

AMIDA NYORAI

Japanese, second half of 12th century

Late Heian (Fujiwara), Early Kamakura Period

Cypress wood with traces of lacquer and gilt

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INTRODUCTION The *Amida Nyorai* was made for the Pure Land Buddhist sect during the late Heian, early Kamakura period. As an idealized and compassionate figure, its classic proportions and refinement appealed to all classes of people. Belief in the Amida Nyorai promised a chance of salvation to all worshippers in a time when most believed the world would end.

**RELIGIOUS
BACKGROUND:** The Buddhist universe is populated by innumerable Buddhas, ruling over all times and all space. Each directional Buddha presides over a Pure Land Buddhism “pure land.” The most famous and beloved of these is the gentle and merciful Amida, who rules the Western Paradise. Amida Buddha vowed through his endless merit and compassion to create a land into which all who accepted his saving power would be reborn. There, his devotees could accumulate enough merit to reach *nirvana* (extinction of the self).

Pure Land Buddhism is a simple, direct form of Buddhism. It rejects elaborate rituals and chants, propounding instead that the way to Amida’s paradise lies in the fervent belief in Amida. All one has to do is chant the name of Amida (“*namu Amida butsu*”) just once in true faith. Even said on one’s deathbed (and even after a sinful life), these words will cause Amida and his attendants to swoop down and transport one up to paradise on a lotus throne (*Amida Raigo*). The lotus then opens up releasing the soul into a sumptuous world populated by gentle, celestial beings. Amida’s mercy even allows doubters in, though they have to wait five hundred years for their lotus blossom to open.

Pure Land Buddhism in Japan “Pure realms” were first described in Indian texts in the 3rd century B.C.E., but it was not until the 6th century C.E. that a distinct religion coalesced around this belief. In China during the T’ang dynasty (618-908) it became the national religion. During the mid-7th century Pure Land Buddhism was introduced into Japan. It was adopted on a vast scale during the late Heian period (late 10th to 12th centuries). Previously Esoteric Buddhism held sway, especially over the nobility. Its esteemed position rapidly faded in the rush towards Pure Land Buddhism spurred on by the notion of *mappo*.

MAPPO *Mappo* (Chinese: *mo-fa*) is the term for a time when the

MAPPO,
cont.

understanding of Buddha's law ends, heralding in an age of degeneration and suffering. An ancient prophecy foretold that *mappo* was to occur beginning in the year 1052. This precise date was calculated in reference to the date of Buddha's birth, 949 B.C.E. (Current scholars date Buddha's life to 563-483 B.C.E.).

The first 100 years following Buddha's death was thought to be a golden age when his law was still understood. The next 1,000 years were a period of "copied" law, where Buddha's precepts would only be understood partially. The final period was that of *mappo*, a period lasting 10,000 years. *Mappo* would finally end with the coming of *Miroku* (Sanskrit: *Maitreya*), the future Buddha who would save the world.

To the people of late Heian Japan, it seemed as if *mappo* had arrived. Successive uprisings ended the domination of the Fujiwara family, and a brutal civil war broke out. This was compounded by a series of natural disasters including famine, drought, pestilence, and disease. As the numbers of innocent victims rose in the tremendous unrest, *mappo* was evident in the eyes of believers. Literature of the period reveals a world view of all-encompassing human suffering and misery.

The secretive, scholarly nature of Esoteric Buddhism offered little hope. As people could not "understand" Buddha's law, Pure Land Buddhism offered the simplest and fastest way to salvation. Since people could not be saved by their own efforts, they surrendered to the grace of Amida.

Pure Land
Buddhism as
a Popular
Philosophy

Pure Land Buddhism appealed to all classes and types of people. The nobility learned about it through a book published by the monk Genshin (942-1017), entitled *A Collection of Essentials for Birth in the Pure Land*. In this book Genshin graphically described the ghastly hells and the lofty Buddhist paradises that one could be reborn into. Artists were commissioned to produce artwork that emulated his descriptions. The most famous of these is the delicate Chinese style buildings of the *Byodo-in* (phoenix hall) in Uji, Japan. The gardens were planted so that flowers would bloom through every season, and the trees were bedecked with colorful crystals emulating the jeweled trees of the Western Paradise.

Women, particularly noble women, were drawn to Pure Land Buddhism. Previous forms of Buddhism stated that because women were at a lower level of existence, they needed to be reborn as men before they could become enlightened. In contrast, Pure Land Buddhism welcomed women, rich or poor. In the end all one needed was faith in Amida.

MUSEUM GUIDE PROGRAMS

Amida Buddha

Pure Land was the first form of Buddhism in Japan to actively engage and proselytize the lower classes. Preachers traveled to remote areas preaching Amidist doctrine and holding mass revival meetings, that included dancing and chanting. The simplicity of Pure Land rites made salvation available to everyone.