Abstract:

An Analytical Study of the Philosophy of Pure Land Buddhism and Its Contemporary Relevance

During its long chequered history, Buddhism has evolved in various forms. Teachings of Lord Buddha regarding codes of conduct, guidelines for communal life, rituals, meditative practices, modes of teaching, images, fables and philosophies have varied greatly over time and place. According to the fundamental Buddhist principle of skill-in-means\(^1\), whatever variations are there in the teachings of Lord Buddha are natural and proper. All are necessary responses to the great variety of circumstances in which Buddhism has been propagated. Pure Land Buddhism is the result of such developments.

Pure Land Buddhism is a branch of mainstream Mahayana Buddhism and one of the most popular schools in the Far East. It is centered around the Buddha Amitabha\(^2\) ("Infinite-Light"), also known as the Buddha Amitayus ("Infinite-Life"), whose double name is shortened to "Amituo" in Chinese, "Amida" in Japanese and "Adida" in Korean and Vietnamese. The set of beliefs and practices surrounding Amitabha and Sukhawati has come to be referred to as ‘Pure Land Buddhism’ and in its Chinese sectarian development as the ‘Pure Land School’ (Ching-t’u-tsung) or ‘Pure Land Teaching’ (Ching-t’u-chiao). The ‘Pure Land’ reflects a concept associated with the Mahayana Bodhisattva practice of ‘purifying the Buddha Land’ (Budhaksetra-parisuddhi; buddhaksetra-parisodhana; ksetram parisodhayati etc.). ‘Purification’ in this context refers to the spiritual process of leading all beings dwelling within the Bodhisattva’s realm to enlightenment. Pure Land Buddhism is sometimes designated by the term "Amidism".

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1 Skill-in-means requires that the presentation of the Buddhist Teaching, (Sometimes simply called “the Dhamma”) be adapted to the mentality and circumstances of the people being taught.

2 Buddha as such is a concept that transcends any particular embodiment, such as Shakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha born in India), or Maitreya Buddha (the future Buddha), or Vairocana Buddha (the cosmic Buddha) or Amitabha Buddha (the Buddha of the western paradise). Buddha exists in many forms, but all share the same "body of reality," the same Dharmakaya, which is formless, omnipresent, all-pervading, indescribable, infinite--the everywhere-equal essence of all things, the one reality within-and-beyond all appearances.
The present study has been completed in six chapters. First chapter of the thesis briefly deals with the history of the origin and development of the Pure Land Buddhism as well as the introduction to the three main Sūtras of the Pure Land Buddhism just mentioned above.

In the Second Chapter an attempt has been made to discuss the Doctrines and Philosophies of Pure Land Buddhism under various sub-titles. According to the Pure Land texts and Amitābha’s original vows, the Buddha who established the Land of Bliss have been all fully described in the Sukhāvatī texts excellently. As pointed out in the texts, here we have known that; “His vow is to establish the Land of Bliss for the sake of all beings. An ideal land with adornments, ideal plants, ideal lakes or what not is all for receiving pious aspirants.” However, whatever successive stages of the universe there is neither ‘bodily pain (Kāyaduḥkham) nor mental pain (Cittaduḥkham)’ for living beings.

Chapter three has pointed out the ways for practice and its relevancies in Pure Land Buddhism. In order to benefit all living beings, right after the enlightenment, the Śākyamuni Buddha saw people having more afflictions, worries, and wandering thoughts. Due to our deep-seated bad habits, which tend to become even more entrenched over thousands of lifetimes, it becomes impossible to liberate ourselves solely by our own efforts. The Buddha knew that to end one’s problems and attain lasting happiness, many people would need the help of other's power such as Amitābha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life, so on and so forth.

There are three essential conditions for practitioner, who wants to fulfill their wish to reborn in pure and peaceful place in the Buddha’s land so they must base themselves on these three categories mentioned below without missing anyone:

1. The meaning of Faith
2. The meaning of Vows
3. The meaning of Practice

The above three essential conditions for rebirth which are called the three factors or elements are the corner-stones of Pure Land Buddhism. They are also counted as the assets and credits necessary for the rebirth in Pure Land.

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3 Junirō Takakusu., The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy, (Ed.) Wing-Tsit Chan & Charles A. Moore, University of Hawai, Honolulu (First Ed), 1947, Motilal Bararsidass, Delhi (Rep), 1975, P. 181.
Fourth Chapter has widely discussed the significance of the nine grades of rebirth focused on the two famous Pure Land Patriarchs in the modern time. These are Hui-Yuan (慧遠) and Shan-Tao (善導) who contributed to the ranking of the nine grades of rebirth for the foreordained social status on the basis of occupation and karma of the practitioners. Thus, the ranking of the nine grades of Hui-Yuan can be delineated as follows:¹

1. Highest of high Mahāyāna Fourth Bhūmi and above.
2. Middle of high Mahāyāna First three Bhūmi-s.
3. Lowest of high Mahāyāna Practice of Resolution and Lineage stages.
4. Highest of middle Hīnayāna People of the initial three [Āryapudgala] stages (Stream-winner, Once-returner, Non-returner).
5. Middle of middle Hīnayāna Inner and Outer Prthagjana prior to Path of Insight.
6. Lowest of middle Hīnayāna Worldly Prthagjana-s prior to Path of Insight.
7. Highest of low Mahāyāna Outer Prthagjana-s those who have begun to Train in the Mahāyāna path. They are not even in the Path ranking.
8. Middle of low Mahāyāna Outer Prthagjana-s those who have begun to Train in the Mahayana path. They are not even in the Path ranking.
9. Lowest of low Mahāyāna Outer Prthagjana-s those who have begun to train in the Mahāyāna path. They are not even in the Path ranking.

Similarly, Shan-tao’s ranking can be summed up as follows:²

1. Highest of high Mahāyāna [Prthagjana-s] of utmost virtue
2. Middle of high Mahāyāna Mahāyāna Prthagjana-s
3. Lowest of high Mahāyāna [Prthagjana-s] who generate the Mahāyāna mind
4. Highest of middle Hīnayāna [Prthagjana-s] who observe Hīnayāna precepts
5. Middle of middle Hīnayāna [Prthagjana-s] without virtues
6. Lowest of middle Hīnayāna [Prthagjana-s] who have not encountered the Buddha Dharma [prior to their deathbed]

¹ Ibid., pp. 82-83. Also see: T 1749.37.182a12-c22.
² Ibid., p. 83. Also see: T 1753.37.248b7-250a8.
8. Middle of low Mahāyāna [Prthagjana-s] who cannot maintain [precepts]
9. Lowest of low Mahāyāna [Prthagjana-s] who commit such evil acts as the
   Five Grave Transgressions and the Ten Evils

Chapter fifth mainly focuses on the status of women in the Pure Land Buddhism. The recent developments in science and technology have affected all walks of life throughout the world. It has changed the world view of the people. The position accorded to women in traditional societies has been also changed drastically in all spheres of activity whether it was be social, religious, economic or political. Such developments have led us to ponder over the status accorded to women in the main religious traditions of the world. It is evident from the perusal of religious scriptures of different faiths that almost all of them depict women as a temptress and harbinger of all sorts of miseries in this mundane world.

Chapter Six is the last chapter captioned as "Conclusion" It presents the summary of all chapters of the thesis. Besides, it also mentions the contemporary relevance of Pure Land Buddhism.