

Georgios T. Halkias. *Luminous Bliss: A Religious History of Pure Land Literature in Tibet*. Pure Land Buddhist Studies Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. 335 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3590-3.

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Published on H-Buddhism (February, 2014)

Commissioned by John Powers



## Reaching the Pure Land of Amitābha from Tibet

If you are a scholar who specializes in either Tibetan Buddhism or in Pure Land studies, then you need to clear some shelf space and make room for this book. Georgios T. Halkias has written a trailblazing study of a Buddhist tradition normally associated with East Asia as it is found in Tibet, and this book is going to be the foundational text in this area for many years to come. That said, and remembering that pioneers seldom find their way forward free of bumps and occasional wrong turns, I will attempt here to give an outline of the book as well as an evaluation of its contributions, limitations, and theoretical challenges.

The title is revealing. Notice that Halkias does not claim that this is a book about Pure Land *Buddhism* in Tibet, as that would imply that, as in East Asia, “Pure Land” denotes a kind of self-focused path or institution. Rather, the subtitle makes clear that he is considering Pure Land *literature*. The author reinforces this point with an important disclaimer: “Nothing in the material presented in this book can be seen to imply or remotely suggest that there has ever been a sectarian, self-conscious movement of Pure Land Buddhism in Tibet” (p. xxviii). Even though the book describes not just texts but also persons and ritual practices, this move forestalls any accusation that he has read this East Asian category into the Tibetan materials. At the end of this essay, I will return to reconsider whether or not this move really works; here I simply note that the author is clearly aware of this danger and has sought to avert it.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part 1 paints several histories in broad brushstrokes. The first chapter outlines the genesis of Pure Land beliefs and practices from earlier Buddhist ideas of postmortem fates and destinations; the idea and imagery of the buddha-field (Skt. *buddha-kṣetra*) as well as philosophical ruminations relating such concrete imagery to the idea of universal insubstantiality (not always successful; see page 12); the development of Pure Land scriptures, the history of the Pure Land’s regnant buddha Amitābha, or Amitāyus, or even Aparimitāyus along with a consideration of the images of boundless light and life encoded in his name; and the contested question of whether the land and its buddha originate within Buddhism or from other Indian or Zoroastrian traditions. It concludes with a review of images of Amitābha in Tibet, with a brief coda on East Asian commentaries.

Chapter 2 ostensibly deals with relations between the Tibetan Empire and the Chinese Tang dynasty, but begins with several subsections describing Pure Land literary remains found in (and in the languages of) several of the oasis kingdoms of Central Asia: Kucha, Miram, Khotan, and so on, afterward connecting them all as part of an interactive marketplace of ideas. The next subsection, “The Buddhist Emperors of Tibet,” gives a detailed history of the early Tibetan Empire, the transmissions of Buddhism thereto, and the relationship between Buddhism and the imperial government. While offering a general history of Buddhism in Tibet, the author pays

special attention to the transmission of ideas within the Pure Land orbit (i.e., Kamalaśīla's ideas about buddha-fields). This chapter ends with a lengthy survey of Pure Land literature in Tibet, beginning with the *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtras*, but moving on to other scriptures, such as the *Ārya-aparimitāyur-mahāyāna-sūtra*, for which the author provides a translation, and an aspirational prayer from Dunhuang 敦煌.

In part 2, the author moves to a more rigorously philological study of specific Pure Land texts, beginning with the shorter *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra* in chapter 3. This includes a survey of extant editions, an analysis of its contents, and an annotated English translation (A critical analysis of the Tibetan text appears in appendix 1). Chapter 4 moves on to survey Tibetan commentaries, which serve to elucidate how Tibetan Buddhists thought about the causes for rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land. This chapter also includes some translations, such as Tsong-kha-pa's brief but influential "Praise to the Protector Amitābha: Opening the Door to the Sublime Field." The author covers commentaries from the time of Tsong-kha-pa up to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These sorts of texts show that the aspiration to rebirth in Sukhāvati was widespread throughout the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Of some interest here is the analysis of Mi-pham 'jam-dbyangs rnam-rgyal's *Sun-like Instructions of a Sage*. This text addresses some of the issues familiar to those who study the East Asian Pure Land tradition: the power of reciting the buddha's name and the relationship between self-power and other-power.

Part 3, "Pure Lands and Pure Visions," changes the topic to tantric texts and practices aimed at rebirth in Sukhāvati or identification with Amitābha (chapter 5) and "treasure" (*gter-ma*) texts and their associated practices (chapter 6). The tantric material comprises *dhāraṇī* texts that may or may not center on the visualization of this particular buddha and buddha-field, but that end with aspirations to be reborn there. As with other tantric traditions, some aim at this-worldly ends rather than rebirth in Sukhāvati; the author draws one example from the longevity rituals centered on the buddha Amitāyus (a name that means "immeasurable life," p. 145), for the generation of bliss or the practice of dream-yoga, or for the transfer of one's consciousness to the Pure Land. Chapter 6, dealing with "treasure texts," focuses more on the manner in which texts relating to the Pure Land were discovered through revelation and vision; the literature itself may be of different genres.

The book concludes with a brief epilogue, which I

found not altogether satisfying. The author begins by violating his own disclaimer by speaking in the first sentence of "Tibetan Pure Land Buddhism." The remainder does not sum up the author's findings and offer directions for further research, but strays into unrelated topics, as when two of its six pages deal with the genesis of Tibet's self-identification as a Buddhist kingdom, a historical narrative with no articulated connection to the literature of Sukhāvati.

The book is strongest when it is doing the job its subtitle advertises. As a survey of literature and practices centered on Sukhāvati and the attainment of rebirth there, it is a truly great work showing mastery of a large body of primary sources and a wide familiarity with Tibetan and Central Asian Buddhism. A few problems remain, however, and here I will address three: one organizational, one theoretical, and one technical.

The organization of the book is a little hard to follow. My primary concern is with a lack of chronological ordering. The four substantive chapters of the book revolve around genres (*sūtras* in chapter 3, commentaries in chapter 4, *tantras* in chapter 5, and "treasure texts" in chapter 6). Subdivisions may be by schools or authors. This results in the book lacking clear chronologies; one finds oneself in the eighth or ninth century, then in the nineteenth, then back again to the fourteenth. This matters because this organizational scheme prevents the correlation of developments in this literature with historical/political/cultural developments, which the author himself says are important. Here is an example: as noted above, Mi-pham 'jam-dbyangs rnam-rgyal's *Sun-like Instructions of a Sage* is the only text in the book that brings up the familiar tropes of self-power and other-power (the author even gives the Japanese renderings of *jiriki* and *tariki* here) and the recitation of the buddha's name as a means of gaining rebirth. It is also one of the later texts the author reports. This raises the question whether or not centuries of interaction with Chinese Buddhism exerted any influence on Tibetan Pure Land literature over the centuries.

This leads into my theoretical concern. The reason Western scholars refer to "Pure Land Buddhism" at all is that there is a loose but self-conscious Pure Land "lineage" (*zōng* 宗) or "dharma-gate" (*fāmén* 法門) with "patriarchs" (*zǔ* 祖) in China and a strong set of Pure Land institutions in Japan. While the author advertises up front that he does not want to imply that such a self-conscious tradition existed in Tibet, one cannot help but wonder if the East Asian model is still somewhere offstage exert-

ing a gravitational pull on the argument. Why characterize *any* Tibetan literature or practice as “Pure Land” at all? Why segregate out texts dealing with Sukhāvātī and Amitābha from, say, other instances of *dhāraṇī* or *gter-ma* literature? Has the strong presence of a Pure Land tradition in East Asia led to the reification of an etic category in the Tibetan materials that would not have emerged without it?

Finally, my technical quibble has to do with the consistent use of Wylie romanization throughout the book. While one must acknowledge the necessity of providing this romanization for the benefit of specialists, it remains

one of the most problematic linguistic features of scholarship on Tibetan Buddhism. To use it and no other orthography is to reduce the accessibility of one’s work to nonspecialists. I understand that this is still a lively issue of debate within the Tibetological community; I can only say that my own engagement with the riches of this book was severely hampered by this editorial decision.

In the end, and despite these criticisms, I would maintain that this book will stand for many years as a classic text and a rich reference source for scholars. The author is still a young scholar, and I look forward to seeing the ongoing results of his research program.

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**Citation:** Charles B. Jones. Review of Halkias, Georgios T., *Luminous Bliss: A Religious History of Pure Land Literature in Tibet*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

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