

Research Article



Pure Land or Pure Mind?: Locus of Awakening and American Popular Religious Culture

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This essay has two sections, each with its own distinct goal, forming an interrelated whole. The first introduces “locus of awakening,” and applies it to the relative success in America of Zen and Tibetan Buddhisms, compared to Pure Land Buddhism. The explanatory power of the concept is demonstrated by also considering Soka Gakkai. The difference between popular culture treatments of Zen and Tibetan Buddhisms, and Pure Land Buddhism was the problematic leading to identifying locus of awakening as an aspect of Buddhist thought. The second section locates it in the history of Buddhist thought, demonstrating that it is not a modern conceptualization of the path, not one created in response to Euro-American religio-therapeutic culture. Locus of awakening is, instead, part of the continuity of the Buddhist tradition, and does not fall on one side or the other of the sometimes overdrawn dichotomy between Asian and American Buddhisms.

Keywords: Pure Land; Zen; Tibetan Buddhism; Shin Buddhism; Soka Gakkai; popular religion; Buddhism in the West

This essay introduces a conceptual tool that will help us to understand the history of Buddhism as it has developed in the West, and elsewhere as well, in a more adequately nuanced fashion than previously. The traditional classification of Buddhist teachings into sudden (sometimes also called “leap”) and gradual (also, “path”) is only one dimension of Buddhist thought. Out of the traditional classification of Buddhist praxis (i.e., practice and doctrine taken as an integrated whole) into the three dimensions of ground, path and goal, the sudden-gradual distinction articulates a dimension of the path, and is therefore, only partially effective as an analytic tool for understanding Buddhist praxis as it is being adapted and adopted in the United States today. The concept being introduced here is the “locus of awakening.” Focusing on the goal, the locus of awakening has been conceived as either internal, that is, within the individual practitioner, or external, that is, in the lived environment within which the practitioner exists. Looking at Buddhist thought in terms of the locus of awakening allows us to comprehend various positions and their relations in the history of Buddhist thought and practice in a fashion complementary to the familiar distinction between sudden and gradual.

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The term “pure land” Buddhism may be used to identify a wide range of different cults and traditions, from Abhirati, that is, the eastern pure land of Akṣobhya (Nattier, 2000), to modern movements, such as Foguangshan, which proclaim an intention to establish a “pure land on earth” (Chandler, 2004). Here we will be referring specifically to the representation in American popular religious culture of the Japanese form of Pure Land Buddhism known as Jōdo Shinshū, conventionally now known as Shin Buddhism. Although this is the specific form that is of concern to us in this essay, the marginalization of Pure Land Buddhism in American popular religious culture applies not simply to Shin Buddhism *per se*, but more generally to Pure Land aspects of the many different Buddhist traditions in which it is found. In many, if not most, forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism Pure Land and other devotional practices are found as part of a complex set of practices and doctrines. Shin, however, is not a tradition within which Pure Land is one part, but rather a tradition exclusively focused on Pure Land thought and practice—thus giving us a clear case to examine in developing the distinction between internal and external loci of awakening. A brief, introductory survey of Shin Buddhism in the United States follows. Consideration of that history reveals the incongruity between a tradition that has been part of the American religious milieu for more than a century—much longer than Zen or Tibetan Buddhisms—and the fact that it remains little known and less understood.

The origins of Pure Land Buddhisms as distinct sectarian institutions in Japan takes place around the turn from the eleventh to the twelfth century. Jōdoshū (“pure land school” 浄土宗) takes as its founder Hōnen (1133–1212 法然), and does have some relatively small presence in the United States today. Jōdo shinshū (“true pure land school” 浄土真宗) considers Shinran (1173–1262 親鸞) to be its founder. A split within Jōdo shinshu at around the beginning of the seventeenth century led to the present situation in Japan, with two predominant lineages conventionally known as as “Higashi Honganji” (東本願寺 Eastern Temple of the Original Vow, more formally Honganji-ha) and “Nishi Honganji” (西本願寺 Western Temple of the Original Vow, more formally Ōtani-ha), along with other less prominent branches. Like Jōdoshū, Higashi Honganji also has a relatively small presence in the United States today. In contrast, Nishi Honganji is represented on the continental United States by the Buddhist Churches of America, which has its headquarters in San Francisco, and by the Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawaii in the Hawaiian islands. This latter division is a consequence of the history of Japanese immigration combined with the history of Hawai’i as an independent kingdom.

The Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawaii (HHMH) received its first superintendent in 1898, and grew to more than thirty missions throughout the islands by the mid-1920s. The Buddhist Mission of North America, predecessor to the Buddhist Churches of America, was established in 1899 (Ama, 2011: 3). Today the BCA has sixty member temples and seven affiliated fellowships (also called “sanghas”) across the United States. Nationally, the membership is approximately 16,000 (BCA website: “BCA History”). Although perhaps not as large as other kinds of Buddhism taken collectively, it appears to be by far the largest single Buddhist organization in the United States, and at the same time, with a history stretching back well over a century, one of the very oldest as well.

Despite the size and longevity of the BCA and HHMH in the United States, as well as their sister organization, the Jodo Shinshu Temples of Canada (established 1905, Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada website: homepage) across the northern border of the United States, Shin Buddhism specifically, and Pure Land Buddhism more generally, remain largely invisible in American popular religious culture's understanding of what Buddhism comprises.

I. Applying the Concept

As will be discussed in the next section, the idea of loci of awakening is found within the Buddhist tradition itself, and is not simply an analytic artefact, that is, it does not result from reifying an idea generated in the analytic process itself. Even as an emic conceptualization, however, it is appropriate to ask whether the distinction actually makes a difference or not.¹ To do so the concept of loci of awakening will be employed to determine whether it provides additional clarity in the study of contemporary Buddhism in the United States. That is, does the concept have heuristic value?

In order to demonstrate the heuristic value of the idea of locus of awakening, the relative success in American popular religious culture of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in contrast to Pure Land Buddhism will be examined in terms of the locus of awakening. A second application will be an examination of the easy conflation of Pure Land and Christianity. A last consideration is that of a possible counter-example, that is, Soka Gakkai. In order to present the concept of locus of awakening as an analytic tool more clearly, though, the method employed, retrodiction, and the framing metaphor within which the applications will be made are introduced.

The different instances examined below are all contemporary. Two of the instances are opposite to one another. One indicates a correlation between an internal locus of awakening, and relatively high popular awareness and approval. The other demonstrates a correlation between an external locus of awakening, and relatively low popular awareness and approval. The correlation revealed by each application gives greater credence to the explanatory power of the distinction than simply repeated applications of the same kind. These applications are not part of a fully formulated theory. Instead an explanatory framework is provided by the metaphor of the marketplace.²

Methodologically, this is a retrodictive analysis, that is, the application of an explanatory concept to a known phenomenon, situation or event to determine whether it assists us in

¹ This criterion derives from information theory. See Floridi, 2014.

² I emphasize the difference between metaphor and theory as it seems not uncommon that the one is mistaken for the other. In such cases, it is easy to push metaphors past their breaking points. The ideas of a religious marketplace, and of a rational actor in that marketplace have received extensive discussion, including assertions of its status as a theory (Iannaccone, 1995), and claims that it is not empirically confirmed (Ahidar, 2006). A full discussion of this perspective is Witham, 2010. Verter, 2003, like many others engaging in this discourse, employs the formative ideas and critiques of Pierre Bourdieu, whose own corresponding terminology is that of a "field of cultural production," as for example, Bourdieu, 1993.

understanding that phenomenon. In other words, we already know what the situation is, and are attempting to understand it more adequately (Veyne, 1984: 144–175). Success in such a venture provides much less certainty of knowledge than does prediction, the standard for experimental science. However, many of the explanatory concepts of the social sciences cannot be the subject of controlled experiments based on predictions, i.e., hypotheses. The following analyses employ the retrodictive method, considering the effects of different conceptions of the locus of awakening on the reception of Buddhism in the West.

One theoretically suggestive metaphor for the way people navigate religious belief, commitment, and affiliation in contemporary society is the marketplace. What Pierre Bourdieu calls “the religious field” is “a hierarchically structured social arena (or market) in which actors compete for money, prestige and power” (Verter, 2003: 153). Competition between different specialists determines how religious commodities are represented in the market. In the United States, that market is one in which for many, if not the majority of consumers, there are no clear boundaries between religion, self-help, and psychotherapy, nor any felt need to clearly distinguish between them. (Hornborg describes a similar kind of conflation in Sweden, using the term “neospiritual therapy,” Hornborg, 2013: 191.) We refer to it here as a religio-therapeutic marketplace, invoking as it does conceptions of ultimacy as the source of personal meaning, together with a view of the self as having a problem, issue, flaw, or wound of some kind. Competition in the marketplace has created hybrids of religion and therapeutics. Verter, summarizing Bourdieu, claims that “What allows for this overlap is a parallel logic of practice: psychologists and priests share therapeutic techniques and offer similar goods: they use, in other words, a very similar species of capital” (Verter, 2003: 156). The therapeutic ancestor of this hybrid provides a quasi-medical diagnostic-prescriptive system, which formulates both the problem and the response to it.

From such a perspective, one may frame the status of different Buddhist traditions on offer in the religio-therapeutic marketplace in terms of how well it has come to be represented as a fulfillment of consumers’ expectations. Consumers are not one-dimensional, isolated individuals making fully informed rational choices, nor are they passive consumers without agency of their own (Verter, 2003: 170). Rational choice theory and other analyses based on a modern conception of the individual are limited by the absence of a social dimension. Gauthier, Woodhead and Martikainen have argued that “the ‘individualization’ or ‘privatization’ thesis is better recast as one of ‘subjectivation’, thus emphasizing the inherent social and cultural determinants, dynamics, aspects and effects at work (which will go well beyond narrowly defined ‘public’ implications of religion), as well as stressing we also acknowledge the corresponding modes of sociality that are incurred” (Gauthier, Woodhead, and Martikainen, 2013: 22). The analysis offered here, however, does not focus on the consumer as individual decision-maker as such, but rather with why certain ways that Buddhist traditions are represented have been more successful in making a place for those traditions in popular religious culture than have others. It is, to continue the metaphor, primarily an analysis of marketing strategies rather than consumer behavior.

The marketplace reflects the popular religious culture of the United States, which is marked by three characteristics. First, it takes psychology as causally explanatory. Second, it is therapeutic in the sense of being constructed in terms of problems and solutions. And, third, it promotes a form of individual autonomy wherein each person is responsible for their own happiness, or lack thereof. Consumers whose subjective sense of self, relations to others and orientation to the existential world has been constructed within this framework are expecting products presented to them in terms of an internal, individual transformation that solves some identifiable personal problem.³

The popular religious culture of the United States is deeply infused by the Protestant religious heritage, particularly as reformulated by nineteenth century Romantic theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) at the beginning of the century, and Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) at the end. Romantic theology focused on individual self-reflection as a means of moral self-improvement, and an understanding that religion is private (or individual) and experiential (or internal) in nature. These theological conceptions inform, match and reinforce the therapeutic orientation and assumptions of the self-help culture, flowing together into the forms of popular religious culture with which Buddhism engaged as it entered the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. As indicated above, there is no clear delineation between the popular religious culture and the culture of self-help. “Therapeutic” is not limited to the psycho-therapeutic, but rather points to the quasi-medical systematics of diagnosis and prescription that structure many instances of popular religious culture. The primacy of the psychological in so much of the popular self-help literature is itself a presumption grounding the therapeutic products offered in the religio-therapeutic marketplace, but this is not the same as psychotherapy *per se*.

Much of what the religio-therapeutic culture is concerned with is not organic problems, but rather ones that may be classed as issues of personal adjustment, satisfaction, and meaning. Such issues are ones that are shaped intersubjectively, that is, by a person’s social environment. The “diagnostic” phase serves not to identify a specific objective problem, such as lung cancer, but rather give form to otherwise diffuse dissatisfactions, or vague anxieties (cf. Harrington, 2008), constellating them into an identified sense of inadequacy or need—one that can be addressed by the religio-therapeutic system on offer.

Two kinds of Buddhism have perhaps become most well known in American popular culture: Zen and the various Tibetan forms⁴, the latter usually taken collectively as

³ As presented here, this should not be taken to imply that subjects are purely passive—patients—who are helpless in the face of a hegemonic culture imposing its worldview/values on them. As Michel de Certeau has pointed out, there is a necessary theoretical balance between the atomistic conception of the subject as fully autonomous, and the image of a mindless mass being led by advertising, propaganda and ideology. de Certeau, 1984: xi.

⁴ Insight or mindfulness is also widely known in the West, however we will not consider it here. Like Shin, both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism are often promoted as “sudden” awakening schools. This contrasts with insight meditation, which is generally portrayed in terms of gradual awakening. Our question here is why, despite sharing sudden awakening teachings with Zen and

“Tibetan Buddhism.” This popular receptivity to Zen and Tibetan Buddhisms was noted more than three decades ago by Masao Ichishima. In 1982 he noted that common to the interest in each was meditation, “Recently Zen and Tibetan Tantric meditation has gained popularity among younger generations throughout the world” (Ichishima, 1982: 119). Like Shin, both of these forms of Buddhism are either explicitly sudden awakening schools, or have important strains of sudden awakening teachings. Despite this similarity, Shin has very little traction in popular Western religious culture. In other words, Shin is not relatively successful compared to Zen and Tibetan Buddhisms.

By “relative success” is meant the degree to which the different forms of Buddhism have entered popular culture, gaining recognition and positive valorization. One admittedly rough measure is the New York Times. A search of its archive, which includes articles dating as far back as 1910, produced about ten references to Shin Buddhism, including book reviews and public announcements of activities at the New York BCA temple, while the phrase “Pure Land Buddhism” generated five results. In sharp contrast a search for the phrase “Zen Buddhism” generated 675 results, and “Tibetan Buddhism” 784 results. Two more sociologically oriented measures that could be applied in the context of new religious movements are number of adherents, and successful transplantation (Dawson, 2001: 338). The measure being used in this essay, however, is the positive media attention and public perception of a tradition, that is, its recognition and status in popular religious culture.

In terms of the metaphor of popular religious culture as a marketplace, we might say that Pure Land has very little “market share.” As Wade Clark Roof notes

Successful religious groups adapt to their environments—whether geographical neighborhoods, social clienteles, or spatially dispersed networks of people bound together by common causes and concerns. Expressed in market terms, they are the ones that compete well, providing a compelling “religious product” in exchange for resources—most notably, time, money, and commitment. (Roof, 1999: 79)⁵

As it exists in the United States, Shin Buddhism doesn’t offer a “compelling ‘religious product’,” which in light of the assumptions of the religio-therapeutic marketplace discussed above can be more closely described in terms of offering an internal and individualized solution, such as, meditation, to a problem that is itself defined in psychologized terms.⁶ Along with other differences in style, exoticism, charismatic

aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, has Pure Land gained relatively little attention, and therefore the case of insight meditation is not relevant to this inquiry.

⁵ Roof goes on to employ “religious needs” rhetoric—“fundamental human needs for meaning and belonging”—which I find highly problematic. The idea of “religious needs” is commonly employed, but I have yet to find it adequately theorized, much less demonstrated. It is one of those concepts that is widely accepted simply because it is widely accepted.

⁶ The general stance of much of Shin representation in the West has been as a tradition that is either actively opposed to meditation practices as “self-power” (*jiriki* 自力), or at least as dismissing meditation as effective. In an important sense, then, Shin has no technology to commodify, no product to put on sale. In some ways this may indeed be a strength in that it can

leadership, and historical origins, the difference between the way in which Shin is represented in terms of an external locus of awakening, that is, birth in the Pure Land, and the way in which Zen and Tibetan Buddhism are represented in terms of an internal locus of awakening helps to clarify why Shin's religious product is not as compelling within the religio-therapeutic marketplace, which constructs both needs and solutions as internal in character.

In contrast, both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism have been successfully commodified as offering solutions to personal problems, specifically those that can be constructed as psychological in nature. This allows them to appropriate some of the social capital held by therapeutic systems, placing them in a stronger position in the religio-therapeutic market than they would have occupied otherwise (Verter, 2003: 158-159). Discussing the history of Zen in the United States during the 1950s and 60s, Jason Bivins highlights the formative role of the social and economic elite. Given that they have "access to sufficient money and leisure time" they are able to act on their "American preferences or commitments to possessive individualism, sexual freedom, or psychologies of personal growth [which] are precisely what motivates many elites to seek out Buddhism in the first place, believing it to be a free-floating, nondisciplinary, and personalized tradition" (Bivins, 2007: 63-64). As Verter notes, however, "scales of spiritual capital may vary widely among different groups of analogous social status" (Verter, 2003: 162). Not all "elites" would hold all the same values as those identified by Bivins. Regional variations with Buddhism in the United States are in part reflections of differing scales by which religious commodities are evaluated (Wilson, 2012).

The internal awakening aspect of both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism allows them to be easily integrated into the therapeutics (diagnostic-prescriptive system) of the popular religious marketplace, that is, the "psychologies of personal growth" that Bivins identifies. Thus, although all three, that is, Shin, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, are—or have aspects that can be highlighted as—sudden awakening teachings, the external locus of awakening of Shin precludes it from being easily commodified and marketed within the religio-therapeutic marketplace.

The difficulty of presenting Shin within the religio-therapeutic marketplace is exacerbated by the fact that people easily conflate Shin with Christianity in various ways. Despite the doctrinal similarities of Shin, Zen and Tibetan Buddhisms, Shin's emphasis on birth in the Pure Land both distinguishes it from the other two, and gives it a superficial similarity to Christianity, which is also an externally oriented tradition.⁷ Frequently when Shin Buddhism is introduced to people who are not already familiar with it, they almost immediately equate it with Christianity. The parallels are such that

make the easily accepted products with their offers of internal transformation more problematic. That confrontation with accepted norms of Buddhist self-representation in the West is also, however, not advanced by many in the Shin community.

⁷ Despite the internal, experiential aspects of Romantic theology mentioned above, and their deep influence on popular religious culture, the goal of Christianity is still largely interpreted as a real place one attains after death. The theological resistance to psychologized interpretations of heaven as symbolic is evidence of the external nature of the goal of Christian life.

these equations are quite understandable. For example, the Pure Land is easily equated with Heaven, Amida as an all-accepting savior figure is easily equated with Jesus, an emphasis on “other-power” (Jpn. *tariki*, 他力) as distinct from “self-power” (Jpn. *jiriki*, 自力) as key to birth in the Pure Land is easily equated with the role of grace in salvation, the function of *shinjin* (信心) is easily equated with faith (especially since this has been the favored rendering of many English language Shin authors), and, when portrayed as a populist reformer, Shinran is easily equated with Reformation figures such as Luther (e.g., Ingram, 1968; Alles, 1985; Ishihara, 1987; Nobuhara, 1992).

One of the key equations that further supports this homologization of Shin and Christianity is that the goal of birth in the Pure Land after death is easily equated with the goal of attaining Heaven after death. In other words, an external conception of the locus of awakening, that is, birth in the Pure Land⁸, is easily seen as equivalent to the attainment of salvation as eternal life in Heaven. Once this equation is made, it provides a foundation upon which other elements of Pure Land and Christian thought can easily be aligned with one another. Thus, the external character of both the Pure Land and Heaven allows for superficial identification of Shin and Christianity, or even in some cases a portrayal of Shin as inferior, a pale imitation of Christianity since it lacks the salvific grace of Christ (cf. Yandell and Netland, 2009). Having considered the ways in which locus of awakening can be used to better understand retroactively the relative popular success of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism when contrasted with Shin, it is now also possible to consider another movement, Soka Gakkai, which initially would seem to be an instance in which locus of awakening is not explanatory.

It has been suggested that Soka Gakkai might offer a counter-example to the thesis that an internal locus of awakening has contributed to the popular success of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism in the United States. That is, Soka Gakkai is a movement within Buddhism that both maintains an external locus of awakening, and been very successful in the United States as measured by membership. Soka Gakkai's orientation toward an external locus of awakening is evident by its long and controversial involvement in politics in Japan. Indeed, one of the first impressions of Soka Gakkai presented in Western journalism, that is, in the late 1960s and early 70s, was as the cult—in the negative sense employed in journalism—behind the Komeito (Clean Government Party). In its exclusivistic claims that Soka Gakkai is the only true religion, and with the Komeito's express intent of taking control of Japanese governance, the political expression of Soka Gakkai was seen as having the potential to become a religiously-based totalitarianism (Brett, 1979: 366–367; Chelli and Hourmant 2000: 90).

Soka Gakkai's focus on an external locus of awakening is also evident in the millennial quality of its self-characterization as “the Third Civilization” (Babbie, 1966). Although the exclusivistic claims and combative style have apparently been purposely toned down in more recent decades (as in Brazil, see Clarke, 2005), the external locus remains prominent in many of the public representations of Soka Gakkai. “It is generally well

⁸ In Shinran's interpretation, birth in Sukhāvātī is awakening. More traditional interpretations, following the teachings as found in the Pure Land sūtras more literally, describe Sukhāvātī as an optimal transitional birth, one that leads inevitably to awakening.

known that the lay Buddhist organization SG [Soka Gakkai], as a whole has initiated wide and multifaceted activities even in an international level in order to transform its religious ideals into social reality, specifically in the field of educational, cultural, social, and peace-promoting programs” (Matsudo, 2000: 59). This is now often referred to by the phrase “human revolution,” by which is meant “a process of inner reformation and its role in the creation of a peaceful world” (Straus, 1995: 200; see also Seager, 2006: 94).

This conception points out that the popular representation of Soka Gakkai in terms of an external locus of awakening is not descriptive of the kinds of doctrinal explanations that one would find upon closer examination. Rather than some kind of Buddhist Utopianism, there is a dynamic relation between internal and external transformations (cf. Barone, 2007: 118). This is an important qualification in considering the analytic utility of the concept of locus of awakening. The two forms—internal and external—are not static over the course of a group’s history, nor are they necessarily mutually exclusive of one another.⁹ Instead the two represent differing emphases that can change in response to either internal (e.g., doctrinal reflections) or external factors (e.g., changing target market). This complex of internal and external in Soka Gakkai may also contribute to its representation as a form of “Buddhist humanism,” a phrase also employed by other Buddhist groups to express an external orientation, such as those deriving from the efforts of Taixu and Yinshun (Bingenheimer 2007). Our analysis here, however, is not intended to provide a detailed or sophisticated treatment of the doctrine and practice of any of the groups discussed, but rather common representations as found in popular religious culture. If these stray over the edge into stereotypes, it is not the intent here to further propagate those stereotypes, but rather to consider the effects that they have in relation to the dominant religio-therapeutic presumptions of popular religious culture.

Both Shin Buddhism and Soka Gakkai are relatively invisible in the mediascape of popular Buddhist culture of the United States. A search of the New York Times archive for “Soka Gakkai” yielded about 180 results, which included several wedding announcements and obituaries. Similarly Buster G. Smith notes that “[Don] Morreale’s (1998) *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America* includes over one thousand Buddhist organizations, but has notable exceptions. Both Soka Gakkai and Jodo Shinshu organizations were excluded, as well any center that did not that practice meditation” (Smith, 2007: 308). The connection between centers “that did not practice meditation” and both Soka Gakkai and Shin is indicative of the significance of how an internal locus of awakening influences popular conceptions of Buddhism. The popular presumption that Buddhism is identical with meditation produces the negative inversion—that if it’s not meditation, then it’s not Buddhism (cf. Chelli and Hourmant, 2000: 91; see for example Rapaport and Hotchkiss, 1998). A similar perception seems to follow of traditions holding an external locus of awakening—if it is not internal, then it’s not Buddhism. Despite this presumption, both perspectives on the locus of awakening are found across the Buddhist tradition generally.

⁹ I am grateful to the suggestion of one of the anonymous reviewers that a significant understanding of this dynamic relation between internal and external may follow from a deeper consideration of the role of the *gohonzon* (ご本尊) in the practice of the individual Soka Gakkai adherent.

II. The Concept and Its Historical Grounding

The phrase “locus of awakening” is meant to identify the differing conceptions of where awakening takes place, not in a geographic sense, but rather in an existential sense. As seen in the applications above, the concept of “locus of awakening” divides into two major categories: “internal” and “external.” That is, awakening is either conceived as an event that happens “inside” the person, or an event that takes place “outside” the person. Inside may be understood as either mental or bodily, though the presumption of contemporary Westernized society is that internal is synonymous with mental, or more specifically, psychological. External refers to an event that takes place outside the individual, as a transformation of their existential environment (*lebenswelt*)—it is a change of the environment within which the subject exists. This contrasts with the distinction between sudden and gradual, which categorizes and codifies Buddhist thought by focusing on the issue of whether awakening is attained by following one step after the other along a path, i.e., gradually, or is attained in a single moment, “in the time it takes a strong man to snap his fingers,” i.e., suddenly.

Although sudden and gradual understandings of the path have been extensively studied and codified, what have not been codified are the consistent patterns that can be discerned regarding where awakening is theorized as taking place, its locus. Like other constellations, these patterns become visible by generalizing over the distinguishing characteristics of doctrinal details that are frequently deployed to maintain exclusive sectarian identity. In other words, there is heuristic value to be gained from identifying the similarities and differences between Buddhist traditions according to a spatial organizing principle describing the goal, that is, the “locus of awakening.” Being spatial in nature, locus of awakening is complementary to the temporally structured sudden and gradual conceptions of awakening. That is, the two pairs of concepts—sudden and gradual, and internal and external loci of awakening—are not contradictory alternatives to one another. Where sudden and gradual identify distinct ways of thinking about the path to awakening, internal and external loci identify distinct ways of thinking about the goal of practice. Thus, they can be applied in such a fashion as to augment each other, creating a more finely nuanced system for describing differing conceptions of awakening found in the Buddhist tradition.

The idea of “locus of awakening” is not a new creation, but is found in the history of Buddhist thought—though not specifically identified in such terms. The relevant methodological concern here is that, if this is simply a new pair of categories, they may be artificially imposed on the data, that is, a Procrustean fallacy, or simply the product of the analysis, an analytic artefact, rather than describing a characteristic inherent in Buddhist thought as such. There are, however, important instances where just this kind of distinction, even if not in exactly these same terms, has formed an important part of the history of Buddhist thought.

Both the larger and smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha sūtras are well-known for presenting vivid imagery of the Pure Land, together with the vows of Amitābha, which guarantee birth in that land for those who recall him (*buddhānusrīti*, *nian fo*, *nenbutsu*, 念仏) as few as ten times. By contrast to the external locus envisioned in the Sukhāvātīvyūha sūtras, the

Buddhabhūmi sūtra identifies the Pure Land with the awakened mind. John Keenan explains that the

Buddhabhūmi-sūtra confidently recommends Pure Land as the mind of wisdom and compassion; it encourages practitioners who may not be keen on philosophizing to engage in their practices and encounter and experience the *buddha-saṃbhoga* body as empty of all defiling discrimination and yet indivisible with the *buddha-dharma* body, identical with the pure reality of what is really real (*pariśuddhi-dharma-dhātu*), yet without defined margins that might delineate its contours and serve as an object of religious attachment. (Keenan, 2014: xi.)

As indicated above in relation to Soka Gakkai, the relation between the two loci of awakening is not always mutually exclusive, however. There are several attempts to reconcile the two, for example by claiming that the two constitute of nondual relation with one another. Robert Sharf has noted for example that the nondual relation of pure land and pure mind is expressed in many Mahāyāna sūtras in terms of the teaching of “the ultimate purity of this very world.” (Sharf, 2002: 315.) The importance of the locus of awakening is addressed quite explicitly, for example, by the introduction to the *Vimalakīrti nirdeśa sūtra*: “The bodhisattva who wishes to purify his *buddhakṣetra* should, first of all, skillfully adorn his own mind. And why? Because to the extent that the mind of a bodhisattva is pure is his *buddhakṣetra* purified.” (Sharf, 2002: 315.) Thus, awakening is not something that only happens within the mind of the practitioner, but rather is nondually also an event external to the practitioner’s mind. Although the relation is being asserted is nondual, it is clear that the nondual relation is being asserted between the two conceptions of spatially distinct loci of awakening, internal and external, as for example in the *Buddhabhūmi sūtra* and the *Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtras*, respectively.

Those familiar with the history of Pure Land Buddhism in China will recognize the categories to which the title of this paper alludes, that is, Pure Land and Pure Mind. These terms reference discussions between those¹⁰ who promoted a perspective in which the Pure Land (that is, Skt. *Sukhāvatī*, 淨土) is described as an externally located reality, and those who emphasized an interpretation of the Pure Land as a symbol for the purified mind (Sharf, 2002: 284).

Disagreements between Chan and Pure Land can be formulated as disagreements about the locus of awakening. For example, in the *Xiu-xin yao lun* (修心要論, T. 2011), a Chan text traditionally attributed to the fifth patriarch Hongren (弘忍, 601–675), we find the following interchange: “Question: Why is it said that one’s own mind is superior to mindfulness of the Buddha 何名自心勝念彼佛? Answer: One cannot escape from the rounds of life and death by constantly being mindful of the Buddha. Only by constantly maintaining awareness of your own original mind can you reach the other shore.” (Trans. McRae 1986, 123; cited in Sharf, 2002: 302.) Sharf interprets this exchange as an instance of Mahāyāna rhetoric regarding attachment to practice, and not a rejection of

¹⁰ We should note à la Sharf’s citing of the work of Sasaki Kōsei and Tsukamoto Zenryū, that we are not able to speak of a “Pure Land school” but rather of those who promote Pure Land thought and practice. Sharf, 2002: 284.

nian fo (念佛, nembutsu) practice *per se*. What is important for our consideration here, however, is not the question of the efficacy of *nian fo* practice, but rather the metaphorical structure within which the claim is made. The answer in the exchange just quoted is framed in terms of either being mindful of the Buddha as an external object¹¹ or being mindful of one's own mind. Similarly, we find the Fourth Zen Patriarch, Daoxin, providing the following exchange in his *Leng-qie shi-zi ji* (T. 2837, 楞伽師資記):

Question: "In each moment, how does one practice discernment?" Hsin said: "You must just allow things to go naturally." Question: "Should one turn in the direction of the West [facing the Pure Land] or not?" Hsin said: "If you understand that the mind originally neither arises nor passes away, that it is ultimately pure, *this* is the pure buddha-land. There is no further need to face West." (T. 2837, trans. Robert Sharf, 2002: 303).

Sharf goes on to give two additional quotes from Daoxin that support the practice of *nian fo*—noting that "The extended instructions on the topic of *nien-fo* suggest that Tao-hsin not only advocated *nien-fo* but that *nien-fo* was a cardinal practice among his community. In that case, Tao-hsin's cautionary comments are best read not as injunctions against the practice of *nien-fo* but rather as reminders not to conceive of the Pure Land or the Buddha dualistically. The object of contemplation is ultimately mind itself, and the Pure Land to be attained is the fundamental purity of mind." (Sharf, 2002: 304.)

Again, what is of concern to us here is that the issue is framed in terms of a dualistic spatial metaphor, one that would consider the location to be a matter of either the mind—an internal locus of awakening—or the Pure Land—an external locus. It is indicative that for some authors, it is not a question of method, that is, meditation versus recitation, that is the main point of concern, as birth in the Pure Land as an external locus was to be attained by meditation.

Tanluan (曇鸞, 476–542), for example, in his interpretation of the fourth of the five gates of recollection (*wunian men*, 五念門), emphasizes that it is because through proper visualization of the qualities of the Pure Land, one will attain these same qualities "and will certainly attain birth in the Pure Land" (Mochizuki, 2015: 97). Tanluan also interpreted *vipaśyanā* "as meaning 'to see the Buddha after one had attained rebirth in the Pure Land'" (ibid., 98). Others, while advocating the validity of desiring birth in the Pure Land and of recitation practice, also interpreted it as "mind-only," that is, in terms of *Yogācāra* conceptions. Thus, for example, in the Yuan dynasty, "Wei-tse [Weize] held that the Pure Land was only mind, and therefore no land existed apart from the mind. Since 'mind-only' is identical to the Pure Land, no mind existed apart from this land" (ibid., 548). As mentioned above in relation to the *Vimalakīrti nirdeśa sūtra*, there were also interpretive attempts to reconcile these two perspectives.¹²

¹¹ Other similar expressions relate to attaining a vision of the Buddha.

¹² There were, for example, several attempts to reconcile or to synthesize Pure Land practices and beliefs, particularly with Chan and *Yogācāra*. For a discussion, see Chappell 1986. There were also polemics regarding the relative value of different practices for different kinds of practitioners.

Whether arguing for the difference between Chan and Pure Land on the basis that the goal of practice is only inaccurately conceived as being outside the practitioner's own mind, or for the identity of the two practices on the basis that the Pure Land is one and the same with the purified mind, the underlying spatial metaphor for the goal of practice remained the same.

Reflection on the issues involved in conceiving of the Pure Land locus of awakening as external continued to be central in modern Japan. For example, we find the interpretations promoted by Kaneko Daiei and Soga Ryōjin, who shifted

the focus from a Pure Land and an Amida conceived of as actually existing in some other world to an internalized understanding of the Pure Land, and, as Soga argued, to a new understanding of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara...as a representation of the deepest layer of one's own consciousness, the *ālaya-vijñāna*. (Watt, forthcoming: ms. 57, intro to part II)

The contemporary context of Shin in the West in the twenty-first century is different, however, from that of the Pure Land tradition in medieval India, seventh century China and *fin-de-siècle* Japan.¹³ What has remained consistent, despite internalizing interpretations such as those of Kaneko and Soga, however, is that an imagery indicating an external locus of awakening has been consistently central.

Conclusion: Locus of Awakening as Description and as Explanation

Applying the concept of locus of awakening to the relative status of Shin Buddhism vis-à-vis Zen and Tibetan Buddhisms in contemporary American religious culture provides one part of the explanation for that difference. Although all three are sudden awakening teachings, Shin has an external locus of awakening, while Zen and Tibetan forms generally share an internal locus. Having an internal locus of awakening allows for those traditions to be more easily integrated into the religio-therapeutic culture of the United States that is itself internally oriented. With its external locus, Shin is less easily integrated into that culture and more easily conflated with Christianity. Consequently, Shin does not have the same consumer appeal, it is not a “compelling religious product.” This is not to say that locus of awakening is the sole factor involved, nor that on the level of individual choice it is determinative. But as a pattern of aggregate decision-making, the relation between popular, “market appeal,” and an internal locus of awakening

Investigating the mind being promoted in Chan circles as superior to Pure Land aspirations for birth in Sukhāvātī, or alternatively the “decay of the dharma” (mofa, mappo 末法) theory according to which meditative and monastic practices are ineffective, and only seeking birth in Sukhāvātī provides any alternative to the ongoing processes of decaying samsara. For the sake of analysis here, however, we choose to set those complexities aside in order to focus on the conceptual paired opposition that was consistently part of these discussions, that of the locus of awakening.

¹³ Whether a theoretical retrospective to Yogācāra, or an active adaptation to the psychologized language of the religio-therapeutic marketplace are relevant for contemporary Shin thinkers and practitioners is outside the intent of this paper.

appears to be a regular correlation.

The distinction between internal and external loci of awakening is in itself trivially obvious—after all, there are only two possibilities. The same, however, is true of the distinction between sudden and gradual awakening—there are only two possibilities. What makes the sudden–gradual distinction important is that it serves as a key, fixed opposition that structures many other aspects of Buddhist thought. Once the decision is made in favor of one or the other, the conceptualization of many other aspects of the tradition is entailed. For example, if the path is sudden or gradual, certain kinds of practices are seen as effective or not.

The same is true for internal and external loci of awakening. It is not the distinction *per se* that is important, but rather the doctrinal and practical entailments that follow from one conceptualization or the other. If the goal is conceptualized as internal or external, then one kind of practice or another will be preferred. If we consider Buddhist traditions as systems of thought, ideologies in the literal sense, then their systemic integration means that certain key issues—nodal points in the system—will determine the structure of the rest of that system. Such conceptual systems are not, however, without practical consequences.

Two dimensions of the idea of locus of awakening have been presented. First, it functions as a descriptive category identifying Buddhist systems of thought and practice in terms of a fundamental dichotomy regarding conceptions of the goal. In this, it matches the descriptive categorization of sudden and gradual, which identifies Buddhist systems of thought and practice in terms of a fundamental dichotomy regarding conceptions of the path.

Second, it also gives form to an aspect of the interaction between the Buddhist traditions introduced to the United States and the religious culture that those encountered. In this, the distinction suggests that there is a correlation between an internal or external loci of awakening, and the popular recognition and acceptance or marginalization of a tradition, respectively.

As a retrodictive study, the dynamics explored above do not demonstrate a causal relation, though given that both positive and negative instances were examined the correlation is a strong one. Despite the strength of this correlation, locus of awakening is not in itself a complete explanation. As is well recognized, the introduction of Buddhism to the western world has been a “complicated and highly selective process of importing or adapting a religious tradition” (Bivins, 2007: 61). The relative success of traditions emphasizing an internal locus of awakening is, of course, not to be explained by one single factor. However, it is one of the key elements in systems of Buddhist praxis that engage the cultural preconceptions of the societies within which they exist and into which they are introduced.

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