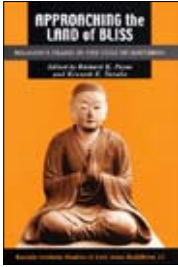


REVIEWS



Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*

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PURE LAND Buddhism has often been neglected by Buddhist Studies in the West. During the twentieth century, studies of Theravāda, Zen, and in more recent decades Tibetan Buddhism far out-numbered those of Pure Land, even though it has been a commanding presence in East Asia for a millennium or more. Little by little Pure Land Buddhism has staked out a place for itself in the world of Western scholarship, partly because of the sponsorship of powerful Pure Land institutions in Japan and partly due to the efforts of Western scholars specializing in it. The publication of *Hōnen, The Buddhist Saint* in 1925 by the Chion'in temple in Kyoto was perhaps the most momentous early event bringing Pure Land Buddhism to the awareness of Western readers. Alfred Bloom's *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace* (1965), the most widely sold volume in the Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies series, extended this focus to Shin Buddhism and provided a synoptic view of Shinran's religious thought. My own book, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (1989), provided additional historical and institutional background for understanding Shin Buddhism. And *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 2 vols., published by the Hongwanji-ha denomination (Nishi Honganji temple) in 1997, made available an authoritative, almost canonical, corpus of his writings. These works—and many others—have successfully carved out a place for Pure Land Buddhism in Western scholarship. But they have also unwittingly created a dominant, if not hegemonic, model of it.

Approaching the Land of Bliss is one of a growing number of works challenging this model. Specifically, it is a collection of nine essays elucidating aspects or understandings of Pure Land Buddhism that stand outside of the Hōnen-Shinran axis, or at least outside its conventional articulation. The collection represents the final version of papers presented at a symposium in 1995 and a conference panel in 2000, plus several others from additional sources. In content, five of the nine essays focus on topics in Japan, one on Tibetan Buddhism, one on Song China, one on Newar Buddhism in Nepal, and one on Buddhism in contemporary Taiwan. In each case they offer a picture of Pure Land Buddhism that diverges from the dominant model in significant ways. Collectively they convey the message that there have been many

Pure Land Buddhisms in Buddhist history and that the Hōnen-Shinran version is only one among them—albeit now the most influential one.

The Hōnen-Shinran model, to which this volume offers alternatives and counterpoints, presents Pure Land as a school of Buddhism focusing on Amitābha Buddha and emphasizing the utterance and recitation of his name, the *nenbutsu*, as its central practice. Based on the so-called three Pure Land sutras, it recognizes Sukhāvātī, the land of bliss which the Buddha created in accordance with his vows as a *bodhisattva*, as the destiny and locus of enlightenment for those who rely on Amitābha and invoke his name. Reliance on the Buddha is stressed particularly, since birth in the Pure Land occurs as a result of Amitābha's "other-power" rather than a person's "self-power." The reason people's own efforts are ineffective is that the world has entered a period of decline, *mappō*, when their religious capacity is no longer commensurate with previous Buddhist practices leading to enlightenment. Hence, people should turn their attention to Amitābha first and foremost and seek enlightenment through birth in his paradise. This general model of Pure Land Buddhism, though eliding differences between Hōnen and Shinran somewhat, has served well to create a distinctive niche for Pure Land in modern scholarship alongside Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism.

With the ascendance of this model, however, has also come the unfortunate tendency to read it into most references to Amitābha and Sukhāvātī across the Buddhist world and Buddhist history. This has had an adverse effect on the study of Chinese Buddhism in particular and also Indian Buddhism to the extent that sources are available. Even in the case of Japanese Buddhism, the model has skewed our understanding of a wide range of Pure Land materials and practices. One of the early studies that helped de-center this model was Gregory Schopen's seminal article, "Sukhāvātī as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 19/3–4 (August–September 1977). Schopen points out that in most Indian Mahāyāna texts aspiration for birth in Sukhāvātī does not operate to the exclusion of other Buddhist alternatives, but rather as one component in the larger *bodhisattva* path to enlightenment. This observation has had a ripple effect in the study of Pure Land Buddhism, and some of the essays in this volume benefit directly from it. Another, more recent challenge to this model is Robert Sharf's article, "On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch'an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China," *T'oung Pao* LXXXVIII (2002). Sharf questions the assumption that there was ever a school, movement, tradition, or patriarchal lineage of Pure Land Buddhism in China, and argues instead that Pure Land beliefs, practices, rituals, and imagery were diffused throughout Chinese Buddhism. In short, the Hōnen-Shinran model is not only inadequate for understanding the Chinese example but actually distorting.

The essays in this volume, without overtly seeking to dismantle the Hōnen-Shinran model, each take up its subject matter without presupposing this model as a paradigm. Matthew Kapstein's essay, "Pure Land Buddhism in Tibet? From Sukhāvātī to the Field of Great Bliss," describes what he calls a Pure Land orientation in Tibetan Buddhism, one that is not widely explored in Western scholarship. It includes aspiration

for rebirth in Sukhāvātī, devotion to Amitābha, and even recognition that the world has entered a degenerate age, all of which resonate with the Hōnen-Shinran model. But alongside these characteristics are a host of associations that set Tibetan Pure Land apart from this model: for example, Amitābha's tie to Padmasambhava, the semi-legendary tantric master linked to Tibet's adoption of Buddhism, and Pure Land's place in the tantric yoga practice of forceful transference (*pho-ba*) of the consciousness into the next rebirth at death. In the end Kapstein finds Schopen's proposal—that aspiration for Sukhāvātī is a generalized and widely disseminated goal operating in the framework of the Mahāyāna path to enlightenment—as more applicable to Tibetan Buddhism.

Daniel Getz's essay, "Shengchang's Pure Conduct Society and the Chinese Pure Land Patriarchate," reveals the constructed nature, *ex post facto*, of the lineage of Pure Land patriarchs in China. He does so by examining evidence about one such figure, Shengchang (959–1020), whom the Tiantai historians Zongxiao (1154–1215) and Zhepan (fl. 1258–1269) hold up as an exemplary proponent of Pure Land for organizing a religious circle like Huiyuan's fifth-century White Lotus Society. Getz demonstrates that Shengchang was grounded more explicitly in Huayan texts and doctrine. He also shows that the idea of pure conduct (*jingxing*), which Shengchang advanced, and the name White Lotus Society, which was widely disseminated in China, did not necessarily have the close associations with Pure Land that are often attributed to them. The net effect of Getz's essay is to reinforce the claims of Sharf (who relies on Getz's scholarship for some of his arguments). Though Getz does not treat the diffusion of Pure Land in Chinese Buddhism as the explicit theme of his essay, the evidence he presents certainly conforms to this view.

Jacqueline Stone's essay, "By the Power of One's Last Nenbutsu: Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan," examines the traditional Japanese Pure Land ceremony aimed at a deathbed vision of Amitābha and his celestial retinue coming to usher one into Sukhāvātī. This practice, accompanied by nenbutsu chanting and other ritual elements, was well known to Hōnen and Shinran, though Hōnen did not consider it a necessity and Shinran actually de-emphasized it. Stone elucidates how this ritual became highly developed and diversified in Japan. She also situates it in the context of a deeply rooted Japanese concern for one's state of mind at death, which inspired the persistence of such practices even though they were not pivotal to the Hōnen-Shinran model. In short, her essay reveals a vibrant culture of Pure Land beliefs and practices intersecting with Japanese Buddhism both within and outside of the Hōnen and Shinran traditions.

James Sanford's essay, "Amida's Secret Life: Kakuban's *Amida hishaku*," likewise demonstrates the engagement and vitality of Pure Land symbols outside the dominant model. Specifically, he examines and translates a work by the renowned medieval Shingon priest Kakuban (1095–1143), who makes a variety of exegetical associations between Amitābha and Dainichi Buddha. These produce an immanentist understanding of Amitābha compatible with the Shingon principle of attaining Buddhahood in this very body. Sanford thus shows the interpretive potential

of Pure Land discourse outside the Hōnen-Shinran matrix, and he identifies one strand of “heresy” in Shinran’s school, the so-called secret dharma (*hiji būmon*), as probably influenced by this Shingon explication of Amitābha.

Hank Glassman’s essay, “‘Show Me the Place Where My Mother Is!’ Chūjōhime, Preaching, and Relics in Late Medieval and Early Modern Japan,” also explores the capacity for interpretive transformation of Pure Land images and narratives outside the dominant model, in this case in the context of popular Japanese religious culture. Specifically, he focuses on the legend of how the *Taima Mandala*, a graphic representation of Sukhāvati with panels on three edges depicting passages from the *Pure Land Meditation Sutra* (*Kangyō*), came into existence in Japan. As the story goes, a bereft young woman, Chūjōhime, whose mother had died, receives the mandala in the form of a tapestry which Amitābha, appearing as a mysterious nun, has an assistant weave for her overnight. The tapestry provides a visual image of the place where Chūjōhime and her mother may be reborn. The *Taima Mandala* was known widely in medieval Japan and became the subject of itinerant preaching. Glassman shows how the Chūjōhime legend came to dominate references to the mandala, even though the story depicted in it is that of Amitābha and Sukhāvati. There was thus a merging of the two stories so that Chūjōhime’s legend, when presented, presupposed Amitābha’s and Sukhāvati’s story as an unspoken backdrop. This localization of the Pure Land narrative reflects the dynamic process by which Pure Land symbols could transform and proliferate, constantly pressing the boundaries of any closed reading of them.

Fabio Rambelli’s essay, “‘Just Behave as You Like; Prohibitions and Impurities Are Not a Problem’: Radical Amida Cults and Popular Religiosity in Premodern Japan,” explores this dynamic capacity for interpretive diversification in a different way. Unlike the other essays, he addresses the actual content and historical setting of Hōnen’s and Shinran’s teachings and seeks to explicate radical interpretations of them that led to anti-authoritarian religious expression. Among other things, Rambelli focuses on religious claims that Amitābha’s promise of birth in Sukhāvati gives people license to eat meat, drink liquor, and indulge in sex just as they please, all offenses in the eyes of the religious establishment. The essay presents such views as the logical extension of Hōnen’s and Shinran’s teachings, even while acknowledging their protests against them. Influenced by the Marxist historiography of Kuroda Toshio on the one hand and by Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas about “popular culture, carnival, the grotesque, and the quest for liberation” (p. 190) on the other, Rambelli analyzes these radical Pure Land assertions as revolutionary challenges by the subaltern to religious orthodoxy and domination. In short, imbedded in Hōnen’s and Shinran’s teachings was the very capacity to challenge the Hōnen-Shinran model that has come to prevail.

Richard Jaffe’s essay, “Ungo Kiyō’s Ōjōyōka and Rinzai Zen Orthodoxy,” examines Pure Land symbols and ideas as they were debated in Japanese Zen during the seventeenth century. Zen had a long tradition of interpreting Amitābha and Sukhāvati dating back to the *Platform Sutra* in China. The focus of Jaffe’s study is an inspirational

poem that Ungo Kiyō (1582–1659), a Rinzai master from the Myōshinji monastery, composed for a lay female adherent and patron of Zen. In it Ungo gives the Buddha an immanentist meaning as reflected in the opening lines of the poem: “When one awakens to Amida Buddha he is not far away, when one is deluded then he is in the distant West” (p. 221). The poem provoked a dispute in the Rinzai school between those who approved of Zen’s use of Pure Land themes and those who did not. The disagreement was further complicated by the appearance during this period of Ingen (1592–1673) and Ōbaku Zen in Japan. He advocated the nenbutsu *kōan*, which both Ungo and his opponents rejected. Jaffe’s study reminds us that there was a complex discourse on Pure Land in Japanese Zen too, apart from the established Pure Land schools.

Todd Lewis’s essay, “From Generalized Goal to Tantric Subordination: Sukhāvati in the Indic Buddhist Traditions of Nepal,” seeks to identify Amitābha and Sukhāvati in the beliefs, practices, and imagery of Newar Buddhism in contemporary Nepal. He finds Amitābha displayed ubiquitously as the Buddha of the West in four-image ensembles found on votive stupas. Sukhāvati, for its part, is a destiny frequently invoked not only in death and after-death rituals but also in tantric animal sacrifices. In addition, Amitābha is linked prominently to texts, rituals, and iconography associated with the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, though the bodhisattva tends to overshadow the Buddha in the popular mind. Lewis concludes that, drawing on Schopen’s proposal, “Sukhāvati rebirth remains an unsystematically articulated goal, merely one of many associations linked to venerating the stupas and bodhisattvas of the country” (p. 255). Of all the presentations of Pure Land Buddhism in this volume, Nepal’s example comes across as the most diffused and inchoate.

Finally, Charles Jones’s essay, “Buddha One: A One-Day Buddha-Recitation Retreat in Contemporary Taiwan,” provides an in-depth description and analysis of a religious retreat at a self-declared Pure Land temple in Taiwan. This one-day retreat offers lay Buddhists an abbreviated experience of monastic life. It is structured around eight sessions lasting about one-hour each in which the participants recite the Buddha’s name both orally and silently with the hope of developing mental concentration on Amitābha and Sukhāvati. With constant practice one’s mind becomes attuned to the Buddha’s mind and resonates with it. The temple and practices that Jones describes have a more clearly articulated Pure Land identity than the diffused image of Chinese Pure Land that Sharf presents. But the Taiwan case still diverges from the Hōnen-Shinran model in that adherents are expected to exert themselves religiously, instead of relying solely on the Buddha’s power, so that their efforts will work in tandem with his power.

These diverse and disparate examples reveal many faces of Pure Land Buddhism both in Japan and out. In some cases it has appeared as a clearly defined and distinct tradition with parallels to the Hōnen-Shinran model. In other cases Pure Land has operated as an amorphous and open-ended collection of themes without a cohesive center. It is as if the Pure Land discourse can function as an open semantic field in which a wide variety of beliefs, doctrines, and religious claims can plant their

meaning. And yet, for all its definitional problems, we still seem to recognize Pure Land Buddhism when even a few of its symbols or motifs appear in proximity to each other.

In this review I have focused on the net effect of these essays taken as a whole. In all likelihood most readers will single out one or another of them to focus on, rather than reading the book straight through. In fact, each essay has an integrity all its own and may convey a more powerful message in the context of other scholarly concerns. But by assembling them in this one volume, their total effect exceeds the sum of their parts. They destabilize the previous Hōnen-Shinran model and allow Pure Land Buddhism to be seen in its diversity and multifunctionality.

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