

佛學論文
TOPICS ON BUDDHISM
THE "OTHER POWER"
BUDDHISM

By Venerable Sumangalo

The "historicity" of Amitabha is a stumbling block to many. Yet, despite this and other "drawbacks", many who at the outset of their studies of the Sukhavati school, came to scoff, after more mature consideration and observation, remain to pray. Sooner or later, it becomes apparent even to the most prejudiced critic, that the historicity of Amitabha is not intended to be accepted as fact. As one devout Amitabha-follower phrased it to me: If Amitabha and Sukhavati were mere facts they would not interest us; they are of the realm of truth and, as such, do not at all depend on facts for validation of their truth." This same devout person, believing me to be a Christian, asked: "Do you really believe that Jehovah is a historical being? There is much history concerning him in your Bible, but do you regard these stories as facts or as devices for presenting truth?" He continued: "I do not think that Jews and Christians regard the Bible as being dependant on factuality for its right to be held as holy. Surely you see much of it as allegorical presentation of truth which, in its higher reaches, is beyond all expression."

At the outset of acceptance of the Omito salvation, the average believer probably is working on a basis of sheer credulity. The frequent repetition of the sacred formulary "Namo Omito Fu" often seems to outsiders to be but a form of bookkeeping or accountancy, a scheme of "salvation by calculation"—such as one sees in lands of the Southern Buddhism where many believers perform meritorious acts with an eye to their value in the respective believer's stock of merit, rather than by motivation to do good because it is right to do good. But Sukhavatists claim that this frequent repetition of the Holy name results in elevating the individual's consciousness and forms a stronger and stronger rapport between the individual consciousness and the Buddha-mind until finally there comes about a cessation of "twoness" and there is only the "oneness" of Amitabha-Mind.

The frequent, even incessant, repetition of the sacred formula serves two major purposes: one is to keep the consciousness fixed on Buddha-Mind and the other is to add to the stock of merit on deposit in the Universal Treasury of Merit as it is sometimes called by the faithful. Faith in Amitabha is sufficient for salvation; endlessly reciting his name is not necessary. But the vast merits arising from such constant pious recitation on the part of millions of believers is regarded as being a source of good Karma for the well-being of all sentient beings. Sukhavatists point out that Amitabha's power to lift all who have faith in him to a higher plane, does not at all obliterate the Karmic consequences of everyday life. Thus the constant recitation of the Holy Name is believed to add to the world's stock of merit and, in so doing, to lessen the miseries of mankind's everyday life.

At the time this is written I have been in Siam and other Theravadin lands for almost three years. All this time I have lived in monasteries and temples and have had constant opportunity to study the daily religious life of the people of all classes. Daily I see this or that devout person pause a moment in his day's occupation and stop in at a temple or shrine to offer incense and candles. There is a brief recitation of the usual ascription of praise (Namo tassa Bhagavato, etc., etc.) plus the three refuges. As the pious person rises from these brief devotions he murmurs: "may the merit of this act benefit all sentient beings." The terminology used by the Sukhavatists and the Theravadin follower is not the same, but, in this instance, is not the underlying idea quite the same?

In all religions the opening stage seems to be one of mere believing and acceptance. Faith is a development that comes in due course, even as the fruit on a great tree has its beginnings in a small seed. Attempts to describe this faith, this transcendence of mere believing, are usually not too successful. We find we are dealing with a subject which, in its very nature, does not lend itself to analysis. Yet, despite the difficulties encountered in trying to measure infinity with a string, there are many who persist in the attempt.

In common with the Ch'an school, Sukhavati Buddhism lays no stress on

rites ceremonies, incantations, temples, images, organization or any other *thing*. This attitude does not at all necessarily indicate that Sukhavatists disdain all these adjuncts to religion. But they are not regarded as essentials. Superficially, the two schools of Ch'an and Sukhavati seem as far apart as the poles. Actually they are quite close together. The Ch'an meditator has his hua-t'ou (koan) as a focal point for meditation. The Sukhavatist has his sacred formula of refuge in the Holy Name. The terminological differences between these two schools are great. But their respective results, as regards the faithful followers of each school, seem much the same. Both transcend the prison of ego, both find there is a something better than either joy or sorrow, namely *serenity*,—and both schools offer their faithful a way of realizing that Samsara is not different from Nirvana; Nirvana is not different from Samsara. Sincere devotion to either system finally results in transcendence of "thisness" as opposed to "thatness" and realization of "Suchness." In my own long experience of observing and annotating the everyday life of Buddhists in many lands, I believe I am on demonstrably safe ground in saying that, more so than any other schools of Buddhist thought, the Ch'an and Sukhavati schools actually succeed in making of The Kingdom of Heaven, and the way thereunto, something more than mere teleological abstractions in the lives of the many. Devout Ch'an and Omito followers know from experience that The Kingdom of Heaven is not afar off; it is closer than hand or foot. It is within one's own consciousness.

Those who know the Buddha-Dharma only as an intellectually satisfying explanation of life and the phenomena of the universe, seeking no further satisfactions are, when compared to Omito believers and meditation practitioners, seemingly much akin to the fabled wise men of ancient India who went in search of "the Dragon's treasure." They passed the plains of everyday life without digging. Their theories told them that surely the treasure hoard must be hidden on some faraway mountain peak. A simple peasant paused to listen to their learned speculations, but all he was able to understand was that somewhere or other there lay hidden a great treasure. The wise men passed on to the well-nigh

inaccessible mountains, far from human habitation. Their erudite theories made it plain to them that in no other place could the treasure be found. The poor peasant returned to his daily occupation in the haunts of men, the troubled plain of life, and presently he began to dig. Now if he had understood the learned and highly metaphysical theories of the wise men he would never have begun his search for the treasure, because the conclusions of the wise men were that such a search was utterly futile. But the poor peasant did not know he was attempting the "manifestly impossible" and, lo and behold, he found the treasure!

Western observers of Mahayana Buddhism often declare that Omito's salvation is a sort of "atonement." To many Omito believers who really do not seek to find the Dragon's Treasure, perhaps this description may be applied with at least some justification. But the treasure chest contains not "atonement" but *at-one-ment*. And, whether the fact be palatable to many or not, the fact remains that it is among the simple folk, the hewers of wood and drawers of water, that the discovery of the Dragon's Treasure is most often made. Whether we are observing the scene in Theravadin lands or in China or Japan, we see that bhakti (devotion) is productive of far more peace of mind and heart than is ever derived from erudite understanding of the Dharma on the intellectual level. Finally, we see that Bhakti—by whatever name we may call it, leads its practitioners onward to a mystical culmination for the attempted description of which we may well borrow phraseology from the modern science of psychology. The more or less total *identification of subject and object*—varying, of course, from individual to individual, is the real treasure chest. To those who are filled with faith and devotion, Omito and his Western Paradise are not separate and distinct from themselves and this world. They live and move and have their being in a realm of Buddha-consciousness. It is unfortunate that a parallel ideal in Christianity has been almost totally neglected in the West. I have reference to the cultivation of "the mind which was in Christ Jesus." To those who have found this Dragon's treasure of Buddha-mind, there are no boundaries to the Western Paradise—it is here and now as well as hereafter.