

## 5. Pure Land, Hua-yan and Tantric Buddhism

### Introduction

Many different schools and sub-schools of the Mahayana and Vajrayana (Tantric) forms of Buddhism developed over the centuries. And the character of individual schools changed over time. Some schools died out, while others flourished and sub-divided. Perhaps the best known forms of Mahayana Buddhism today are:

- Pure Land (Jodo Shin Shu in Japan)
- Zen (Chan in China), and
- Vajrayana (Tantra)

[However, the Vajrayana (Tantra) is often considered as a separate, further, development from the Mahayana.]

This week's study material provides only a brief glimpse of the colour and diversity of Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhism. The notes do not come close to even the three forms discussed here: Pure Land, Hua-yan and the Vajrayana. If you want to find out more there are plenty of resources about, including some good coffee table books showing the art of different forms of Buddhism, from different periods of time and different countries. This art may be as helpful in communicating the qualities of different schools as studying their philosophies. Consider, for example, how Chinese landscape paintings communicate something of the spirit of Chan (Zen), how a thangka (hanging scroll) of Padmasambhava communicates Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, and of how the bodhisattvas in the reliefs on the side of the Borobodur stupa communicate the spirit of Buddhism across the centuries.

### Pure Land Buddhism

This form of Buddhism started in India, but has remained popular in countries like China, Taiwan and Japan, where there are various sub-schools. It is mainly based on the longer and shorter *sukhavati vyuha* sutras (scriptures) which describe the world or realm of Amitabha Buddha - ie. Amitabha's "Pure Land" known as Sukhavati.

Amitabha's Pure Land is a world of archetypal symbols: trees and flowers made of jewels, colourful birds whose song communicates the dharma (truth), waters whose song also communicates the dharma, flowers that fall from the sky. Everything you could ask for appears at your wish. In all directions there are lotus flowers with golden Buddhas sitting on them. In the middle of all this is Amitabha, flanked by his two chief bodhisattvas. It is said that having reached this Pure Land we can never fall back into the type of confused and ugly world we have come from.

Amitabha's Pure Land is considered to be more than just a god realm (*deva-loka*). It is a world deeply imbued with Transcendental meaning; a world from which it is relatively easy to gain Enlightenment. But there is another way Amitabha's Pure Land, with all its archetypal symbolism, can be interpreted. It can be seen as a symbolic portrayal of the state of Enlightenment (Buddhahood) itself.

The main form of practice of the Pure Land forms of Buddhism is a simple recitation (*namu amida butsu* in Japanese), which means homage to the Buddha Amitabha. Followers of the Pure Land school generally believe that reciting this with pure faith leads directly to rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land.

The Pure Land schools depend on "other power" whereas schools such as the Theravada or Zen rely predominantly on "self power". Relying on "other power" means that rather than striving to gain Enlightenment through your own individual efforts you become receptive to higher spiritual "forces" and surrender yourself to them. In other words you are relying on a sincere faith which is rooted in receptivity to something greater than your own individual resources. [Some people experience the sevenfold puja practiced in the FWBO in this way.]

The sub-school of Pure Land Buddhism known as the Jodo Shin Shu (or just "Shin") goes so far as to say that it is unnecessary even to recite the homage to Amitabha in order to be reborn in his Pure Land. They recite it as an expression of gratitude for certain rebirth in the Pure Land. In other words, their approach is completely "other power". They would say that if you think in terms of making a certain quantum of personal effort, that quantum of effort can never be commensurate with the infinite richness of Amitabha's Pure Land. Therefore, they would go on to say that the way to reach the Pure Land is to go beyond our current sense of self.

## Hua-yan Buddhism

The Hua-yan school is based on a collection of Mahayana sutras called the avatamsaka (flower wreath). Although most of these scriptures have been lost, some remain, notably the *dhasabhumika* and *gandavyuha* Sutras. The Hua-yan's philosophies were primarily systematised by Fa-zang (643-712). Perhaps the most important teaching is that of "interpenetration". This principle of interpenetration is illustrated by the Hindu myth of "Indra's net".

### *Indra's net*

[*Edited excerpt from Sangharakshita's lecture: "the Universal Perspective of Mahayana Buddhism"*]

According to mythology which Buddhism inherited from Hinduism, Indra is the King of the Gods. He is said to dwell in the "heaven of the thirty-three gods". And Indra possesses a number of treasures. Amongst these treasures is a net made entirely of jewels. This net has the extraordinary characteristic that each and every one of its jewels reflects all the other jewels. In other words each jewel reflects the rest of the net; and all the other jewels are reflected in that individual jewel. All in each, and each in all.

The *gandavyuha sutra*, which is so important to the Hua-yan school, says the whole universe with everything in it is like Indra's net of jewels. The universe consists of innumerable phenomena of various kinds, just as Indra's net consists of innumerable jewels of all shapes and sizes. From the standpoint of the highest spiritual experience all the phenomena of the universe, whether great or small, near or distant, all mutually reflect one another; in a sense they even contain one another. All contain each, and each contains all. This truth applies throughout space and also throughout time. Space and time are, in effect, transcended, because everything that happens is happening now, and everything that is happening anywhere is happening here.

Of course we usually we do not think of the universe like this, or experience it like this. We usually think of the things that make up the world as irreducibly distinct from one another. And we usually experience the universe as consisting of things that are completely distinct from one another.

There is a very popular scriptural saying that is quoted in mahayana Buddhist countries again and again, and which enters deeply into their literature.. Eventually it even influences their everyday life. And this saying is that "every grain of dust in the universe contains all the Buddhafields" (ie. all the worlds throughout space and time). This might seem a rather bizarre and exotic insight, but we have something rather like it in a verse by the English poet, painter and visionary William Blake. He must have had a glimpse of this reality when he wrote:

*To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold the universe in the palm of one's hand,  
And eternity in an hour.*

Although this is a very popular verse of English literature, some people may not take it very seriously. They tend to think of these lines as just a flight of poetic fancy. But Blake was not just a poet, he was also a visionary, and this verse of his expresses a realization that in essence is not very different from that of Indra's net.

The various teachings of Buddhism are also like Indra's net. They comprise a number of different paths, teachings and practices, all of which are interconnected. They all reflect one another each gives you a clue to all the others. Each is contained in all the others.

## Tantra/Vajrayana

In chapter 18 of Vessantara's book "Meeting the Buddhas" (Windhorse Publications, 1993) he describes the characteristics of the Tantra/Vajrayana. His discussion says the Tantra:

- is concerned with direct experience
- uses of symbols and magic
- addresses the whole person
- sees the world in terms of energy
- makes use of the strongest experiences of life

- sees samsara and nirvana as inter-related
- begins at the highest point.

Although not all of these qualities are exclusive to the Tantra, this chapter of his book provides an excellent introduction.

This form of Buddhism spread from India to China and from there to Japan (where it is known as Shingon - not to be confused with Shin). The Shingon school of Buddhism is associated with Kukai (Kobo Daishi).

A later form of the Vajrayana or Tantra went from India to Tibet, where it mixed with the local Bon religion. The form of Buddhism popularly known as "Tibetan" is also found in parts of northern India, parts of Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia (as well as the US, Europe etc etc).

Tibetan Buddhism has four main schools:

*Nyingmapa*: the oldest school, deriving its primary inspiration from the Indian teacher Padmasambhava, who went to Tibet in the eighth century;

*Kargyupa*: founded by Gampopa in the eleventh century. It has produced some famous solitary mediators. The Karmapa is the head of this lineage;

*Sakyapa*: originally from the Indian teacher Virupa; and

*Gelugpa*: the largest and most recent school, founded in the fourteenth century by Tsongapa. The Dali Lama is head of this particular school.

Tibetan Buddhism is very rich and varied, as you can see from a visit to somewhere like Dharamsala or Darjeeling in northern India, or parts of northern Nepal. The spiritual guides within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition are known as lamas. Lamas may be monks or married, they may live in isolation for longer or shorter periods. They may live in a large monastery or with their family. Some are very conventional and others unconventional.