

Amida Shu Pureland Buddhism (Amida School) Definitions (July 2020)

Q: What is Amida Shu?

Dharmavidya's Answer: Socially engaged Pureland Buddhism, a generic, religious spirituality animated by the energy of Amida Buddha. Amida shu has three basic teachings: the trikaya nature of Buddhas, the bombu nature of adherents and the nembutsu as principle practice. The core teachings of Amida shu are found in the Larger Pureland Sutra. Amida Shu is an other power spirituality.

Q: What is other power?

A: Other power refers to the Buddha's teaching of 'dependent origination', according to which all things arise in dependence upon causes and conditions. This means both that the causes in our karmic history will always cause us to be bombu and also that there are other causes that can, nonetheless, empower our spiritual life. All of these - our own karmic history and our openness to the healing power of Buddhas - are outside of ('other' than) our present self. We are both victims and beneficiaries of other powers. When we take refuge in the healing power of a Buddha it is as though a seed were planted within us that will then grow by itself. We then become a tathagatagarbha, or 'buddha-womb' within which the seed of Buddha gradually matures. Calling upon Amida Buddha is thus like allowing oneself to be impregnated by the Buddha's healing power which will then grow of its own accord. Amida Shu thus relies upon a subliminal process of spiritual growth.

Q: What does the Larger Pureland Sutra say?

A: In brief, it is the story, told by Shakyamuni Buddha to his disciple Ananda, of a bodhisattva called Dharmakara who establishes a Pure Land and thereby becomes Amida Buddha. Included are Dharmakara's prayers that describe the nature of that land as a place where there are no hells or places of punishment, no discrimination or disadvantaging of particular social groups, no war or oppression, only opportunity for spiritual advancement and enjoyment. Dharmakara also promises that he will bring to his realm anybody who sincerely calls upon or takes refuge in him. The beings in Amida Buddha's Pure Land are all either shravakas or bodhisattvas. Thus the sutra specifies the calling of Amida's name as the means by which an affinity is created between oneself and the Buddha and also provides an archetypal example of how, in the case of Dharmakara Bodhisattva, such a connection eventually ripened into the creation of a Pure Land and full Buddhahood.

Q: What is a shravaka?

A: The word means 'listener'. Somebody who listens to the Buddha's teaching and enjoys the benefit. Merely listening is enough for the Buddha seed to become lodged within one. All shravakas will eventually be Buddhas after many lifetimes or after a long period in Amida's Pure Land.

Q: What is a bodhisattva?

A: Somebody who 'serves all Buddhas' and thereby dedicates their life to the spiritual assistance of others. Those who are powerfully inspired by Buddhas, but are not yet Buddhas themselves, are called bodhisattvas. Bodhi is the vision of things that is held by a Buddha. While bodhisattvas do not yet fully embody that vision, they have some of its spirit at work in their lives.

Q: What does trikaya nature mean?

A: Tri means three. Kaya means body or manifestation. Trikaya is a Buddhist teaching that Buddhas have concrete, spiritual and absolute manifestation. A Buddha acts in the mundane world, appears in our spiritual life and embodies the absolute truth of unconditionality. This means that Buddhism is a spiritual, not merely a moral teaching.

Q: What does 'bombu' mean?

A: This is a Japanese term referring to the fact that we are vulnerable, limited, unenlightened beings subject to conditions. We have various delusions, are affected by greed, hate, and a variety of other wayward passions. To recognise one's bombu (or 'guchi') nature is to adopt a realistically modest assessment of what it is to be an ordinary human being.

Q: What is nembutsu?

A: The thought of Buddha. To conceive of the unconditioned and make it sacred in your life makes one a Buddhist. This is called taking refuge. The unconditioned is embodied by Buddhas, described in their Dharma teachings, and works itself out in the life of the Sangha. All Buddhists take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. These are called the Three Jewels. Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the act that makes one a Buddhist. This refuge may be focused upon a particular Buddha. In the case of Amida Shu the particular Buddha is Amida Buddha.

Q: Why Amida Buddha?

A: Amida Buddha is the Buddha that most completely manifests unconditionality. Amida Buddha made a paradise called Sukhavati for everyone who calls upon him. This means

that if we put Amida Buddha at the centre of our life we shall create a karmic connection with that Pure Land and this will be so irrespective of what spiritual or moral level we have reached. Amida loves us unconditionally, just as we are, already.

Q: What is social engagement?

A: Social engagement means to

- * resist oppression,
- * assist the afflicted and
- * demonstrate an alternative, individually and/or collectively, and to
- * apply Buddhist ethics at a social as well as a personal level.

It includes social action, relief work, education, psychological and pastoral assistance, community building, alternative lifestyle, eco-awareness, life simplification, and participation in specific projects, campaigns, communities, or programmes intended to contribute to a Pure Land in the world. There are many ways of being socially engaged and different people contribute in different ways. Shravakas listen to the Buddha's teaching and put it into practice in their personal life, thereby allowing the seed of the teachings to grow secretly. Bodhisattvas more openly dedicate their lives to the cause taking on the task of assisting all sentient beings. Both are welcome in Amida's Pure Land.

Q: What is sangha?

A: Sangha is the term for the Buddhist community - all those who have taken refuge in the Three Jewels. The sangha aims to be the ideal community that demonstrates an alternative way of life and faith that avoids the extremes of consumerism and self-indulgence on the one hand and those of fundamentalism or puritanism on the others.

Q: What is Pureland Buddhism?

A: Buddhism is the spiritual tradition deriving from Shakyamuni Buddha who lived in India 25 centuries ago. It is a religion of personal and social peace and harmony based upon the creation of karmic affiliation to a Buddha or Buddhas through an act of 'taking refuge'.

Q: What is a Buddha?

A: A being who is awakened to the power of the unconditional: unconditional love, unconditional wisdom, unconditional goodness, unconditional generosity, unconditional patience, unconditional energy, unconditional presence. Buddhas support the unconditionality of one another - Buddhas are inspired by Buddhas. We who are not Buddhas are also inspired by Buddhas.

Q: What is meant by the unconditional?

A: This is the principle of willingness. A Buddha loves each person just as he or she is. A Buddha does not condemn. Ordinary people are not capable of doing this, but they can grasp the principle.

Q: What is spirituality?

A: Spirituality has a number of meanings. Amida Shu is spiritual in being

- * (a) a relationship with what is sacred,
- * (b) a personal and individual form of devotion and religious exploration as well as a collective one,
- * (c) a relationship to Amida Buddha who is commonly experienced as spirit, appearing in dreams and at death, not merely as a historical existence, and
- * (d) centred on religious feeling and devotion.

Q: What is meant by religion?

A: Amida Shu is a religion inasmuch as it is an organised communion of fellow spirits. Religion generally refers to the institutional aspect of the spiritual life. Buddhism takes a middle position on religion - not too organised and not too anarchic. A degree of organic organisation is necessary if a group of people are to have any effect in the world. Since Amida Shu has an acknowledgedly utopian vision to create 'Pure Land in this world' some organisation is necessary. Amida Shu is therefore a communion of people of common faith working together for a better world, supporting one another as a mutually caring family, and thereby demonstrating an alternative way forward in which diverse people care for one another and co-operate in the service of a better vision.

Q: What is meant by saying it is a 'generic' spirituality?

A: The basic principles of Amida Shu define a simple structure within which a person can live a spiritual life. All that they have to do is recognise their own limitations, recognise the unconditional ideal, and adopt a practice that relates the two in their consciousness. This latter, whatever form it takes, will be a form of nembutsu. The framework of Amida Shu is thus of more or less universal application for people with a spiritual outlook. Thus, it is easy for an Amidist to relate to the other major religions by simply assuming that their gods are Buddhas. So long as your god is a Buddha - i.e. embodies unconditional love - then your religious practice is a form of refuge and parallel to Buddhism. Buddhism claims no exclusivity. (Problems in inter-faith dialogue generally derive from claims to exclusivity, but Buddhas do not claim exclusivity because what they teach is universal.) So Amida-shu is universalistic both in the sense

of recognising the validity of other spiritualities and being able to talk about them in its own language as well as theirs and also in being a simple structure of doctrine that persons of any faith background can readily utilise.

~ Dharmavidya David Brazier, Founder of the Amida Order