

Pure Land Buddhism

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[Amitābha](#) and his attendant [bodhisattvas](#) [Avalokiteśvara](#) (right) and [Mahāsthāmaprāpta](#) (left)

Part of [a series](#) on

Mahāyāna Buddhism



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Pure Land Buddhism ([Chinese](#): 淨土宗; [pinyin](#): *Jìngtǔzōng*; [Japanese](#): 浄土仏教 *Jōdo bukkō*; [Korean](#): [Korean](#): 정토종; [RR](#): *Jeongto-jong*; [Vietnamese](#): Tịnh Độ Tông), also referred to as **Amidism** in English,^{[1][2]} is a broad branch of [Mahayana Buddhism](#) and one of the most widely practiced traditions of Buddhism in [East Asia](#). [Pure Land](#) is a tradition of Buddhist teachings that are focused on the [Buddha Amitābha](#). The three primary texts of the tradition, known as the "Three Pure Land Sutras", are the [Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra](#) (*Infinite Life Sutra*), [Amitayurdhyana Sutra](#) (*Contemplation Sutra*) and the [Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra](#) (*Amitabha Sutra*).

Pure Land oriented practices and concepts are found within basic Mahāyāna Buddhist [cosmology](#), and form an important component of the Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions of [China](#), [Japan](#), [Korea](#), [Tibet](#) and [Vietnam](#). The term "Pure Land Buddhism" is used to describe both the Pure Land [soteriology](#) of Mahayana Buddhism, which may be better understood as "Pure Land traditions" or "Pure Land teachings," and the separate Pure Land sects that developed in Japan from the work of [Hōnen](#). Pure Land Buddhism is built on the belief that we will never have a world which is not corrupt, so we must strive for re-birth in another plane, referred to as the "Pure Land".^[3]

□

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Early history



Statue of [Amitābha Buddha](#) seated in meditation. [Borobudur](#), [Java](#), [Indonesia](#).



[Mount Lu](#), where the Chinese Pure Land tradition was founded.

History in India

The Pure Land teachings were first developed in [India](#), and were very popular in [Kashmir](#) and [Central Asia](#), where they may have originated.^[4] [Pure Land sutras](#) were brought from the [Gandhāra](#) region to China as early as 147 CE, when the [Kushan](#) monk [Lokakṣema](#) began translating the first Buddhist sūtras into Chinese.^[5] The earliest of these translations show evidence of having been translated from the [Gāndhārī language](#), a [Prakrit](#).^[6] There are also images of

Amitābha with the [bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara](#) and [Mahāsthāmaprāpta](#) which were made in Gandhāra during the Kushan era.^[7]

In the Buddhist traditions of India, Pure Land doctrines and practices were disseminated by well-known exponents of the Mahāyāna teachings, including [Nāgārjuna](#) and [Vasubandhu](#).^[8] Pure Land schools arose because of the belief that humans were becoming incapable of Dharma, emphasizing that humans needed help from another power; that power being Amitābha Buddha.^[9] Although Amitābha is honored and venerated in Pure Land traditions, this was clearly distinguished from worship of the Hindu gods, as Pure Land practice has its roots in the Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva.^[10]

Pure Land sutras

The three principal Pure Land sūtras are the [Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra](#), [Amitayurdhyana Sutra](#) and the [Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra](#).^[11] These sutras describe Amitābha and his Pure Land of Bliss, called [Sukhavatī](#). Also related to the Pure Land tradition is the [Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra](#), which gives an early description of the practice of [reciting the name of Amitābha](#) as a [meditation method](#), although it does not enumerate any vows of Amitābha or the qualities of Sukhāvatī.

Bodhisattvas hear about the Buddha Amitābha and call him to mind again and again in this land. Because of this calling to mind, they see the Buddha Amitābha. Having seen him they ask him what dharmas it takes to be born in the realm of the Buddha Amitābha. Then the Buddha Amitābha says to these bodhisattvas: "If you wish to come and be born in my realm, you must always call me to mind again and again, you must always keep this thought in mind without letting up, and thus you will succeed in coming to be born in my realm."^[12]

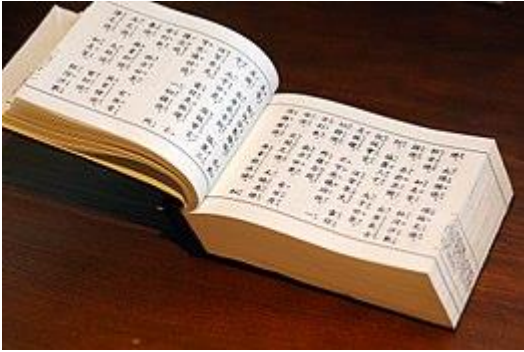
In addition to these sutras, many other Mahāyāna texts also feature Amitābha, and a total of 290 such works have been identified in the [Taishō Tripitaka](#).^[13]

Andrew Skilton writes that the descriptions of Sukhāvatī given in the *Sukhāvatīvyūha* sūtras suggests that these descriptions were originally used for meditation: "This land, called Sukhāvatī or "blissful," is described in great detail, in a way that suggests that the sūtras were to be used as guides to [visualization](#) meditation, and also gives an impression of a magical world of intense visual and sonorous delight."^[14]

In the *Infinite Life Sutra*, [Gautama Buddha](#) begins by describing to his attendant [Ānanda](#) a past life of the buddha Amitābha. He states that in a past life, Amitābha was once king who renounced his kingdom, and became a monastic bodhisattva named Dharmākara ("Dharma Storehouse").^[15] Under the guidance of the buddha Lokeśvararāja ("World Sovereign King"), innumerable buddha-lands throughout the ten directions were revealed to him.^[15] After meditating for five eons as a bodhisattva, he then made a great series of vows to save all [sentient](#)

[beings](#), and through his great merit, created the realm of Sukhāvatī (“Ultimate Bliss”).^{[15][16]} This land of Sukhāvatī would later come to be known as the Pure Land ([Chinese](#): 淨土) in Chinese translation.

Early history in China



Book open to the Chinese version of the [Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra](#) with Japanese annotations.

The Pure Land teachings first became prominent in China with the founding of [Donglin Temple](#) at [Mount Lu](#) ([Chinese](#): 廬山) by [Huiyuan](#) ([Chinese](#): 慧遠) in 402. As a young man, Huiyuan practiced [Daoism](#), but felt the theories of immortality to be vague and unreliable, and unrepresentative of the ultimate truth.^[17] Instead, he turned to Buddhism and became a monk learning under [Dao'an](#) ([Chinese](#): 道安). Later he founded a monastery at the top of Mount Lu and invited well-known literati to study and practice Buddhism there, where they formed the White Lotus Society ([Chinese](#): 白蓮社).^[18] They accepted the *Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* and the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* as their standards among the Buddhist sūtras, and they advocated the practice of reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha in order to attain rebirth in the western pure land of Sukhāvatī.^[19] The [Mount Lu](#) is regarded as the among the most sacred religious sites of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition,^[20] and the site of the first Pure Land gathering.^[21]

The Pure Land teachings and meditation methods quickly spread throughout China and were systematized by a series of elite monastic thinkers, namely [Tanluan](#), [Daochuo](#), [Shandao](#), and others. The main teaching of the Chinese Pure Land tradition is based on focusing the mind with Mindfulness of the Buddha (Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*) through recitation of the name of Amitābha Buddha, so as to attain rebirth in his pure land of Sukhāvatī.^[22] Early Pure Land as practiced in China by Tanluan is described as follows:

[Tanluan] describes the visualization of Amitābha and Sukhāvatī in minute detail, he regards the invocation of the Buddha's name as a [spell](#) working in the inconceivable realm (*acintya-dhātu*), and he describes how the realized Pure Land devotee manifests human (*nirmita*) bodies in all times and places. His knowledge of Buddhism is deep. He uses over twenty sūtras and more than a dozen śāstras to argue his case. There are eighty-one references to the [Mahāprajñāpāramitāupadeśa](#)

alone, and twenty-one references to the Chinese [Mādhyamaka](#) Master [Sengchao](#), none of them trivial or out of place. ^[23]

At a later date, the Pure Land teachings spread to Japan and slowly grew in prominence. [Genshin](#) (942 – 1017) caused [Fujiwara no Michinaga](#) (966–1028) to accept the Pure Land teachings. [Hōnen](#) (1133 – 1212) established Pure Land Buddhism as an independent sect in Japan known as [Jōdo-shū](#). Today Pure Land is an important form of Buddhism in Japan, [China](#), [Korea](#), and [Vietnam](#). Pure Land schools make up almost 40 percent of Japanese Buddhism practitioners with the most temples, second to [Chan](#) schools. These schools were influenced by the thought that humans could no longer understand the dharma by themselves. ^[24]

The Pure Land

Contemporary Pure Land traditions see Amitābha expounding the [Dharma](#) in his buddha-field (Skt. *buddhakṣetra*), or "pure land", a region offering respite from [karmic](#) transmigration. Amitābha's pure land of Sukhāvatī is described in the *Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* as a land of beauty that surpasses all other realms. It is said to be inhabited by many gods, men, flowers, fruits, and adorned with wish-granting trees where rare birds come to rest. ^[25] In Pure Land traditions, entering the Pure Land is popularly perceived as equivalent to the attainment of enlightenment. Upon entry into the Pure Land, the practitioner is then instructed by Amitābha Buddha and numerous bodhisattvas until full and complete enlightenment is reached. This person then has the choice of returning at any time as a bodhisattva to any of the [six realms of existence](#) in order to help all sentient beings in [saṃsāra](#), or to stay the whole duration, reach [buddhahood](#), and subsequently deliver beings to the shore of liberation. ^[citation needed]

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, there are many buddhas, and each buddha has a pure land. Amitābha's pure land of Sukhāvatī is understood to be in the western direction, whereas [Aksobhya](#)'s pure land of [Abhirati](#) is to the east. Though there are other traditions devoted to various Pure Lands, each of Pure Lands except Amitābha's is called by the different name without calling it pure land, and Amitabha's is by far the most popular. Few Pure Land buddhists have practiced the harder [Pratyutpanna samadhi](#). ^[citation needed]

Sutras of Pure Land Buddhism preach that Dharma brings effects equally without distinction of saints or the imperial family. This is one of the reasons that became most popular among the populace. In addition, it references that benevolences expecting the reward do not have good deeds, and suggests that good and evil may be interchanged in the difference of one's situation. Hence, it was thought that menial persons could be released from the underworld like [Hell](#) and arrive at Pure Land easily depending on their good deeds in one's lifetime. However, because this teaching includes extremely difficult subject matter, various denominations or sects appeared over the interpretation. ^[citation needed]

Meditation

[Charles Luk](#) identifies three meditation practices as being widely used in Pure Land Buddhism. ^[26]

Mindfulness of Amitābha Buddha

Main article: [Nianfo](#)

Repeating the name of Amitābha is traditionally a form of mindfulness of the Buddha (Skt. *buddhānussmṛti*). This term was translated into Chinese as *nianfo* (Chinese: 念佛; Japanese: *nenbutsu*), by which it is popularly known in English. The practice is described as calling the buddha to mind by repeating his name, to enable the practitioner to bring all his or her attention upon that Buddha (See: [samādhi](#)). ^[27] This may be done vocally or mentally, and with or without the use of [Buddhist prayer beads](#). Those who practice this method often commit to a fixed set of repetitions per day. ^[27] According to tradition, the second patriarch of the Pure Land school, [Shandao](#) is said to have practiced this day and night without interruption, each time emitting light from his mouth. Therefore, he was bestowed with the title "Great Master of Light" ([Chinese](#): 光明大師) by [Emperor Gaozong of Tang](#). ^[28]

In Chinese Buddhism, there is a related practice called the "dual path of Chan and Pure Land cultivation", which is also called the "dual path of emptiness and existence." ^[29] As taught by [Nan Huai-Chin](#), the name of Amitābha is recited slowly, and the mind is emptied out after each repetition. When idle thoughts arise, the name is repeated again to clear them. With constant practice, the mind is able to remain peacefully in emptiness, culminating in the attainment of samādhi. ^[29]

Pure Land Rebirth Dhāraṇī



Engraving of a [Sanskrit dhāraṇī](#) for [Amitābha](#) written in the [Siddham script](#).
[Mogao Caves](#), [Dunhuang](#), China

Repeating the Pure Land Rebirth [dhāraṇī](#) is another method in Pure Land Buddhism. Similar to the mindfulness practice of repeating the name of Amitābha, this dhāraṇī is another method of meditation and recitation in Pure Land Buddhism. The repetition of this dhāraṇī is said to be very popular among traditional Chinese Buddhists.^[28] It is traditionally preserved in [Sanskrit](#), and it is said that when a devotee succeeds in realizing singleness of mind by repeating a mantra, its true and profound meaning will be clearly revealed.^[28]

*namo amitābhāya tathāgatāya tadyathā
amṛt[od]bhava amṛta[siddhambhave]
amṛtavikrānte amṛtavikrāntagāmini
gagana kīrtī[kare] svāhā*

The Chinese use a version of this dhāraṇī that was [transliterated](#) from Sanskrit into [Chinese characters](#), called the “Mantra for Birth in the Pure Land” ([Chinese](#): 生淨土咒; [pinyin](#): *Shēng jìngtǔ zhòu*)^[30] also known as the Pure Land Rebirth Dhāraṇī (往生淨土神咒 *Wangsheng Jingtū Shenzhou*). The translation exists in various forms and this is one commonly used.

Visualization methods

Another practice found in Pure Land Buddhism is meditative contemplation and visualization of Amitābha, his attendant bodhisattvas, and the Pure Land. The basis of this is found in the [Amitayurdhyana Sutra](#), in which the Gautama Buddha describes to Queen Vaidehi the practices of thirteen progressive visualization methods, corresponding to the attainment of various levels of rebirth in the Pure Land.^[31] The first of these steps is contemplation of a setting sun, until the visualization is clear whether the eyes are open or closed.^[32] Each progressive step adds complexity to the visualization of Sukhāvatī, with the final contemplation being an expansive visual which includes Amitābha and his attendant bodhisattvas.^[32] According to Inagaki Hisao, this progressive visualization method was widely followed in the past for the purpose of developing samādhi.^[10] Visualization practises for Amitābha are also popular in [Shingon Buddhism](#) as well as other schools of [Vajrayana](#).

Going to the Pure Land



Tibetan painting of [Amitābha](#) in [Sukhāvati](#)

Practitioners claim there is evidence of dying people going to the pure land, such as:

- Knowing the time of death (預知時至): some prepare by bathing and nianfo.
- The "Three Saints of the West" (西方三聖): Amitābha and the two bodhisattvas, [Avalokiteśvara](#) on his right and [Mahāsthāmaprāpta](#) on his left, appear and welcome the dying person. Visions of other buddhas or bodhisattvas are disregarded as they may be bad spirits disguising themselves, attempting to stop the person from entering the Pure Land. ^[33]
- Records of practicing Pure Land Buddhists who have died have been known to leave [śarīra](#), or relics, after [cremation](#).

The last part of the body to become cold is the top of the head (posterior fontanelle). In Buddhist teaching, souls who enter the Pure Land leave the body through the [fontanelle](#) at the top of the skull. Hence, this part of the body stays warmer longer than the rest of the body. The *Verses on the Structure of the Eight Consciousnesses* (Chinese: 八識規矩補註), ^[34] reads: "to birth in saints the last body temperature in top of head, to deva in eyes, to human in heart, to hungry ghosts in belly, to animals in knee cap, to the hells-realm in sole of feet." See also: [phowa](#).

The dying person may demonstrate some, but not necessarily all, of these evidences. For example, his facial expression may be happy, but he may not demonstrate other signs, such as [sharira](#) and dreams.

When a person dies, at first "good luck at the underworld" is prayed for the dead person. The next, the family is in mourning during 49 days till the dead person's reincarnation (Pure Land sects may say "till achieving Pure Land"). It

is thought that the great sinner transmigrates to a *beast* or a *hungry ogre* without being able to go to the Pure Land.

Variance between traditions

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In Tibet, which has a Tantric culture, the original Indic general orientation of seeking rebirth in the Pure Land of any deity was retained. Tibetan practitioners may also visualize themselves as a Buddha. By contrast, the Chinese traditions are oriented towards seeking assistance from an "other-

Amitabha Buddha” which is outside the self, and may consider the Western Pure Land to exist only in the mind. ^[35]

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Indian Buddhism

Regarding Pure Land practice in Indian Buddhism, Hajime Nakamura writes that as described in the Pure Land sūtras from India, Mindfulness of the Buddha (Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*) is the essential practice. ^[36] These forms of mindfulness are essentially methods of meditating upon Amitābha Buddha. ^[36] Andrew Skilton looks to an intermingling of Mahāyāna teachings with Buddhist meditation schools in Kashmir for the rise of Mahāyāna practices related to *buddhānusmṛti*, mindfulness of the Buddha. ^[37]

Great innovations undoubtedly arose from the intermingling of early Buddhism and the Mahāyāna in Kashmir. Under the guidance of [Sarvāstivādin](#) teachers in the

region, a number of influential meditation schools evolved which took as their inspiration the Bodhisattva [Maitreya](#). [...] The Kashmiri meditation schools were undoubtedly highly influential in the arising of the *buddhānusmṛti* practices, concerned with the 'recollection of the Buddha(s)', which were later to become characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the [Tantra](#).

Chinese Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhism was one of the two main schools of monastic Buddhism that persisted, the other being Chan. Pure Land Buddhism is considered to be both monastic and lay. ^[38] Pure Land practice never became a sect of Buddhism separate from general Mahāyāna practice. ^[39] In particular, Pure Land and Zen practice are often seen as being mutually compatible, and no strong distinctions are made. ^[40] Chinese Buddhists have traditionally viewed the practice of meditation and the practice of reciting Amitābha Buddha's name, as complementary and even analogous methods for achieving enlightenment. ^[40] This is because they view recitation as a meditation method used to concentrate the mind and purify thoughts. ^[40] Chinese Buddhists widely consider this form of recitation as a very effective form of meditation practice. ^[40]

Historically, many Buddhist teachers in China have also taught both Chan and Pure Land together. For example, in the [Ming dynasty](#), [Hanshan Deging](#) and many of his contemporaries advocated the dual practice of the Chan and Pure Land methods, advocating mindfulness of Amitābha to purify the mind for the attainment of self-realization. ^[41]

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Pure Land Buddhism has a long and innovative history dating from the 8th-9th centuries, the era of the [Tibetan Empire](#), with the translation and canonization of the Sanskrit *Sukhāvatīvyūha* sūtras in Tibetan. Tibetan compositions of pure-land prayers and artistic renditions of Sukhāvatī in Central Asia date to that time. Tibetan pure-land literature forms a distinct genre and encompasses a wide range of scriptures, "aspiration prayers to be born in Sukhāvatī" (Tib. *bde-smon*), commentaries on the prayers and the sūtras, and meditations and rituals belonging to the Vajrayāna tradition. The incorporation of [phowa](#) (mind transference techniques) in pure-land meditations is textually attested in the 14th century, in *The Standing Blade of Grass* (Tib. 'Pho-ba 'Jag-tshug ma), a [terma](#) text allegedly dating to the time of the Tibetan Empire. A good number of Buddhist treasure texts are dedicated to Amitābha and to rituals associated with his pure-land, while the wide acceptance of [phowa](#) in Tibetan death rituals may owe its popularity to Pure Land Buddhism promoted by all schools of [Tibetan Buddhism](#). ^[42]

There are many treasure texts associated with Tibetan Pure Land Buddhism ^[43] and [tertön Longsal Nyingpo](#) (1625 – 1682/92 or 1685 – 1752) of [Katok Monastery](#) revealed a terma on the pure land. ^[44] This terma entailed phowa during the [bardo](#) of dying, sending the [Mind Stream](#) to a pure land.

Gyatrul (b. 1924), ^[45] in a purport to the work of [Karma Chagme](#) (Wylie: Karma Chags-med, fl. 17th century), rendered into English by [B. Alan Wallace](#) (Chagmé *et al.*, 1998: p. 35), states:

It is important to apply our knowledge internally. The Buddha attained enlightenment in this way. The pure lands are internal; the mental afflictions are internal. The crucial factor is to recognize the mental afflictions. Only by recognizing their nature can we attain Buddhahood. ^[46]

Japanese Buddhism

In [Japanese Buddhism](#), Pure Land teachings developed into independent institutional sects, as can be seen in the [Jōdo-shū](#), [Jōdo Shinshū](#), [Yūzū-nembutsu-shū](#), and [Ji-shū](#). ^[47]

The majority of the important schools of Japanese Buddhism developed in the middle ages, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. However they were mostly influenced by the Tendai school (Chinese: Tiantai in the sixth century) as their founding monks were all trained originally in the school. Its teachings were based on the Lotus Sūtra and Mahāyāna Nirvāṇa Sūtra, encompassing a wide range of teachings and eclectic practices of austerities. ^[48]

Strong institutional boundaries exist between sects which serve to clearly separate the Japanese Pure Land schools from the Japanese Zen schools. ^[49] One notable exception to this is found in the [Ōbaku](#) Zen school, which was founded in Japan during the 17th century by the Chinese Buddhist monk [Ingen](#) (Chinese *Yinyuan Longqi*). The [Ōbaku](#) school of Zen retains many Chinese features such as mindfulness of Amitābha through recitation and recitation of the Pure Land sūtras. ^[49]

Upon encountering Japanese Pure Land traditions which emphasize [faith](#), many westerners saw outward parallels between these traditions and [Protestant Christianity](#). This has led many western authors to speculate about possible connections between these traditions. ^[50] However, the [cosmology](#), internal assumptions, and underlying doctrines and practices are now known to have many differences. ^[50]

See also

- [Faith in Buddhism](#)

- [Ippen](#)
- [Transfer of merit](#)
- [Vyūha](#)
- [Pure land](#)

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