Pure Land is too far removed from original Buddhism to be considered Buddhist.' Discuss.

Pure Land Buddhism is a devotional sect of Mahayana Buddhism. It spread through China and Japan between the 5th and 12th centuries. Its main focus is around faith in Amitabha Buddha who dwells in the Pure Land which was created by transference of merit (kamma). When he was a monk (called Dharmakara), he vowed to create a Pure Land out of compassion for suffering beings by transferring his good kamma. Pure Land Buddhists have two main practices; they call to mind Amitabha’s name (by chanting the Nembutsu) or visualise him. In Jodo Shu Buddhism, it is only necessary to say the Nembutsu once to guarantee entry into the Pure Land at death, but it must be said with true faith which can be built up by repeating the Nembutsu regularly. Pure Landers rely on ‘tariki’ or the ‘other power’ of Amitabha to help them reach the Pure Land because it is believed that it is too difficult to reach the Pure Land in this time of ‘mappo’ (social and moral decline) if we rely on own power. It is also believed that to rely on ‘jiriki’ (own power) increases our deluded sense of self. Thus, Pure Land Buddhists rely on the compassionate power of other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

We should first address what we mean by ‘original Buddhism’. Many understand Theravada to be the ‘original’ form but it has been discovered that in fact, it was only one of many forms which developed in ancient India. Thus we must consider other forms such as Mahayana to be ‘originals’. It could be argued that Pure Land is one of these original forms and was an Upaya; the Buddha taught different things to different people and perhaps Pure Land is just an example. Arguably, we should not compare these different types whatsoever and should accept that each is a more ‘skilful’ way of putting the message across for different people.

We should also consider the context in which Pure Land was taught and why it grew in China and Japan. In China at the time of the growth of Pure Land, there was a great deal of social and political unrest and civil war broke out. The apocalyptic message of ‘mappo’ really struck a chord with the Chinese and they understood the reasoning behind the idea of mappo. The idea of a sense of urgency to reach the Pure Land there also corresponded to the Chinese’s experience as they longed for salvation. Thus, this is a typical example of an Upaya as the teachings are altered to mirror the experience of those people. We cannot, therefore, discount Pure Land as being ‘truly Buddhist’ as it is an adaptation of the original message, intended to correspond with the experiences of its followers, just like other forms of Buddhism.

The problem many have with Pure Land is that they understand Buddhism to be totally non-devotional and thus, the ideas of worship and dedication to Amitabha make Pure Land appear contradictory. The Buddha appeared to reject ideas of worship in Hinduism and Pure Land could appear to be endorsing this type of worship and therefore is incongruous with ‘original’ forms of Buddhism.

However, this shows a fundamental Western misunderstanding of other forms of Buddhism. Theravada is often perceived as being non-devotional but this is a misinterpretation. Theravadins do perform rituals and do treat statues of the Buddha in a sacred way. The only way in which we can say they are non-devotional is that they do not believe in a two-way relationship with heavenly Buddhas. Thus, to say the ideas of devotion and worship are too different shows a complete misunderstanding of the Theravada message. Mahayanans also worship heavenly Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and do believe in soteriology. The whole aim is to become enlightened to help other beings and thus the idea of tariki does not oppose this sect of Buddhism either. Pure Land is often...