will practice pure karma<sup>33</sup> exclusively. I ask only that when I die, I may be reborn in the highest grade, so that upon seeing the Buddha and hearing the teachings, I may at once attain to the Unborn. Afterwards, without separating from the Pure Land, I will enter into all ten directions universally. With the stream or against it, using all manner of expedient means, I will carry this teaching to all places, and liberate all beings. Not a single moment will I rest in all future times. In space without limit, I vow to reach the furthest extremity. May Śākyamuni, Amitābha, and all of the eternally-abiding Three Jewels have pity on my foolishness and sincerity, and all come to receive and enfold me.<sup>34</sup>

Jixing Chewu ties this motivation directly to the generation of ganying, the “sympathetic resonance” that effects one's rebirth in the Pure Land, in a way that adds philosophical depth to the simple assertions of Yuan Hongdao and Yinguang, explaining why these basic Mahāyāna motivations matter for the successful completion of the Pure Land dharmagate:

If I do not think of universal liberation, but seek only to benefit myself, then I am deficient as to the principle. If the mind is not pacified, how much more will I not generate the Great Mind? This being so, then externally I will not attain sympathetic resonance (*ganying*) with all of the buddhas, and internally, I will not be able to accommodate my own fundamental nature. Above, I will not be able to attain the perfect Buddha-way, and below, I will not be able to benefit the multitude of beings.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, because the mind of the Buddha Amitābha is marked by great compassion for all beings, then the Pure Land practitioner's mind also needs compassion as a fundamental motivation. Unless one's mind and the Buddha's mind are consonant in this manner, one will not create *ganying*, and will not elicit the deployment of the Buddha's other-power and attain rebirth in the Pure Land. Furthermore, Chewu emphasizes the value of getting to Buddhahood expeditiously, explaining that true compassion for others entails the desire to gain the ability to render aid as quickly as possible:

Therefore, I need to generate the great mind of enlightenment in accordance with nature, and, having generated it, cultivate great practices. Further, from among the various dharma-gates I should choose the one that is easiest to set my hand to, and easiest to have success with. From the most stable, the most perfect and quick, there is nothing to compare with having profound faith in the calling out of the buddha's name.<sup>36</sup>

Chewu is, in effect, putting elements of motivation and practice into a cyclical, self-reinforcing formula. One wishes to practice and attain rebirth in the Pure Land; in order to do this, one must establish sympathetic resonance with the Buddha Amitābha; establishing resonance requires the replication of the Buddha's compassionate mind; for compassion to be genuine it must, among other things, seek the fastest and most reliable way to attain Buddhahood, for only a Buddha has the requisite wisdom and skill to help others; the fastest and most reliable path to Buddhahood is to practice *nianfo* and attain rebirth in the Pure Land.

This gives a perspective on the individual's need for precepts, meditation, and study that differs markedly from the Kamakura period Japanese construction of Pure Land. All these efforts on the part of practitioners retained their value as integral parts of the Buddhist life because they sped the practitioner to the goal by combining his or her attainments with the other-power of Amitābha. The description of the deathbed conversion that brought the lowest of the low to rebirth as depicted in the Meditation Sūtra was never generalized to cover the condition of all humanity living in the Age of the Final Dharma, but was taken at face value: it was an expedient means for the miscreant who faced the terrors of hell and had no other recourse but to call upon the Buddha and rely exclusively on other-power to gain rebirth. For the rest, the example simply did not apply, and practice remained necessary.

This correlates well with Daniel Stevenson's findings in his study of death-bed testimonials. As he describes it, long before a devotee's death, he or she looked for signs that they had forged karmic links to the Pure Land and activated a sympathetic resonance with its Buddha; such assurances generally took the forms of dreams or waking visions of Amitābha. However, since these indicators were typically not sought while on the deathbed, and thus not in extremis, there was more expectation that the person's life would actually be in accord with Buddhist norms of practice and conduct: "Both forms of experience [dream



and waking vision] were considered valid proof that the ‘connection with the pure land’ was or would soon be secured—provided, of course, that the character and behavior of the individual who claimed the experience fit the profile of a dedicated Pure Land devotee.”<sup>37</sup> That is, the “grace” or “other-power” worked more when all other options had failed and the person was dying and had no time to amend his or her life or begin practice. In order to gain auspicious signs that one would attain rebirth in the Pure Land in the middle of life, without the exigency of impending death, more emphasis was placed on the devotee’s own efforts in keeping precepts and cultivating practices.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that the deathbed testimonial of Lady Yueguo, which follows her dream trip to the Pure Land with her former servant, opens by severely criticizing those who deliberately wait until the last moment to begin practice, hoping that the compassion of the Buddha will save them from their fate. Huang Ce’s interest in recording the life of this lady stems precisely from the fact that she did not act in this way, but began Pure Land devotions while still young and healthy, and lived a virtuous Buddhist life. By holding her up as an exemplar, Huang is saying to his readers that they should take this as their pattern, and combine Pure Land devotion with diligent practice and virtuous behavior.<sup>38</sup> Lady Yueguo provides a suitable example of the “the twin powers of self and other” which work together to produce the most ideal result.

## IV. Conclusion

Based on the above exercise in bricolage, the following picture emerges of human striving within the Pure Land path as interpreted by the Chinese tradition: The Mahāyāna practitioner sets out on the path of practice in order to achieve Buddhahood for the sake of saving all other sentient beings. This goal is important enough that it is worth considering how best to reach it in the shortest possible time. Taking a realistic look at one’s present situation, one sees that, dwelling in this Saha, world and laden with one’s present karmic burden, one cannot count on having proper teachers or any other requisite of practice, and so one’s prospects for attaining the goal on one’s own are scant. However, Amitābha Buddha, through the power of his vows, has created a land where one may make the speediest progress toward Buddhahood, and so one resolves to gain rebirth there in order to make one’s way toward the final goal without risk of failure. Nevertheless, while Amitābha’s vow-power is essential for reaching the Pure Land, one may still expedite the process of attaining Buddhahood by making whatever progress on the way that one can while still in this life. Achieving rebirth at a higher level and grade in the Pure Land can still cut eons off the process and propel one to Buddhahood faster. Thus, rather than relying exclusively on other-power, one begins a process in which self-power and other-power work together to get the very best and fastest results. Practices which establish ganying, or sympathetic resonance, with the Buddha Amitābha will assure that one is reborn there, and all other practices will serve to gain one the highest possible level of rebirth there. This plan comports best with the compassionate motivation of the Mahāyāna.

We began by noting that Chinese Pure Land Buddhism never followed the path of disparaging human effort charted by the Kamakura Pure Land founders in Japan. Thus it is now appropriate to ask: Is there a way to understand why a figure such as Shinran never



arose in China to propose utter dependence upon the other-power of Amitābha to the deprecation of moral effort? After all, the idea of Amitābha's "other-power" was present in both places; why was it carried to this extreme in only one? One plausible explanation emerges from the fact that there never existed a Pure Land "school" as such in China, at least not in the achievement of institutional independence that the various Pure Land Schools enjoy in Japan. Ven. Dr. Shengyan (聖嚴) points out that during the Song dynasty, most of the developments in Pure Land took place within the Tiantai school, and stressed a combination of meditation, Pure Land, and vinaya (chan 禪, jing 淨, lü 律). By the end of the Ming dynasty, he says, there was no one Pure Land "school" that had exclusive propriety over a set of practices identified as "Pure Land practice"; Pure Land became the common property of all schools.<sup>39</sup>

This means that a strictly Pure Land soteriology had no room to develop in isolation from other schools and strains of thought. What we call "Pure Land thought and practice" in Chinese Buddhism could more accurately be called the "Pure Land component" of the thought and practice of other schools, or of Chinese Buddhism as an organic whole. Thus, the practice of nianfo and speculation on the efficacy of self-power and other-power generally took place among educated lay and clergy who were also Tiantai thinkers (such as Siming Zhili and others), vinaya masters and preceptors (such as the figures mentioned in Liu's study), or active in these and many other facets of Buddhist life and thought (such as the Ming dynasty polymath and ninth "patriarch" of the Pure Land tradition, Ouyi Zhixu). Ensclosed as it was in the wider tradition, Pure Land thought could never dispense with, declare its independence from, or assert its opposition to the other concomitants of the Buddhist life: precepts, ethics, meditation, and study.

It may also be of some interest to note that such thought appears to be taking hold in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in the modern world. In an essay published in 1993, the Japanese Pure Land thinker Tokunaga Michio called attention to the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of "the return to this world" as a practical motivation for practice. Responding to Christian criticisms that Pure Land Buddhism represents a mere escape from suffering with no compassion, Tokunaga says, "The central purpose of my presentation is to claim that shinjin or nembutsu as revealed by Shinran is nothing but the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path, and that it is the concept of "return to this world" (gensō-ekō, 還相廻向) which fulfills the actual significance of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path to its utmost." Seeking rebirth in the Pure Land in order to help other beings is the best way to fulfill the Mahāyāna ideal of "benefitting self and other."<sup>40</sup> Whether this represents a new trend in Japanese Pure Land thought or not, I leave to my colleagues in Japanese Buddhist studies to say.

I have often said, only half in jest, that Pure Land in China is like an escalator, while in Japan it is more like an elevator. An escalator will take one to the top without fail, but one may still speed up the process by walking. This is the dynamic that we observe in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. If one takes into account the compassionate aspirations necessary for generating bodhicitta, and understands that Chinese Pure Land practitioners are serious about fulfilling that aspiration, then it becomes clear that the practitioner is morally culpable if he or she chooses not to participate in the process of gaining rebirth as he or she is able. In this light, choosing to engage the cooperation of self-power and other-power becomes an intelligible ethical decision in its own right.

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## Endnote

- 1 This trend may be subsidiary to a larger trend noted by Jacqueline Stone wherein East Asian Buddhist history becomes a prologue to the “reform” movements of Kamakura-era Japan. In this view, not only Shinran and Ippen, but also Nichiren and Dōgen become teloi for the history that precedes them. See Stone 1999, p. 93-94.
- 2 Shi Zhiyu 1992, p. 58-60.
- 3 See, for example, Getz 1999, p. 477; and Sharf 1997, p. 2-3.
- 4 See Dobbins 1989.
- 5 See Zongxiao at T.1937, 46:859b13-15.
- 6 See my article, “Toward a Typology of Nien-fo: a Study in Methods of Buddha-Invocation in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism,” for an examination of varieties of Pure Land practice.
- 7 Huang 2001, p. 213.
- 8 It should be noted that this problem is much more evident in the Meditation Sūtra (T.365) than in the Larger Sūtra (T.360). While the person of the “lowest level, lowest grade” of the Meditation Sūtra is described as an abject malefactor, the person of the third of three grades in the latter still generates bodhicitta, has faith in the teachings, aspiration to rebirth, and so on. They seem to be good beings (gods and humans) who, for various reasons, cannot take either monastic precepts or lay precepts. See T.360, 12:272b-c.
- 9 Yinguang 1991, 1:368-369.
- 10 See, for example, Yinguang 1991 1:361.
- 11 See Sharf’s extended discussion of the meaning of this term in Sharf 2002, p. 82-88 and *passim*.
- 12 See, for example, Yinguang’s explanation of the meaning of the phrase “having the Pure Land” in the “Four Alternatives” attributed to Yongming Yanshou in his “Jingtu jueyi lun” (“Treatise Resolving Doubts About the Pure Land”), in Yinguang dashi quanji (“The Collected Works of Great Master Yinguang”). compiled and edited Shi Guangding. Taipei: Fo jiao Chubanshe, 1991. 1:366.
- 13 See Yinguang 1991, 1:368: “However, even though [the deathbed convert] does not recite very many times, they can still reap this great benefit because of their

fierce determination. You cannot compare the sheer number of repetitions between them and another who recites listlessly.”

- 14 Liu Changdong. “Lüzong yu Mituo jingtu xinyang” (“The Vinaya School and Amitābha-Pure Land Belief”), in *Jin Tang Mituo Jingtu xinyang yanjiu* (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2000). p. 452-459. Thanks to James Robson for sending me this source.
- 15 See Eiki 1998, p. 77-80.
- 16 T.365, 12:344c-345a.
- 17 T. 365, 12:346a.
- 18 The essay is found at T.1970, 47:279c17-280a7. The quotation is at 280a5-7. Italics added.
- 19 T.1970, 47:280b.
- 20 Shi Jingkong 1998 p. 249.
- 21 Shi Jingkong 1998, p. 257.
- 22 Shi Jingkong 1998, p. 258-9.
- 23 Yinguang 1991, p. 1:357.
- 24 Stevenson 1995, p. 599.
- 25 Stevenson 1995, p. 599-600.
- 26 Yinguang 1991, p. 1:359.
- 27 I am speaking here, of course, from the perspective of the elite textual tradition. There certainly have been people throughout history who have recited the Buddha Amitābha’s name hoping for rebirth in the Pure Land thinking it a final destination like Heaven in Christianity. See, for instance, Hori 1968.
- 28 Yuan Hongdao. *Xifang helun* (Colloquy on the West), T. 1976, 47.398c-399b
- 29 Zongxiao. *Siming zunzhe jiao xing lu* (Record of the Venerable Siming’s Teachings and Practices) T.1937, 46:862a10.
- 30 Yuan Hongdao, T. 1976, 47.391c29-392a2.

- 31 Chewu, XZJ 109:756a6-8.
- 32 Yinguang 1991. 1:367.
- 33 In Pure Land texts, the term “pure karma” (jingye , ) is usually synonymous with Pure Land practice.
- 34 Yinguang 1991, 1:370.
- 35 Chewu, XZJ 109:754a.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Stevenston 1995, p. 594. According to this article, this “profile” included specifically Pure Land practices, such as nianfo or other forms of spiritual cultivation, as well as ethical behavior.
- 38 Stevenson, p. 598. The selection itself is taken from Zongxiao’s Topical Anthology of the Land of Bliss (Lebang wenlei), T.1969, 47.189c-190a.
- 39 Shengyan 1992, p. 89, 102.
- 40 Tokunaga 1993, p. 2, 5-6.