

The purist of pure lands

Birth in the Pure Land in Jodoshinshu refers to birth in the realm of the real as opposed to the realm of delusion, to the realm of Nirvana as opposed to the realm of Samsara, or perhaps more correctly, awareness of Nirvana as Samsara without self. Samsara means the world of delusion created by the ego-self. This includes everything of a relatively negative nature, positive nature, and neutral nature. In other words, everything in this world is a delusion when seen from a self-centered point of view – hate, love, envy, empathy, greed, generosity, anger, happiness, grief etc. etc. In the world of the self, these are really relative terms; thus, love and hate seem to be related, generosity and stinginess, grief/happiness, opposite sides of the same coin. To look for absolutes in this self-centered world of Samsara is a futile endeavor. The condition, state, or moment free of this self-centeredness is Nirvana, a condition free of self, a pure state. A person in this state of purity is called a Buddha, and wherever a Buddha is, his or her surroundings are also pure. This head-scratching issue is what is central to Buddhism as a religion. It is pure, or free of conjecture about the origin of the universe, life after death, the supernatural, and all the “sciences” of the occult, fortune telling, auras, zodiacs, geomancy (feng shuei), vortexes, pyramid power, etc, etc. – the ego-self struggling to remain in control of all it has created.

This position of Buddhism from the time of the historical Buddha remains to this day, but the austerity of its teaching, and the difficulty of understanding it philosophically, not to mention understanding it as a religious experience, has left us open to all the above temptations creeping into Buddhism. There is not a Buddhist tradition in the world that has not incorporated the samsaric sciences into their system of Buddhism, especially American Buddhists. Ironically, American Buddhist seems not to include Japanese-American Buddhists or any of the “ethnic” Buddhists in America, even though the Japanese-American Buddhists are the oldest Buddhist group in America with the longest history of Americans who are Buddhist. It is ironic because American Jodoshinshuists are the most free (pure) of non-Buddhist concerns for astrology, oracles, fortune telling, protective amulets, magical cures, ghosts, spirits, and all the “bachi” associated with such beliefs. As Rev. Russell Hamada once said, Jodoshinshu has no flash, no trash, and no cash. It is a legitimate religion as we see it, as it continually asks the question; “What is this thing I call “me”, Why am I so self-absorbed with “me” and why is it such a pain-producing experience?” Is there another reality that I do not see? And if there is, how can I connect with it? Shinran Shonin has suggested that the question is awkwardly put. If “I” is what blocks out reality, how can it be relied upon to go beyond itself? If the power of the self is the agency for delusion, then self-power is the definition of delusion. Must we not then depend on a power “other” than the self? Self-power is the power of the ego-self, a formidable power that creates the world as we know it. But just as the eye cannot see itself, it cannot see a reality beyond its creations. Other-power, Amida, the Pure Land are terms for the ultimate reality that sees the separate and exclusive worlds of the ego-self as a single and intimately connective reality.

We are all a part of a single interconnected reality, ever-changing, with no beginning and no end. When the ego-self attempts to deny this and creates a world of separate individuals interacting, the samsara world of self-power comes into being. The moments when the ego-self lets down its guard, the Nirvana world breaks in upon us, where the interaction is real, and our portion of it only a temporary name. The Pure Land is as Buddhist as you can get.
Namanda, Namanda, Namanda.