

REVIEWS

Henny van der VEERE, *A Study into the Thought of Kōgyō Daishi Kakuban*. Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2000. v + 318 pp. \$61.50 cloth, ISBN 90-74822-23-1.

HENNY VAN DER VEERE has done a great service for scholars of Japan's history and religions with this first substantial English-language study of the thought of Kakuban (1095–1143), one of a number of monks from the Heian and medieval eras whose reputations still languish in undeserved obscurity. What small reputation Kakuban does have derives from his being credited with bringing about a significant revolution in Shingon thought and practice by raising Amida *nenbutsu* practice to a prominent place in Shingon esotericism. Van der Veere, however, urges his readers to push beyond this view, arguing that Kakuban's fundamental project was a more broadly conceived effort to revive Shingon thought by bringing it back into line with the foundational teachings of Kūkai. Central to the thought of Kūkai was the idea that Shingon teaching encompassed and superceded the teachings of all other strains of Buddhism, a position he developed in great detail in his *Jūjūshinron* and later summarized in *Hizō hōyaku* (11, 44). Van der Veere believes that Kakuban's writings followed Kūkai's model, and were primarily aimed at situating the innovations in doctrine and practice he witnessed in his own time in the overarching context of Shingon thought. Through careful studies of some of Kakuban's works, most importantly the *Gorin kuji myō himitsushaku*, which is generally accepted as Kakuban's final and most comprehensive treatise, van der Veere strives to bring into focus Kakuban's broader enterprise in all its depth and complexity.

In carrying out his project, van der Veere proceeds with admirable care, first presenting a brief biography of Kakuban aimed at showing his intellectual development and the influences he encountered. Of particular interest to me was his description of Kakuban's founding of the Denbō-in on Mt. Kōya and the *denbōe* gatherings there that attracted numerous luminaries of the day, and retired emperor Toba in particular. This must have been an exciting time on Mt. Kōya, and though Kakuban was later banished for promoting views deemed unacceptably heterodox, the profile of the mountain certainly must have been raised in the capital by virtue of his activities.

Chapter 2 contains a detailed review of Kakuban's works and the efforts that scholars have made to date to establish their authenticity. The steady stream of texts and scholars covered makes for heavy going for a neophyte, but here van der Veere has provided an invaluable resource for researchers contemplating further study of the life and work of Kakuban.

Chapters 3 and 4 are the heart of the book; in these chapters van der Veere gives detailed treatments of Kakuban's doctrinal positions and his stance toward Pure Land thought. Chapter 3 begins with a recapitulation of the central contention of this work, that Pure Land thought was pervasive in Kakuban's time, but that his treatment of it was founded upon Shingon esotericism, and his focus was on properly situating Amida in that context (63).

Van der Veere further contends that Kakuban distinguished himself from the other monks of Kūkai's time to his own by his emphasis on the systematic study of esoteric doctrine, in contrast to the practice-centered approaches of his predecessors. This may be a slight exaggeration, but it is fair to say that Shingon monks were more known for their rituals for state protection and their ascetic practices than for their command of doctrine. Most of the rest of the chapter documents the closeness with which Kakuban followed the precedent of Kūkai and other early Shingon scholars, while also pointing out some of Kakuban's important innovations. Most importantly, in this section we see how Kakuban consistently asserted the supremacy of *mikkyō* esotericism over exoteric *kengyō*, very much after the manner of Kūkai, as a way to situate Shingon teachings as transcendent over all others.

In Chapter 4, van der Veere deals directly with Kakuban's stance toward Pure Land thought. He begins this chapter with the argument that the religious climate in twelfth-century Japan showed a shift in emphasis from this-worldly to otherworldly concerns, marked most prominently, of course, by the rise in interest in the prospect of salvation in the Pure Land of Amida. As is typical of scholars studying this era, he points to the rise of *mappō* thought, the idea that the world had entered the end of the efficacy of the teachings of the Buddha, as a primary mover of this shift in religious emphasis (108–9). Though Van der Veere can scarcely be faulted for following established scholarship, it is my feeling that the religious scene of eleventh- and twelfth-century Japan was much more varied and complex than this, that those considering this era carefully need not look very far to find signs of optimism that stand in contrast to the pessimism attributed to *mappō* thought. Still, it is certainly the case that Kakuban would have had to deal with Pure Land belief and *mappō* thought. And deal with it he did, in his *Amida hishaku*, the "Esoteric Explanation of Amida," for which van der Veere provides a full translation (111–14). Of particular interest here is Kakuban's statement of Amida's relationship to Dainichi (Amida is seen as an exoteric [*kengyō*] manifestation of the ultimate Buddha Dainichi), and his recasting of the concept of *ōjō*, usually understood to refer to posthumous birth in the Pure Land. For Kakuban, *ōjō* is equated with *jōbutsu*, the achievement of buddhahood, and because Kakuban held to the concept of *sokushin jōbutsu*, attainment of buddhahood in this life, it was in fact not necessary for a seeker to await "gradual" translation to the Pure Land of Amida; one could hope for *ōjō* in this very life (117–18).

Chapter 5 is van der Veere's *tour de force*. Here he provides his readers with a translation of Kakuban's *Gorin kuji myō himitsushaku*. Translating this work must have been a daunting task, requiring both broad knowledge of Shingon writings and a great deal of philological acuity. As advertised, this work stands as the most persuasive evidence in support of van der Veere's thesis that Kakuban's interests went well beyond Pure Land thought. We see Kakuban for example wrestling with religious Daoism (e.g., 167, 177–78), the ultimate form of the Buddha (*hosshin*, 190), and the issue of sudden and gradual (201–2), an issue on which he comes down squarely on both sides. Van der

Veere has handled this translation very effectively by inserting his own commentary and explication after every translated section, thus leading his readers through the very difficult conceptual terrain of this work and making the connections required for full understanding.

Van der Veere tells us that his approach is from the field of the history of ideas (8), and to the extent that he follows that approach, he is quite successful. I was less satisfied with his attempts to situate Kakuban's thought in the religious milieu of his time, and it could be argued that van der Veere's repeated emphasis on the importance of Pure Land and *mappō* thought at the time in fact seems to weaken his assertion that Kakuban's concerns were not confined to these things. While it is surely important to recognize the socio-historical context in which ideas are formed, if Kakuban was primarily concerned about the state of Shingon transmission and practice, then his writings would have been primarily aimed at those inside the Shingon establishment—as the *Gorin kuji myō himitsushaku* clearly was. I am usually critical of scholars of religion who neglect the historical contexts of their subjects, but in this case I believe the absence of such would have been preferable to the rather simplistic one van der Veere offers. After reading this study, I am left with the image of a Kakuban who was indeed operating in the realm of ideas, who saw his audience as other professional clerics and not the populace at large. His goal was not to steer more lay people toward Shingon practice (this was more likely the program of Dōhan and others in the Kamakura era [110]), but to reinvigorate the teachings and practices of the Shingon clergy. This is the point van der Veere wants to make, and I feel he succeeds even if somewhat in spite of himself.

Finally, a few comments about the book itself. First, Hotei Publishing deserves praise for not shying away from including Japanese orthography in the text along with the first occurrence of Japanese terms or names; without this, the text would have been far less intelligible to the scholarly community at which it is clearly aimed. At the same time, the very inclusion of Japanese characters reminded me again of the editorial challenges posed by this practice—which terms are glossed, and should glosses be included in the index as well? I was grateful for the inclusion of an index, which made it much easier to keep track of the players and concepts van der Veere was concerned with, though sometimes I was led astray. (I searched in vain for a reference to Dōhan on page 45, for example.) I longed for footnotes conveniently presented at the bottom of the page, but in this I am probably a voice crying in the wilderness. And to be fair, given the extensive annotation van der Veere has included, footnotes might well have taken over some pages. There were also periodic typographical errors and patches of awkward English, but given the subject, this book is nevertheless an important achievement, and I am glad we now have a solid, book-length study of the thought of Kakuban.

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