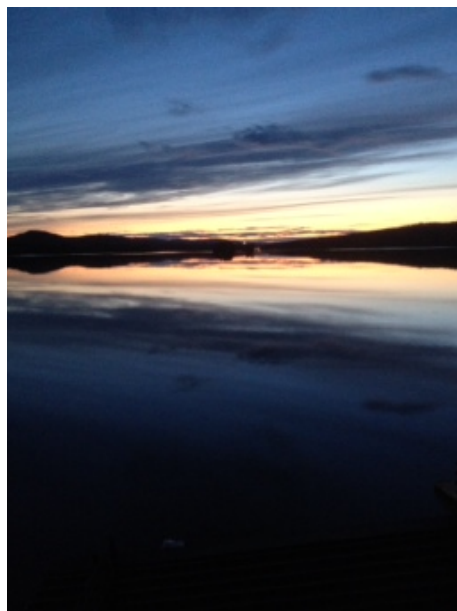


News

from Amitabha village

Notes on life in the Pure Land faith



General information about the village

Born in Sweden, I have lived most of my life in a small Chinese village in northern China near Biyang as the child of Christian missionaries. It is a rural community with a large group of craftsmanship. The dominant religion is Buddhism, the form known as Pure Land Buddhism. Other religions are represented by tiny minorities. There are dirt roads to and from the village and a few gas driven vehicles. Walking, bicycling and riding on horses or mules is the usual way of going around daily errands; and gasoline or diesel are regarded as luxury goods. Electricity is available only to a limited extent through solar panels and elgenerationer privately owned. One can buy electricity from anyone who owns batteries or fuel and utilities. The houses are well-built and easy to keep warm, even in winter.

Social stratification

The village has a fairly homogenous social group, everyone is either monk, artisan, farmer or staff in the administration, health care, police or school. But often these functions overlap so that a farmer can be civilian monk and even part time nurse at the hospital. The Chief of Police is, for example, a civilian monk and also school teacher in various subjects. One of the doctors is a monk at the monastery, i.e. not married and he also has some administrative duties. I myself am a civilian monk, manufacturer of shoes and leather goods, but I also manages some things in the library and the administration of the monastery since I have greater language skills than most and can translate to and from several European languages.

Many are poor but get along fairly well by joint assistance. A few are relatively rich, some of those who have many animals on their farms or those who have built most houses in the village and other villages. But there is no caste system or class formation, such as for example in India and religion in our village is clearly egalitarian. All with a few exceptions, goes to the temple of the Pure Land Faith.

Faith Life in the village

The belief that nearly all inhabitants share, is the paradise faith. We have all been promised birth in the Pure Land, which also includes everyone else in the world, despite the different religions and teachings. For this gift we can say thanks by reciting the Savior's name, which in this village is Omitofou, but I myself and some others say the original sanskrit name of Amitabha. That was the name I first learned at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, where I studied Pure Land with a very good teacher. One can also say "God" if you come from outside Buddhism or Tien Tai or Shang-Te or Shin, names of God in old chinese faith. People here do not differentiate between religions, as in Europe, but look for the actual progress of faith. We are all promised birth in Paradise, no matter what you call your Saviour.

Each morning one can hear the monks singing Amitabha's name until breakfast at seven. Anyone in the village are welcome to take part for a while or for the whole of it. The temple is open around the clock for meditation or prayer to Amitabha, but there is no obligation to go to the temple, except for family ceremonies or celebrations, like birth, becoming adult or death and funeral. Some Buddhist festivals are celebrated by the monks, but no expectation for ordinary people to participate.

The singing or chanting of Amitabha's name is a form of spirituality that all people use in everyday life. This is a bit difficult to describe to westerners. If you walk around our village a typical day, you hear many singing low Amitabha's name, or Omitofou. They can whisper it while doing other things or sing loud and clear, and say it as greeting or farewell. It is simply useful for various behaviours.

You often see people in Europe to take a smoke break. Then they stand still, look around, smoke and relax for a while. In our village almost none is a smoker, although some old men have their own kind of tobacco in pipes. But the saying of Amitabha resembles a little that pause for smoking. People stand still for a while, resting from the manual work and recite the name. But even in the midst of activities recitation goes on. Like this it works for me. I have short interruptions in the recitation except when I get to translate for someone visiting the village. Then I have to focus on all that is said and translating back and forth.

Since many young boys become monks and later decide to get married and start a family, we have many civil monks. They have monk status and at the same time they are craftsmen or farmers and family men. This means that religion is not seen as something separate or special in our society. Almost all live in the same fundamental beliefs and all recite the name of the Savior of all.

Underlying this practice is a simple analysis of life. We are suffering in missing what we want in life, and we are suffering in having things that we do not want. It is the fundamental law that all people can see clearly in everyday life. With the Savior at the center through recitation both forms of suffering reduced. Those who have a living faith in paradise are not affected as much by desires that cause suffering.

When I describe this to people in Europe, confusion often arises. One does not really understand how all forms of belief and religion can be accepted. But I notice how in our village there is a pragmatism at the bottom level of everyday mind. Life has a causal law. We cause suffering by our demanding desires. Quite regardless of culture or religion, this is so for all living beings. Animals do it, we do it, angels and demons do it. Amitabha -- or Jesus for Christians -- saves us from this kind of life in the future, and even now as we recite the powerful and graceful Name in faith.

Christian missionaries in China have noted that this belief in salvation was already alive when they came. Did it arrive with syrian Christians before and during the T'ang dynasty? We don't know for sure. The moment an interpreter says "Amitabha" to explain Christ's saving work, everyone understands and welcomes the Christian missionary. They know his message.

One time we were visited by a theravada monk who sang with us in the morning and then pursued his specific meditation exercises. He had an interesting conversations with me and spoke excellent english. He responded first that we did not seem to care much about spiritual practices and ethical rules found in Buddhism, except the chanting of the Name. But after living with us a few months, he acknowledged that there indeed was a point in the Pure Land Buddhism -- not to rely on their own power, but on the Other power of grace, i.e. the Buddha's redemptive power. And the Name manifests this redemptive power, in our trusting the Buddhas Vow. It is often precisely at this point that other forms of Buddhism are different from the faith of Amitabha.

In a way, this spiritual mood does not appear very "religious" in the European sense. Amitabha is a kind of compass in all the day's action. You can also combine other habits, for example, as I do t'ai chi, and Falun Dafa while I recite. I also use a strolling meditative exercise from Theravada and the sitting and lying, and also in falling asleep. What is convenient is what works most people in, my village folks think.

One difference from Europe is also what we call "the last things" - that is paradise. In the Christian tradition, this theme has been considerably marginalised, while in my home village is the center of the life of faith. That we must be born in Sukhavati by the Power of the Vow and by the saying of the Name is the hub around which the wheel of life on Earth moving.

I remember my Christian childhood where the little bleak morning service at Judgement Sunday dealt precisely with the theme of "the last things". Judgement and the life to come is not at the center of most Christians daily life today, even if it certainly was to the apostles. However, in our village Sukhavati is constantly at the center. This very life is meant to lead to the Pure Land, so nothing can be more of concern. It is to the dimension of unlimited light and life we are constantly going and we thank the Saviour for the grace we have recieved.

The perception of the suffering and the Pure Land

No extensive Buddhist teaching takes place in the village. Indeed many of the people here do not think of themselves as "buddhists". It's not like in the old days of European catechesis and religious knowledge in every school for boys and girls. But many of the villagers learn the basics of the faith anyway. Nearly everyone knows a monk or have one in the family. Most people are aware that we humans live in what in Pali is called kama-vacaram -- a consciousness oriented towards some form of impermanent pleasure, whether it's on the sensual, intellectual or spiritual level. Consuming passions bind us to most of the objects of enjoyment, greed, ill will and aversion. The ignorance of how suffering arises is the big problem. This is basic teaching.

Although many do not have a deep insight in this, one feels anyway intuitively that recitation, singing and thinking of Amitabha's name is what saves the mind from considerable amounts of suffering that would otherwise fill their minds and cause hurtful actions. This is a very pragmatic approach. No villager asks if it is academically true that there is an Amitabha who saves us, the question seems both irreverent and irrelevant. Arguing on such a direct experience as daily suffering and relying on the Name would be almost offensive. Instead we should help each other to recite and be happy.

Even the old monks are people with kama vacaram, despite having the correct perception and living seemingly indifferent to passions. Younger monks are often people with the right idea but not indifferent to the enjoyments of desires. They often struggle with lust and ill will, aversion, anger and greed as all other people. Unlike some other Buddhists, they do not see their own individual power as a rescue, but turn only to the Other Power in the redemptive promise of the Pure Land.

With a background in Zen, I could during my first years in the village feel that many monks and lay people were downright lazy. But I slowly learned that it is all about the realization of Amitabha's eternal light and life that makes you rely only on the promise. Outwardly this seems very "laid-back" and can annoy some other practitioners of a more strict discipline. I have also heard the commentary from buddhist monks: "It reminds you of Christianity rather than pure buddhist practice!"

Traditional "dirty" jobs such as butchers, hunters, cleaners of fish, tanners and those working with skin preparation, and garbage cleaners, are no karmic hindrance to birth in the Pure Land. Nor is there strong attachment or giving

particular importance to eating or vegetarianism. Most monks are vegetarians, as myself. But if a piece of meat appears in some dishes no one bothers about it. Here the Christian missionary gain sympathy in quoting Mark 7:21, where Jesus says that "dirty" always comes from within man, not from outside into the stomach. The list from Jesus of 13 impurities coming from inside is genuine buddhist teaching. I usually recommend the missionaries to begin with this gospel in their teaching.

Suffering is also a quality in the mind that is restless. It's a common joking expression in the village that "you look restless, get out!" They say it as if you had a disease. That is how serious they see restlessness. This is in full compliance with Theravada. Another "disease" is skepticism. While we in Europe might look with obvious sympathy on intelligent skepticism and even the eager ambitious restlessness, the villagers here think that these are forms of suffering that we should try to heal with the medicine of chanting Amitabha's name. They see nothing valuable in doubt of any kind whatsoever. Instead one should respect statements and claims for what they are: just that. One need not doubt them. As regards the important thing, to be born in paradise, a doubt is completely irrelevant, and only negatively important.

Sometimes returnees come back to the village and they are often seen as "defiled" by the major city they lived in, maybe Shanghai or Hong Kong or Beijing. When people talk more intimately with these returners, there are many discussions about precisely those forms of suffering they bring. What is wrong with modernity in the big cities? What are the dangers in taking on the new chinese consumer society, where 550 millions buy products monthly on their cell phone? What about desiring more and more clothes, technology products and other things?

Consuming desires and following disappointments are the most common topics with returnees or visiting children and grandchildren. But the restlessness and doubting the meaning of life are also very common "defilements". It usually takes six months to a year before the returnees begin to find peace again. The medicine is to recite Amitabha's name, alone and together with others in the temple, very close to the Eastern Christianity and the Jesus Prayer and the philosophy of the Name.

It happens of course that modern people caricature these uneducated villagers, believers in all sorts of wonders and miracles associated with the saying of Amitabha's name. But I have not in all these years, seen or heard of much superstitious ways of thinking. Even if we all eagerly wish that chanting

should heal the cancer you have or make someone paralyzed walk again, most people know that these desires are creating more suffering and has nothing to do with the power of Amitabha's Vow. The enthusiasm for healing that we find in the West and elsewhere, is rather foreign to the Buddhist environment here, although of course the wishes show up in consciousness.

Although many perhaps associate buddhism, at least Theravada buddhism with a rather technical and practical morality, people in this village are not primarily concerned with moral problems in life, but with problems of suffering at different levels and the salvation from them. Not salvation through personal effort, however, but through the Other Power. Perhaps one could say that they consider suffering to be just immoral. But they do not see the Saviour Amitabha as a moral principle, but a limitless compassionate light and life.

It is somewhat difficult for me as European to talk about ethics and morality with my neighbors for this very reason. If a person behaves and performs evil acts of passionate malice, most people here are seeing this as a disease of the person's mind, not as a moral evil in itself. A person who behaves senseless and harmful to others should be locked up just because the mind is sick in that person, not primarily because of his moral responsibility, as we think in Europe.

They also seem at odds with that a healthy person chooses to deal with things that create suffering. Wishes and desires are things you do not voluntarily engage if they do not overwhelm you and you are a helpless victim. Restlessness and doubts as well are things that can overtake you at times, but you don't go after them. All the villagers are familiar with the three well-known poisons that many Buddhists learn the term in the forms: greed, hatred and confusion, or reefs. Harry Brigde, shin priest in Oakland, California, call them: GAS - greed, anger, stupidity. These are not seen as demons that beset us, but just as the activities that typically come with the human consciousness and that can be cured in large part by the recitation of Amitabha's name.

But although many of the villagers are not particularly theoretically knowledgeable on the subject, I should say that most of the villagers are aware of Abhidhamma's twelve forms of "immoral consciousness".

Temple and church: a comparison

I tend to think that the village itself is a church, rather than a temple. Those attending to the temple are the monks, but they can hardly be seen as priests or imams, but more as staff for the temple. In this way it differs from Europe's typical environment where churches are in the midst of a rather secular urban or rural setting. Here the "Church" is much more the practice itself, wherever you are and whatever you are busy with. The temple, however, is where you gather and meet people in chanting in unison and sometimes listen to dharma talk. Often visiting teachers hold these dharma talks. These are not as the homilies in Europe, nor like the dharma talks in American Buddhist Jodo Shin temples, which are friendly reflections on the dharma, adapted for a well informed audience, not unlike evangelical Christian churches. Here the sermons are more of elaborate commentaries to actual Pure Land scriptures and not so many can follow the discourses.

This is a subtle topic. To adequately compare temple with church one has to have the actual experience of both. The Protestant Christian version of temple and homily is quite different from the temple in our village. To meet people in the temple is not to join a collective effort at psalm singing or celebrating the eucharist sacrament. It is more like meeting other suffering souls and being aware of the sufferings and the medicine in saying Amitabha's Name. This is a much simpler concept than the Jewish synagogue or the Christian Church or the Muslim mosque. Here we are suffering humans who say the Name Amitabha or Omifoto to thank for the coming birth in the Pure Land. It is a kind of *fait accompli* that we all are grateful for. We are not actually reminding ourselves of any teaching or practice. We already practice and we meet to acknowledge this fact in the presence of the monks and the temple surrounding.

Meeting in the temple is like realizing that all of us are there in one or more of the twelve immoral states of consciousness that the Abhidhamma describes and that we all are sick from this and need the medicine of Amitabha's name and promise. And so there is no spiritual atmosphere but rather like a hospital or a workshop, very down to earth and factual. We all take the medicine, that's all. The kind of polite and spiritual politesse that my missionary parents always had around them, is almost entirely missing. We all do our best to help each other in various matters, but as for religion, we simply say the Name in gratefulness for the Vow of Amitabha.

Some of the missionaries that I have talked to here tend to feel a bit disparaged by this matter-of-fact attitude among the villagers. But I try to explain the context. "Imagine", I say to them, "a hospital for the mind, where we gather because we have sinful states through wishing for things we don't have or complaining about things we do have but do not wish to have. There is no need to be polite or overly nice with each other. It is wonderful if we can but things are difficult. We simply have to acknowledge this and feel compassion with our common lot and help each other out.

This means that some visitors in the temple simply sit and say the Name and cares little of what is going on. Others walk around for a while and leave. Some light candles and whisper the Name of the World Saviour Amitabha and sit down for a while before leaving. The pews and the liturgical order that western buddhist Shin temples have introduced, imitating the Christian churches, is absent here. But instead there is a strong awareness of our sinful state of mind and our earnest need to think of Amitabhas Vow for us. We are like the mentally ill patients in a mental hospital, or hopeless fools full of passions as Honen Shonin in Japan (1133-1212) used to call us. Or, like Siddharta Gautama expressed it, we are in a burning house and have to get out !

A good friend of mine who is studying the japanese master Shinran Shonin (1173-1263) describes our state as that of drowning in the ocean of cravings, having fallen of a ship in the middle of the night. We have heard the ocean itself say to us: don't fight and try to swim, just rely on my Vow to you -- rest in this Vow and say the name of Amida ! This will take you to the Pure Land of eternal light and life.

I find the more clinical image of a mental hospital more to the point than the poetic ocean image of Shinrans. Our problem is, to use a pali term "akusala" -- morally sick consciousness due to wishing cravings (lobha) and various aversions (patigha). Not to understand this mental situation is confusion (moha) which basically is a lack of knowledge. When we come to know and accept our misery due to mental sickness, we can begin to rely on Amitabha and recite the Name in gratefulness.

Now it is easy to appreciate the gulf between, say, a modern liberal evangelic Church, where there is a vibrant and happy atmosphere of religious love and spiritual bliss, and the temple in our village. The people here would not understand the excitement and spiritual energy so important to Western churches. Nor would they get the "positive thinking" of the popular spiriatul culture. It would be like wordly pleasure and entertainment, tending to

hedonism. It would not be conducive to wisdom or freedom from suffering. The truth of suffering inherent in the teaching and life of Christ would probably be much closer to home. People in this village can relate to that suffering and the hope for resurrection it holds.

The positive states of faith

Many people who here about the teaching of the immoral consciousness of the human being, in fact of all of us whether lay people or monks, ask about what the good states are, through meditation and recitation of Amitabha's name. Most villagers here would say: gratitude only. It is the gratitude of knowing oneself to be already saved for the Pure Land, for Sukhavati, for Paradise in Heaven.

Of course there are buddhist teachings on the absence of craving wishes, the absence of aversion or hatred, the absence of ignorance and delusion. But these tend to be abstract and really not what people experience. You don't experience your own "alobha", your own freedom from craving or greed. Rather, in saying the name of Amitabha often, you will get the medicine for your state of lobha, of craving wishes and you will experience gratefulness for the bliss of being born in the paradise of Pure Land.

Respectively, we don't really experience "adosa" or freedom from aversion or hatred, but we experience the "metta", the limitless compassion of Amitabha. We don't really find ourselves to be full of metta or generosity. That is more a theoretic abstract counterpart to the sickness of lobha or dosa, of cravings and aversions. They are logical elements in a discourse. They are the wished for opposites or ideals, just like enlightenment. But in real life it is the compassion and love from Amitabha we feel sometimes and the calm and peace of the saving grace from the Vow we trust.

To visitors in Amitabha Village I often say in an introductory way: this faith is about being real. What is real for us humans? Pain, worry and difficulties of many sorts ! No point in hiding that. Then there is the discovery, sooner or later, of everything in processes of change and decay. No point in hiding that either. Life is painful and changing and decaying. The reason we trust Amitabha and the wonderful fate of being born in the Pure Paradise Land, is that this is comforting and even at times joyful. There is nothing more about it. Comfort and rest in this hope and this confidence is all there is to it.

Visitors who are practising religious people often find this too easy and even a dangerous cop out. The striving for spiritual advancement is important to them. We have not much to say in defense. In fact they are right, we should strive, we should reform. But the pain and suffering of trying to advance spiritually in the end knocks the life out of us. Like Shinran Shonin discovered on Mount Hiei, no amount of religious activity seems to be of any help for us. The pain and the various difficulties reappear when enthusiasm or eagerness fades away. Like the man who fell overboard we are helpless in the ocean. Even when we think we hear the ocean of compassion say: just rest and you will float thanks to my compassion. We are still helpless, but now we rest and, experientially, have some comfort in the constant changes.

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