

REVIEWS



Jacqueline I. Stone, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment: Buddhism and Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 616 pages. Cloth, \$68.00. ISBN 978-0-8248-5643-4.

MANY FEAR DEATH, and that fear is undoubtedly related to its unknown and unavoidable nature. It is, of course, also extremely difficult to portray death positively—with terms such as beauty, cleanliness, and happiness. Death seems to be the opposite of beauty. The ancient Japanese seem to have viewed death along similar lines: as reflected in their native religious practices and underlying notions, life was a blessing but death was the most unfortunate event. However, the arrival of Buddhism and its predominance in early medieval Japan brought about alternative views of death and gradual transformations of the negative notion attached to death. In particular, the Pure Land line of Buddhist belief that encourages one to aspire to birth in Amida's realm of purity ventured the exposition of the absolutely unknown territory of afterlife. Furthermore, it reshaped the notion of death as something to even look forward to. Jacqueline I. Stone's new book, *Right Thoughts at the Last Moment: Buddhism and Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan*, tells us how this was possible, the meaning of the transformation of multifaceted dimensions of death-related concerns, and much more.

Stone's narrative is rich in examples from medieval Japanese literature of various genres, both religious and secular. She explores the idea and culture of deathbed rites and practices in early medieval Japan, focusing in particular on the late tenth through early fourteenth centuries. What lies at the core of deathbed practices is "mindful death," which entails a belief that people can be born in the Pure Land after death if they maintain right mindfulness at the time of death.

The historical context of these deathbed practices is outlined in the first chapter of this seven-chapter book, centering on main agencies and events—including Genshin's crucial pure land text *Ōjōyōshū* and the Twenty-Five Samādhi Society—that contributed to the emergence of deathbed practices in Heian, Japan. We learn that these major contributors are all deeply associated with medieval Tendai culture on Mt. Hiei, as Pure Land thought and practice emphasizing the Buddha Amida were developed within the Tendai tradition. Here, as you might have already surmised, their religious views on deathbed practices were complex—generating contradictions and tensions among diverse, intertwined lines of doctrinal thought and practices.

In the first chapter's introduction of the ideal of mindful death and deathbed practices, we are introduced to the newly emerged concept of the afterlife—the unexplained territory that existed prior to the advent of Buddhism in Japan. More importantly, according to Pure Land thought, the quality of the afterlife was dependent on each dead person's own deeds. Death was now a matter pertaining to an individual, regardless of his or her family affiliation or social status (33). Moreover, this new concept of death and afterlife carries a different type of social dimension, one based on a bond between people not by familial ties but by the transfer of merit in the Buddhist sense of social interaction. Thus one's achievement of mindful death and the implied birth in the Pure Land afterwards came to be considered beneficial for the deceased and the nearby survivors—whether they were family members or fellow practitioners within the same Buddhist lineage. As illustrated in chapter 5, a pious master's success at realizing mindful death served to validate the authority of his lineage; and yet his failure to do so endangered that same lineage, provoking an opponent's severe criticism. Therein lies great pressure on the individual. On the bright side, death could mean a blissful event, one that offered hope for a dying individual and people related to him. On the other hand, individual character and newly interpreted benefits of death in the Pure Land Buddhist sense also generated feelings of uncertainty at both ends regarding one's success in dying with right mindfulness. As examined in detail in the latter half of the book, a variety of deathbed practices, paraphernalia, and human aids were mobilized to help the dying person focus his mind and successfully achieve mindful death.

The ambivalence between hope and uncertainty was integral to Pure Land aspirations of mindful death and hence is an overarching theme of this book, as stressed by the author herself (80). In particular, it is crucial to understand the underlying soteriological problem with respect to deathbed practices. Hope arises as Amida's salvific power warrants birth in his realm of bliss, or, *ōjō*, even for evildoers, if they die with right mindfulness at the last moment; yet anxiety creeps in with the fear of one's failure to do so. The problem of anxieties and the *ōjō* of evildoers such as warriors are examined in depth in chapter 4.

If we pause a little to reflect here, this type of ambivalence or tension is bound to be detected in any *tathāgatagarbha*-related thought and practice. Given that it was early medieval Tendai scholastic culture in which Japanese Pure Land Buddhism emerged, it is natural to see that the ideal of mindful death resonates on multiple levels with characteristics of Tendai thought and its doctrinal foundations. Seen in this light, the rationale of *ōjō* by right mindfulness can be alternatively understood in a more Tendai-oriented fashion. We can read right mindfulness as meaning to restore the original, true state of mind, which is usually hidden in impurity. The Buddha Amida is a divinity hypostatizing our originally pure mind. The rationale of salvation through Amida is seen in medieval Tendai texts such as *Keiran shūyōshū*, a voluminous work that Stone cites on a number of occasions. The Tendai interpretation of Amida in this text shows that Amida's absolute salvific power comes from its ability to reach any kind of people. Identified as the transformed body of Buddha for ordinary worldlings with low capacities for enlightenment, Amida is associated with the sixth consciousness (Skt. *mano-vijñāna*), a superficial, conditioned layer of mind that can be recognized by any ordinary being (T 76, 2410, 553a). In the words of *Keiran*, it is the door that "opens to original enlightenment" (T 6, 2410, 517c); the door, in this case, is accessible to anybody. Most of the symbolism related to Amida and deathbed practices are closely connected to this Tendai esoteric reconfiguration of mind for enlightenment. The association of Amida with the western direction, examined in Stone's second chapter with examples of its real world manifestations, also lays its groundwork upon the complicated mandalic cosmology that reflects the structure of our mind. This type of doctrinally conversational exposition, although commented on in a fragmentary manner here due to limited space, is not offered in this book. Nevertheless, such explanations can sufficiently be found in the author's previous, theory-laden work on Tendai original enlightenment thought (STONE 1999). That said, it is certain that the reader's knowledge of medieval Tendai's major scholastic discourses would increase understanding of the subject matter of this book and the sheer joy of reading this masterpiece.

Returning to the Tendai influence on Pure Land thought and deathbed practices, a significant problem lies in the disjuncture besetting the concept of the Pure Land between theory and practice. As Stone examines in chapter 2, the Pure Land in Tendai's metaphysics of nonduality is in the mind as immanent truth, as mentioned above—not as an external place that one can "go to" with or without death (93–97). Despite Tendai scholars' efforts to reconcile these two views, Stone argues, deathbed practices reinforced a dualistic understanding of reality through the spirit of world renunciation, phrased as "shunning this defiled world and aspiring to the Pure Land" (81–127). Understandably, this world-denying attitude was bound to cause friction with social conventions; thus, it is interesting to grasp how religious ideals interacted with social reality in Stone's

investigation of the twin attitudes characterizing the ethos of deathbed practices. Social dimensions of religious ideals surrounding deathbed practices deserve to be evaluated as one of the many remarkably insightful analyses contained in this book. In particular, throughout her examinations of actual deathbed rites and practices aimed at exemplary death, the survivors' interpretations by signs or dreams, and deathbed attendants found in chapters 3, 4, and 6, Stone is keen to perceive socially significant functions and meanings underlying those issues. She convincingly shows that religious practices on the deathbed and related matters are, after all, sophisticatedly choreographed social performances, which were inseparable from the social context of the time (181–220). Chapter 7 traces the later history of deathbed practices in Japan. Most of all, in its discussion of later innovations and new developments in deathbed practices, it is interesting to see how remaining issues concerning deathbed practices in the early medieval period—issues including the tension caused by the dualistic understanding of the Pure Land—were picked up by later Buddhist thinkers such as Hōnen and Shinran, and influenced innovations on deathbed practices, in addition to bringing other radical changes with regard to the Japanese view of death and salvation.

Meticulously examining every important issue concerning mindful death, with ample case studies drawn from doctrinal texts, hagiographies, and ritual instructions, as well as *setsuwa* narratives, courtier diaries, and letters, *Right Thoughts* is extremely useful not only for scholars of Japanese religion but also for those who are interested in Japanese literature, premodern culture, and history. It will undoubtedly stand as one of the major studies on death in the fields of Japanese religions and religious studies for decades to come (note: while this review was being edited, it was announced that Stone's book had won the 2017 Toshihide Numata Book Award). Among many excellent qualities of this book, a particularly impressive one to be appreciated overall is that it offers an insight into a fundamental human desire for meaning and the role that forms of desire plays in religious ritual and practice. As Stone comments in conclusion, people strongly aspired to a mindful death because of the power of meaning it offered (382). That meaning, we may add, would of course occur in the promise of rebirth in the Pure Land. Stone's discussion of mindful death is an intellectually challenging invitation for us to contemplate how the ardent pursuit of meaning, order, and beauty could be the key driving force behind religious beliefs about and aspirations toward salvation.

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Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *The Lotus Sutra: A Biography*

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016.
257 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95/£24.95; eBook, \$28.07. ISBN
9780691152202 (hardcover); 0691152209 (eBook).

THIS IS A small book, but with great weight, and with a significance far beyond its diminutive physical size. Donald Lopez has a gift for writing concisely and lucidly, making this volume a welcome addition to the “Lives of Great Religious Books” series.

The first clue to the unusual nature of this book is in the title. What does it mean, and how does one write a “biography” of a classical text? For one thing, calling it a “biography” indicates that it (the *Lotus Sutra*) is an entity that grows and changes over the years and in different contexts. Lopez promises to trace the various roles the *Lotus Sutra* “has played in its travels through Asia, Europe, and across the seas to America.” And he delivers. Lopez has a gift for summarizing a vast amount of possible detail into a satisfying discourse. His summary of the content of the *Lotus Sutra* (only a brief ten pages), for example, of necessity leaves out a great deal of detail, but leaves one satisfied that the main points have been covered. This is followed by chapters on the *Lotus Sutra* in India, in China, in Japan, “across the Atlantic” (though actually from India and Nepal to Europe and then to Boston), and finally on the *Lotus Sutra* in the twentieth century and its journey “across the Pacific” from Japan to the Americas. Lopez leaves some (perhaps unanswerable) questions unanswered—such as “what is the real content of the *Lotus Sutra*?”—but he does offer answers to questions that can be answered. How did the text identified as the *Lotus Sutra* develop? How was it understood and used in various times and cultures such as India, Nepal, China, Japan, France, Boston, and elsewhere?