

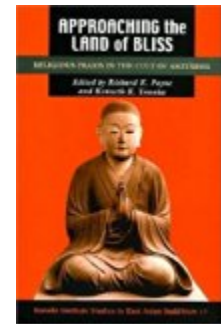
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard K. Payne, Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds. *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*. Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. 304 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2578-2.

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Stated simply, *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha* is a delicious read. It is a stir-fry of scholarship with chapters on Chinese, Taiwanese, Tibetan and even contemporary Newari Pure Land practices, all laid upon a core bed of chapters dedicated to Pure Land in Japan. Co-editors Payne and Tanaka have thus served up an eminently satisfying recipe for re-evaluating Pure Land Buddhism in the pan-Asian sphere, and in so doing have provided post-graduate, graduate and even upper-level undergraduate researchers with much food for thought to consume and digest.

This latest volume in the Kuroda series in East Asian Buddhism explicitly sets out to break down the meat-and-potatoes “texts and nations” (p. 1) approach to Buddhist studies, which traditionally has traced the historical transmission of scriptures from India through China to Japan. This “three-countries model” (p. 1) has falsely set up Japan as the final culmination of all Buddhist thought and practice, with Korea astonishingly absent and Tibet often added fourth as an afterthought. This model’s dominant focus on texts has also created false dichotomies in academe. It has pitted philology against ethnography, doctrine against practice, clergy against laity, and sectarian identity based on select scripture against widespread and popular cults dedicated to individual deities (e.g. Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Bhairava, Jambhavanā, Maitreya or Vairocana).

As an alternative to this geo-textual dissemination trajectory, this volume proposes the useful categories of “cult and praxis” (p. 2) as organizing themes for analysis. Specifically, it broadens the strictly sectarian identity of Pure Land Buddhism by examining the cult of Amitābha

worship throughout Asia. Nine well-known scholars investigate the remarkable variety of cultic practices and ritual performances throughout Asia that are associated with Amitābha and his heavenly Pure Land in the Western Paradise (Sukhavatī). With five out of the nine chapters devoted to Japanese Pure Land practices, one might initially assume that that the three-country model has yet to be fully deconstructed. Yet even within Japan, one learns to appreciate the wide variety of practice associated with Pure Land Buddhism. This sabotages any possibility of a formative model or strict sectarian boundaries for Amitābha worship.

Matthew Kapstein opens the volume by recognizing and subverting the common perception that Pure Land refers solely to an East Asian sectarian phenomenon in “Pure Land in Tibet? From Sukhavatī to the Field of Great Bliss.” Daniel Getz also speaks to the flexibility, malleability and ambiguous nature of sectarian delineations in “Shengchang’s Pure Conduct Society and the Chinese Pure Land Patriarchate” by re-evaluating Shengchang’s (959-1020) Pure Land lineage in light of his Huayan thought and activities. Jacqueline Stone’s “By the Power of One’s Last Nenbutsu: Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan” outlines the core devotional practices of Pure Land even before it obtained separate sectarian status during the Kamakura period (1192-1333). She presents her consummate scholarship on tenth- through thirteenth-century beautiful deaths, merit transfers, post-mortem funerary rites and nenbutsu incantations designed to awaken the mind of faith in Amida’s vow. Following the roughly chronological order of chapters devoted to Amida worship in Japan, James Sanford’s “Amida’s Secret Life: Kakuban’s Amida Hishaku” presents Kakuban’s (1095-1143) highly syn-

cretic and controversial text that equates Amida Nyorai with Dainichi Nyorai, the main Buddha of Shingon esoteric Buddhism (this text was controversial of course, only from the perspective of *kogi* “old school” Shingon).

Hank Glassman’s chapter on Sukh? vat? visualizations by and for women further deconstructs familiar normative Pure Land notions (such as the prerequisite male body for rebirth in the Western Paradise) in “Show Me the Place Where My Mother Is: Ch? j? hime, Preaching and Relics in Late Medieval and Early Modern Japan.” Fabio Rambelli pushes this orthodox-heterodox envelope to its limit as he tackles radical Amidist groups and the carnivalesque reversal of social norms in “‘Just Behave As You Like; Prohibitions and Impurities Are Not A Problem’: Radical Amida Cults and Popular Religiosity in Premodern Japan.” Richard Jaffe also makes us reflect on issues of authority and authenticity in “Ungo Kiy? ’s ? j? y? ka and Rinzaï Zen Othodoxy,” which focuses on Ungo Kiy? ’s (1582-1659) insistence on the precepts, his integration of *nenbutsu* practice as a complement to Zen meditation, and his place in the institutional politics of Rinzaï Zen. Todd Lewis’ “From Generalized Goal to Tantric Subordination: Sukh? vat? in the Indic Buddhist Traditions of Nepal” provides ethnographic evidence to reiterate Kapstein’s observation that Pure Land is a generalized, non-sectarian soteriology that assumes various forms in Nepal, while Charles Jones’ “Buddha One: A One-Day Buddha-Recitation-Retreat in Contemporary Taiwan” dovetails nicely with Jacqueline Stone’s earlier chapter as he narrates a *nianfo* retreat designed to cultivate the mind of faith in Amida’s vow. The volume as a whole thus works together nicely, and the authors’ frequent references to each other’s contributions lends the collection a coherence and integrity not often found in edited volumes.

Taken together, these investigations reveal four major themes, as Payne outlines in his concisely crafted introduction. “[F]irst, the place of Amit? bha and Sukh? vat? in the broad range of Mah? y? na and Vajray? na Buddhism; second, the variety of practices directed towards Amit? bha and Sukh? vat? ; third, the importance of the way in which conceptions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are created; and fourth, the sociohistorical locatedness of religious practice” (p. 12). This, I think, is far too modest an assessment of the contributions this volume presents.

This collection is significant first for making scholars look at ritual and practice, not just doctrinal text (though of course Pure Land as a sect has its own highly

developed doctrinal literature as well). Second, it compels us to consider seriously the practices of one of the most popular forms of Buddhism in the global theater today. This new focus on popular Amida practice remedies the academy’s somewhat elitist bias towards the kind of philological-philosophical-sectarian scholarship that has largely marginalized Pure Land to date, denigrating lay and clerical Amida practice as somehow unworthy of wide scholarly attention. Many other sectarian scholars have therefore adopted an apologist stance, glossing over or simply ignoring syncretized Pure Land elements within their groups, and conveniently but artificially following the age-old process of ranking scriptures (*ky? han*) to sanitize them into pure doctrinal categories. This volume helps to muddy the waters again, especially in the case of Pure Land and Shingon (in Sanford’s case of Kakuban) and Pure Land and Rinzaï Zen (in Jaffe’s case of Ungo Kiy?). Other confluences and ambiguities are presented as well, such as Shengchang’s Huayan turned Pure Land in standard hagiographies, the generalized non-sectarian presence of Amit? bha worship in Tibet and Nepal, and the decidedly antinomian cast of Rambelli’s radical Amidist groups, so contrary to Tibet where one’s own efforts are a prerequisite to rebirth in Sukh? vat? . A volume such as this thus fills in a glaring lacuna in scholarship and incidentally reveals a strange irony: the text-centered attitude that was so instrumental in the so-called Protestantization of Buddhism paradoxically created a blind spot when it came to Pure Land, arguably the form of Buddhism that resembles Protestant theology and original demographics the most.

Shedding light on old blind spots however, often reveals new ones. Korea continues to be overlooked here despite its importance to East Asian Buddhism, and the absence of any Silk Route scholarship is curious for a volume dedicated to pan-Asian Amida worship (there is interesting work being done on Amida’s hens? transformation tableaux at Dunhuang, for example). On a related note, I believe the volume could have been strengthened by more illustrations, especially given Pure Land’s rich visual tradition and the editors’ stated objective of departing from text-based scholarship. Finally, I believe I believe the book could have benefited from a more thoughtful organization of chapters, as Payne’s introduction initially indicated. Specifically, one could have grouped the Mah? y? na chapters (Jacqueline Stone’s Pure Land, Hank Glassman’s Ch? j? hime and Charles Jones’ Taiwan) and the Vajray? na chapters (Matthew Kapstein’s Tibet, Todd Lewis’ Nepal, James Sanford’s Kakuban, and some of Fabio Rambelli’s radical Amidists).

One could also add Zen into the mix, for both Richard Jaffe's *Ungo Kiy?* and I might suggest, Daniel Getz's *Shengchang* speak to this form of Buddhism.

Getz of course did not explicitly address Zen in his chapter, but in deconstructing Shengchang's Pure Land identity via Huayan, he inadvertently hints at some tantalizing Chan/Zen associations. He mentions for example that Shengchang studied "mind-only" (i.e., Chan, not Yog? c? ra) with Zhifeng, the founder of Fayan Chan, and that he copied the Pure Conduct chapter of the *Huayan jing* in blood. In his own commentaries on that very chapter, D? gen (1200-1243) later tells us this was of particular interest to his S? t? Zen founder Quingyuan / Seigen (d. 740), who also reputedly copied the transmission in his own blood. Combined with Shengchang's interest in Mañju? r? imagery, the latter being prominent both in the *Huayan jing* and Zen's literary and iconographic traditions, this chapter firmly speaks to the pitfalls of purely sectarian thinking (Huayan included) and to the cross-fertilization of Buddhist practices. For like Pure Land itself, Huayan too was a generalized set of ideas that influenced a number of other sects, including Zen.

In conclusion, the editors and contributors have provided a timely and above all useful volume to the field. They have ambitiously set out to accomplish nothing other than restructure the way we approach Buddhist studies, and on the whole they succeed. Given their analytical tools of cult and praxis, we can better critique prescriptive doctrinal texts such as the *Da? abh? mika-vibh? s? -? ? tra* which are so blatantly biased against the path of faith for the "simple-minded." However it will take time and hopefully more volumes such as this to refine the analytical tools of cult and praxis. In this volume, these categories are basically employed to demonstrate that Pure Land is more than just a single sect and the simple invocation of Amida-Buddha's name. However in the future, I believe the categories of cult and praxis could be employed for much more sophisticated analyses, which re-integrate the textual component of Buddhist studies (e.g., s? tra-copying as a merit-making praxis, or the insertion of scriptures to consecrate statues). For, in the end, I am not certain we need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I am not sure we will ever be able to overcome our reliance on text; indeed, many of the practices examined here are based on ritual manuals or written accounts from centuries ago. Regardless, this volume has all the ingredients for a nourishing and satisfying read.

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