

Jacqueline I. Stone. *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment: Buddhism and Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan.* Kuroda Studies in East Asian Buddhism Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 624 pp. \$68.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-5643-4.

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Multiple Logics and Multiple Paths in Medieval Japanese Deathbed Practice

The study of Japanese religion has historically relied on explanations of doctrines, founders, and beliefs. In recent years, the pendulum of research interests has swung toward institutional histories and religion “on the ground,” and has come to rest on local traditions and their diversity, at the expense of interest in normative discourse about doctrine or belief. Some scholars have suggested that there might be a middle ground between the focus on doctrine and the focus on practice, whereby we may see both as mutually influential and dynamic aspects of heterogeneous and changing environments.

The value of focusing on that middle ground is well demonstrated by a recent book, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment: Buddhism and Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan*, by Jacqueline I. Stone, professor of religion at Princeton University. The title won the Toshihide Numata Book Award in Buddhism for 2017. As Stone reminds us, in medieval Japan, some Buddhist intellectuals believed that the final moments of life provided a soteriologically potent opportunity to clear away negative past karma. They accepted that someone whose mind was appropriately focused could achieve rebirth in the paradise of a

Buddha, or even attain full awakening. Conversely, they also found disordered mental states to be fraught with danger. The moment of death, then, inspired not just hope but also anxiety by the end of the Heian period (twelfth century).

During this period, some Buddhist practitioners, especially those hailing from the aristocracy, began to pursue elaborately orchestrated deathbed practices. These might have included facing west toward the Pure Land Sukhāvatī, meditating upon an image of the Buddha Amitābha, or reciting a variety of mantras, or spells. Such practices could be performed either alone or in the company of *zenchishiki* (S. *kalyāṇa-mittatā*), “spiritual friends” who might assist the dying person in chanting should his or her physical, vocal, or cognitive faculties fail. Stone analyzes a variety of sources—including Chinese and Japanese Buddhist scriptures, miracle tales, deathbed testimonials, diaries, and didactic literature—and adds significantly to our understanding of this body of practice in medieval Japan, its context in the history of Buddhism, and its influence within Japanese culture more broadly.

Right Thoughts at the Last Moment is composed of seven chapters, plus an introduction and

conclusion. Its appendix with annotated bibliography lists some of the most important deathbed ritual manuals, a literature attributed to such important figures as Genshin (942-1017), Jitsuhan (ca. 1089-1144), Kakuban (1095-1143), Hōnen (1133-1212), Dōhan (1179-1252), and many others. The introduction outlines the overall aims of the study: to nuance our understanding of Buddhist concepts of death and deathbed practices; to examine the dynamic relationship between doctrine and practice; to understand the diverse Buddhist cultural systems on which medieval Japanese Buddhists relied in the medieval period; and to investigate how the possibility of dying with the right state of mind could influence, inspire, or frighten Buddhists in this period.

Invaluable particularly from a pedagogical perspective is the section in the introduction about “multiple logics” and “overlapping repertoires” at play in medieval Japanese religious culture especially, and the Buddhist tradition more broadly (pp. 4, 5). Students in my introductory courses on Buddhism often struggle to understand how the grand diversity of the Buddhist tradition could cohere under the single label of “Buddhism.” Even within the particular and limited context of medieval Japan, they find a bewildering diversity of perspectives and approaches to practice. As Stone notes in the context of deathbed rituals, multiple competing systems—original enlightenment thought, Esoteric Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and so on—complement, reinforce, or contradict one another. Stone also considers how modernist assumptions and sectarian agendas concerning Buddhist doctrine, such as the “mark” of “no-self” (Skt. *anātman*), have influenced how Buddhism and death have been studied together. As I often explain to my students, we might describe Buddhism in line with the image presented in textbooks and popular literature, in which philosophically intriguing concepts like “no-self” or “emptiness” (commonly misinterpreted to mean that there is no conventional experience of the self) take center stage, but we might better describe, his-

torically, the actual foci of Buddhist energy and faith. When we follow not abstract doctrine but the historical record, we find a long and durable interest in the afterlife of the “self.” The introduction to *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment* points to this historical phenomenon with its overview of South Asian and Chinese Mahayana antecedents to Japanese deathbed practices; it concludes with a succinct chapter summary.

One of the important analytical issues addressed throughout Stone’s recent scholarship is the “esoteric” approach to Pure Land rebirth. Scholars of religion in Japan and abroad tend to study “Esoteric Buddhism” and “Pure Land Buddhism” as if they represented necessarily incompatible approaches to enlightenment. However, Stone has marshaled a staggering number of sources—sutras, diaries, tales of Pure Land rebirth, and others—to demonstrate that medieval Japanese Buddhists actually employed various kinds of Buddhist ritual traditions (“esoteric,” or otherwise) to address multiple areas of concern. Such concerns often included the transformation of the last moment of life into a powerful springboard into awakening and—and in some cases *as*—Pure Land rebirth. In other words, to distinguish these traditions represents an anachronistic projection of contemporary sectarian boundaries onto a medieval environment that, in fact, functioned according to its own logic.

As in her earlier *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (1999), here too Stone indicates Tendai thought as a fertile ground for the development of medieval Japanese culture, a site in which original enlightenment thought, as well as other systems, could play upon, influence, and overlap with one another in dynamic ways. Although now taken as the paradigmatic “exclusive practice” of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, the recitation of the *nenbutsu* actually took place alongside mantras, spells, or *dhāraṇī*; the worship of mandala, alongside *raigō* images or paintings of the Pure Land and so on. In

one instance, Stone notes, Emperor Daigo (d. 930) passed away facing West as monks recited the *Lotus Sutra* and the *nenbutsu*. In this case, “*nenbutsu*” refers here not to the six-syllable phrase “*Namu Amida Butsu*” but to the Superlative Spell of the Buddha’s Crown (*uṣṇīṣavijaya dhāraṇī*) (407n73). Stone adduces many similar examples, which challenge our preconceived notions of how ritual, practice, and doctrine overlap, throughout the main body of the book and the footnotes. In some cases, the attainment of “Buddhahood in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu*) and the attainment of rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Amitābha could even be reconciled as two sides of the same coin, or the same event from two different perspectives.

Deathbed practice makes for a perfect prism for viewing broadly the multitude of discourses at play in medieval Japan— political, soteriological, ritual, economic, doctrinal, and sectarian. Because deathbed practices were linked with so many other forms of Buddhist activity, the examination of those practices helps us to look beyond such notions as “sect” and “school” as organizing heuristics. We find in their place a more complex interplay of the agendas and hopes held by Buddhists at different times. For example, historical studies of Pure Land Buddhism tend to presume modernist and contemporary Shin Buddhist notions, including the assumption that Pure Land Buddhism developed as part of a rejection of Esoteric Buddhism. Meanwhile scholars of Esoteric Buddhism use certain doctrines ascribed to Kūkai as the litmus test for determining whether or not a practice is purely esoteric (J. *junmitsu*) or just miscellaneous *esoterica* (J. *zōmitsu*). As Stone demonstrates, though, the sheer heterogeneity of deathbed practice challenges such overly simplistic and anachronistic characterizations.

Such a magisterial study might well leave reader-researchers wondering what is left to be done. But such works as this one open new fields of research, and do not close them off. *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment* is a magnificent re-

source for further inquiry, inviting further dialogue on these and other issues. For example, chapter 7, “The Long Durée of Deathbed Rites,” points to areas of study virtually unknown to Anglophone scholars. Within it, the sections titled “Zen and the Art of Dying” and “A-syllable Contemplation and Dying as ‘Natural’” explore the “multiple logics” at play in the Zen and Shingon traditions, respectively. As these sections show, doctrinally non-dualistic views functioned within ritual contexts which at times presupposed a dualistic view, and at times denied, integrated, or transformed such dualistic perspectives. Academic interest in Tokugawa-era Buddhism and, more generally, popular religion in the early modern period has grown in recent years; these scholars will likely be especially interested in the section titled “Late Medieval and Early Modern Developments.” I imagine many medievalists like myself will read this section to find that it challenges their own notions about the continuities and discontinuities between “medieval” and “early modern” modes of Buddhist practice.

This book is, finally, an extremely useful guide to Japanese research on the topic, and a model for organizing a book or manuscript. The introduction and conclusion both summarize the book as a whole and add new information not otherwise covered, and each chapter contains clearly organized introductions and conclusions, which serve to prepare or refresh the reader’s mind. These may seem like minor points, but as in her previous monographs, Stone’s crystal-clear prose helps the reader to stay afloat in the ocean of sources presented. And this book is indeed thick with stories and diverse examples of deathbed practices, both idealized and presumably actually performed, but with the structured composition style employed by Stone this is an enjoyable read. This is but one of the many commendable features of this book that leads me to recommend this work as an exemplar of how to produce a well-organized, well-written monograph. I would recommend this book to any

scholar of Japanese studies, religious studies, or Buddhist studies.

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