

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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This book is an informative survey and in-depth analysis of Japanese Buddhist deathbed practices in late Heian and Kamakura periods. It adds substantial knowledge to our understanding of medieval Japanese people's attitudes and behaviors at the last moment of their lives and of Japanese Buddhism in general. It is a thorough source and a well-conducted research work that benefits scholars of Japanese studies, religious studies, and Buddhist studies.

The book has an introduction and seven chapters. In her introduction, the author sets four goals for her book, which I shall assess below. There is also a brief discussion of doctrinal justifications for the significance of life's last moment in both Indian and Chinese Buddhism. The author further makes it clear that her main sources are *rinjū gyōgisho*, or Japanese medieval instructions for the time of death and *ōjōden*, or hagiographies of exemplary deaths resulting in blissful rebirths. Indeed, this book is a masterful textual analysis and is very light on material culture or theorizing.

Chapter 1 begins with a short prehistory of Japanese Buddhism's impact on death, focusing on Pure Land aspirations and *nenbutsu*. The chapter then proceeds to detailed discussions of (1) the beginning of Buddhist deathbed rituals in medieval Japan, marked by a series of events such as the

formation of Twenty-Five Samadhi Society, a group of Buddhist monks who pledge mutual assistance to achieve rebirth after death in Amida Buddha's Pure Land; (2) the scholar-monk Gen-shin's instructions on achieving birth in Amida's realm; and (3) the literati Yoshishige no Yasutane's collection of biographies of the Japanese people who supposedly have reached the Pure Land.

Chapter 2 discusses multiple issues: the importance of the idea of "shunning this defiled world and aspiring to the Pure Land" (*enri edo gongu jodo*) in the development of deathbed rituals; pilgrimage and sacred sites in Pure Land beliefs; the doctrinal tension between the immanent Pure Land and the afterlife Pure Land; gender issues in Pure Land aspirations; and "evil" people's prospects for a desirable rebirth.

Chapter 3 is a comprehensive analysis of ideal deaths that successfully result in rebirths in Pure Land. An exemplary death could involve foreknowledge of one's own death for advanced practitioners and receiving the Buddhist precepts for lay people. In most cases, a Buddhist deathbed ritual needs to be meticulously performed and all instructions carefully followed. The details of the ritual include the indispensable Buddha image, to which the dying person is connected with five-colored cords, the chanting of *nenbutsu* and other

appropriate Buddhist texts by both the dying person and those who assist him, the dying person's correct body gestures, as well as decorum observed by both the dying person and his or her caretakers.

Chapter 4 and part of chapter 3 discuss the signs of a desirable death as the signs are the evidence that a good rebirth happened. These signs typically include the appearance of purple clouds and wondrous fragrance, and chanting and music heard in the air. They can also happen in the forms of survivors' dreams and visions, or corpses defying decay. When such signs appear at the time of death, people are motivated to witness such occurrences, and the pollution resulting from regular deaths stops being a concern.

Chapter 5 is perhaps the most interesting part of the book as it discusses the possibility that deaths could go wrong and deathbed rituals could potentially not work. Just as the right mindset and actions at the last moment of life can be extraordinarily rewarding, any mistakes made in this period could also be extremely harmful. Very realistic hindrances come from distractions in the surrounding environment as well as physical pain and disability, all of which prevent the dying from concentrating his or her thoughts on Pure Land. In addition, there is a danger of attachment: an accomplished monk, because of his passing attachment to a small jar in his room, was reborn into a snake occupying the same jar (p. 232). Finally, there are demonic interferences that attempt to keep people out of Pure Land. Due to the above reasons, there have been unflattering reports (or at least rumors) about non-exemplary and even inauspicious deaths. In the cases of religious leaders and reputed Buddhist masters, such reports can raise doubts among their followers and be devastating to the sectarian institutions that they represent. To avoid such embarrassments, disciples of famous masters tended to be reluctant to make public their teachers' death scenes, sometimes defying the latter's wishes, as

happened in the case of the Zen master Enni (p. 248). The popular practice of reciting *nenbutsu* a great many times in medieval Japan could be considered an attempt to hedge by accumulating merit in one's lifetime rather than placing an all-in bet when one died.

Chapter 6 discusses the role of deathbed attendants who are usually semi-reclusive monks. Unlike prominent monks who are responsible for public functions and unwilling to incur death pollution, the semi-reclusive monks are ideal people to care for the dying's spiritual needs. In addition, precisely because of their reclusiveness, they are seen to be saintly and having the power to deliver people to Pure Land.

Chapter 7 begins with deaths on the battlefield that present special challenges to Pure Land aspirations. Beyond the fact that proper deathbed rituals are impossible to perform when fighting, the dying person's mind is set in the worst possible condition. Related are discussions of competing views that downplay the pivotal importance of death rituals. For instance, from Honen's strict "other power only" perspective, the obsession with death rituals is an attempt to save oneself by self-power. From a Zen perspective, the overemphasis on the death moment is not commendable either. The book ends with the decline of Buddhist deathbed rituals in early modern times due to changes in the general cultural ethos, especially in the form of criticism of such practices by Confucianism and Shinto.

As mentioned above, the author sets four aims for herself: the first aim is to advance our understanding of premodern Japanese approaches to death and dying. In my view, the author has done a wonderful job in this regard. The second aim is to explore the interfaces of doctrine and social practice. I believe it is a worthy endeavor because as the author rightly points out, the recent dominance of social history, ritual studies, and art history on this subject has unfortunately led to neglect of intellectual history. A quick check on re-

cent publications on the same topic finds title such as Karen M. Gerhart's *The Material Culture of Death in Medieval Japan* (2009) and Nam-lin Hur's *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System* (2007), both of which focus on "religion on the ground." While these are worthy and valuable researches in their own right, one does get the impression that studies of beliefs and doctrines are being crowded out of the field. It is rather evident that without a relatively self-coherent belief system, the wide spread of deathbed practices would not have been possible. In addition, given the vast medieval Japanese documents left to us, there is much room to conduct further studies. Hence, I believe the author's point is well received. The book's third aim is show how medieval Japanese people used Buddhism to address the personal crisis and social rupture that death poses. The four aim is to use exemplary deaths as a case study of extraordinarily demanding religious ideals. Insofar as many of the complexities and inner tensions in Japanese Buddhist deathbed rituals are analyzed in thought-provoking ways, these two goals are also reached.

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