

21st Century Buddha

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It is hard to say what the traditional view of Amida Buddha felt like as taken to heart by laypeople in the pre-modern period. Let's start with a modernist perspective, progress to post-modernism and then try to construct a view that actually holds up now [early 21st century].

The Modern Amida Buddha

A modernist approach I do not understand or endorse is, "Amida is 'Buddhahood'." If that were all Amida were it would mean that "Hongwan Riki" (the power or 'grace' by which Amida's Vows are being fulfilled), "Pure Land" (the realm of Amida's influence, the realm within which his transformative presence is felt) and such notions would have little meaning. Many of our key concepts would be negated, or at least dis-empowered.

Modernism was the attempt to reinterpret all religion and art from the perspective of an unimaginative atheist humanism. This did not work and was followed by Existentialism and Post Modernism which accept that aspects of our lives are valid and yet elude rational understanding. Modernistic approaches I endorse include: 1. Amida Buddha is an image of your own more evolved and truest self. 2. Saying the Nembutsu in forms like "Namo Amida Butsu" is then the presence of our shared commitment to see our own liberation as inseparable from the freedom and happiness of all living beings. [as the Nembutsu is the Buddha on a Shinshu perspective this modernist approach to Nembutsu is also a modernistic perspective on Amida Buddha.]

The doggedly modernist Buddhist is like the guy who goes to a professional sporting event to enjoy a night out with friends and family without caring much what happens during the game or who wins. Large parts of what the loyal supporters are there for eludes the modernist at temple, church and at the sports arena.

Post Modern Amida

Post Modernism embraces a secondary naiveté where we adopt the older ways of thinking and speaking without denying the dictates of reason or knowledge we have gained through the experimental sciences. Thus Amida is a person who became somewhat superhuman in the process of fulfilling his promises to benefit and liberate suffering beings. The post modernists doesn't worry overly about what superhuman means or how long this process took but would avoid literalistic notions of Amida and his land that contradict scientific findings. Thus the Pure Land will not be some distance to the west, but it may be quasi-spatial and quasi-temporal on this perspective.

Post Post Modernists and I on Amida

I am willing to consider the paradoxes that confront us if Amida is a person while still being critical in my assessment of Amida and the concept of person-hood. I am giving myself as an example of the cutting edge of current theory and this may be both false and vain but I will proceed. Amida Buddha must be understood in terms of the concept of person-hood because we are compassionately welcomed to Buddhahood in his land at death and given composure for more wholesome living now. None of this is accidental and only a person can be compassionate. Besides being a subject of action, which any person is and which I claim Amida is, persons are generally subjects of experience.

I do not believe that Amida is a discrete, singular subject of experience. In the whole Buddhist scholarly world I only know one thinker who does see Amida as a subject of experience, that is John (Ishihara) Yokota. I would not be surprised if he has probably changed his mind by now.

A Buddha of Several Aspects (Bodies)

Sakyamuni distinguished his biological self from what came to be known as the Dharma body. This latter aspect of who he was is the Truth itself, not just a set of teachings about the truth. A Buddha realizes the non-duality of all persons, places, objects and events. Thus a Buddha fully realizes his/her identity with the universe itself. This is what it means to say that a Buddha or that all Buddha's have an aspect in which they are the Dharma body.

The second aspect/body on the three bodies of all Buddha's viewpoint universal in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism is the Recompensed Body. This means that there is an aspect of a Buddha which is what he or she does. This aspect of Buddhahood works well with a narrative approach. As long as we don't get bogged down in questions like "How?" this model is quite useful. (The answer to "how?" is practicing the paramitas but this answer raises further questions)

The second aspect of Buddhahood on Tan Luan's (Donran's) two bodies view is "the body of Compassionate Means." Although making some statements easier than the Recompensed Body/Reward Body language this body of Compassionate means has always been taken as an alternate description of that same aspect of Buddhahood. This way of thinking allows us to say that Suchness/Emptiness took form as Amida, made the Vows described (in human terms) in the Dai Mu Ryo Ju Kyo, fulfilled those Vows, imploded the merit into his name and gave that to us in forms like "Namanda."

If you ask me how that can be I will remind you that Buddhism progresses by adopting a vision (darshana in Sanskrit) and living in terms of that vision. It does not mean that the conceptual terms in which we express that vision are a blueprint of a reality outside our conceptualizing.

Personal Witness (do we do that?!)

I encounter that which is sacred in and as Amida Buddha's Name. The Buddha will help me become free, happy and helpful to others in my next life. Even in this life, as I take the Nembutsu to heart, I find my urges to greedy, delusive and hateful action progressively distasteful. I sometimes even refrain from acting on such urges. This is the vision I share. If you ask "what does it mean?" Keith Richards and I will reply, "It means a lot." The modernists wanted to nail down solid answers to every question. The post modernists pretended the old answers were fine. In the 21st century we must be honest enough to answer the questions we can (Amida is in some senses a person) and humble enough not to answer questions we cannot (Is there no dimension of Amida in which he/she is the subject of specific experiences?).

There is a dryness in modernistic interpretations of the Buddha-dharma, especially when they are extended to the Buddha. There is a dimension of interpersonal relationship between ourselves and Amida. It is in this dimension that have those moments when our minds and hearts seem to be playing in the Pure Land. I would discourage being too precise in talking about all this.

There is a kindness and, yes, I'll call it that, a love that I experience in saying the Nembutsu. This is not because Amida is a big guy in the sky who likes me. Even so, I feel what Rock Graziano used to feel when he would say, "Somebody up there likes me!" Whether you call it secondary naivety or just being goofy, it is important to have such feelings. While Amida Buddha goes beyond the category of "person" as we normally understand it, it would be wrong to say our relationship to the Buddha is impersonal. That's not how I feel about it and its not how Amida feels about it. Just ask him.