

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha.* Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka eds. Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 17. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. ix + 304 pages. \$32.00 cloth, ISBN 0824825780.

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*Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha* is an ambitious book that tries to reconfigure the study of the cult of the Buddha Amitābha and his Pure Land. In the introduction, Richard Payne, one of the book's editors, observes that the study of Buddhism has "predominantly been structured by two themes: texts and nations" (p. 1). Studies of Pure Land Buddhism (the cult of Amitābha in the book's title) have typically been preoccupied with explicating the doctrines presented in particular *sūtras* or treatises. In order to get beyond this narrow textual approach, the essays in this volume focus on the cultic practices associated with Amitābha and his Pure Land. Moreover, all the authors reject what Payne calls the sectarian "three countries" model of Pure Land Buddhist history. This approach, held by the Jōdo and Shin schools of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, has been very influential in Western studies on Amitābha. It holds that Pure Land Buddhism was first systematized by Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu in India, further refined in China through the efforts of such figures as T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o and Shan-t'ao, and came to full flower in Japan with Hōnen and Shinran. Not only does this approach limit the field of research to India, China and Japan (leaving out, for example, both Tibet and Korea, with their distinctive and dynamic Amitābha cults), but it also tends to highlight those Pure Land practitioners who emphasized the vocal *nembutsu* (i. e., the recitation of *Namu Amida Butsu*, considered the sole genuine practice in the Jōdo and Shin schools), while devaluing those who emphasize the practice of visualizing or meditating on this Buddha. The editors have attempted to correct this bias by including studies on the Amitābha cult found in Tibet and Nepal, as well as those treating Japanese and Chinese Pure Land devotees whose practices are rejected by Jōdo and Shin orthodoxy.

The volume consists of nine essays discussing various aspects of the cult of the Buddha Amitābha in South and East Asia. Of particular interest are Matthew Kapstein's "Pure Land Buddhism in Tibet: From Sukhāvati to the Field of Great

Bliss,” a concise overview of Pure Land Buddhism in Tibet, and Todd Lewis’ “From Generalized Goal to Tantric Subordination: Sukhāvati in the Indic Buddhist Traditions of Nepal,” an informative introduction to the place of Amitābha in Nepal. Despite the fact that Amitābha holds an important place in Tibetan and Nepalese Buddhism, the role of this Buddha in the Buddhist praxis of these countries has rarely been discussed. For this reason, these papers are especially welcome. (As Kapstein mentions, although there are some studies on Tibetan Pure Land Buddhism in Japanese, there are very few in English. See p. 19 and p. 43, n. 12). Both papers point out that the exclusive reliance on Amitābha, which is a distinctive feature of the Japanese Pure Land schools of Hōnen and Shinran, did not develop in either of these countries.

Equally noteworthy are the two studies focused on China, “Shengchang’s Pure Conduct Society and the Chinese Pure Land Patriarchate” by Daniel Getz and “Buddha One: A One-Day Buddha-Recitation Retreat in Contemporary Taiwan” by Charles B. Jones. The former takes up Shengchang, a Sung-period monk who established the White Lotus Society, an association of monks and laymen, to meditate on Amitābha and seek birth in his Pure Land. Although Shengchang was later elevated to the status of a Pure Land patriarch, through close reading of contemporary records, Getz argues that his primary motive for founding the association was to spread devotion to the *Hua-yen Sūtra* and counteract anti-Buddhist sentiments propagated by Han Yü among the Sung scholar-officials. In his paper, Jones provides a detailed description of a Buddha-recitation retreat held in Taiwan, and concludes that, unlike Japanese Pure Land schools which stress the overwhelming power of human passions and the consequent inability to attain salvation by one’s own power, Chinese Pure Land Buddhists, more optimistic about the human potential for self-cultivation, stress “the need for the practitioner to work actively to set up a resonance that will elicit Amitābha’s help and support” (p. 276).

The volume also contains five papers on Amitābha in the Japanese context. The first, Jacqueline Stone’s essay entitled “By the Power of One’s Last Nembutsu: Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan,” takes up the practice of deathbed *nembutsu* said to lead to birth in the Pure Land. As Stone points out, since it was believed possible to gain birth in Amitābha’s Pure Land by focusing one’s mind on this Buddha at the moment of death, there developed various deathbed observances to ensure that one would remain mindful of Amitābha in one’s last moments of consciousness. James Sanford’s “Amida’s Secret Life: Kakuban’s *Amida hishaku*,” describes the “secret *nembutsu*” (*himitsu nembutsu*) of esoteric Shingon Buddhism, especially as recounted in the *Amida hishaku* by Kakuban (1095–1143). Hank Glassman’s “Show Me the Place Where My Mother Is: Chūjōhime, Preaching, and Relics in Late Medieval and Early Modern Japan,” focuses on the legend of Chūjōhime, whose heartfelt desire to behold the Pure Land led to the miraculous cre-

ation, by a divine nun who was actually a manifestation of Amitābha, of the Taima Mandara, a “transformation tableau” depicting Amitābha’s Pure Land. Glassman examines this legend in detail, describing how it developed in various ways and how every step in its development “was shaped and guided by the professional preachers who lectured on the mandara, using the practice known as *etoki* (literally, ‘picture explaining’ or ‘picture preaching’)” (p. 145). As he notes, the Chūjōhime legends, with their themes of woman’s salvation, “were always created through performance” (p. 145).

In “‘Just Behave as You Like; Prohibitions and Impurities are not a Problem’: Radical Amida Cults and Popular Religiosity in Premodern Japan,” Fabio Rambelli makes the important point that “received interpretations of Pure Land movements operate a systematic misremembering of their original oppositional potential and revolutionary role in the history of Japanese culture, religion, and thought” (p. 170). Throughout Japanese history, there have been Pure Land schools and groups that supported the dominant ideology (“normative Amidism”) and those that were transgressive of the accepted order and potentially revolutionary (“radical Amidism”) (p. 170). Rambelli focuses on the latter, and provides fascinating accounts of several such movements. Finally, Richard Jaffe, in “Ungo Kiyō’s *Ōjōyōka* and Rinzai Zen Orthodoxy,” describes how the Rinzai monk Ungo Kiyō advocated the recitation of the *nembutsu* and wrote the *Ōjōyōka* to put his views into practice. Ungo’s approach was roundly criticized by Gudō Tōshoku of the Myōshinji, even though the latter also refers to the immanence of Amitābha and the Pure Land. Jaffe concludes that Gudō’s criticism of Ungo is closely related to the arrival of the Chinese monk Ingen to Japan around this time. The presence of the popular Ingen on Japanese soil forced Gudō and the Myōshinji leadership to stress that their line was the true and authentic form of Zen. The Myōshinji strategy was to denounce Ingen’s more all-embracing approach to Zen practice, which incorporated even the recitation of the *nembutsu*, as contrary to the authentic form of Zen which was carried out in temples of the Myōshinji line. As a result, Ungo’s form of *nembutsu* Zen was attacked as “an Ingen-like distortion” (p. 220) of true Zen practice.

As the papers in this volume testify, Amitābha and his Pure Land hold an important place in Buddhism throughout Asia. In contrast to the understanding common in Western academic circles, they show that the recitation of the *nembutsu* is not the only practice associated with this Buddha. There is a rich variety in the ways in which Amitābha has been revered by Buddhist believers throughout history, and it is hoped that readers of this volume will be inspired to carry on their research further in the direction pointed out by these essays.