

***Pure Land: History, Tradition, and Practice* (Buddhist Foundations Series). By Charles B. Jones. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2021. 264 pages. \$16.95 (paperback). ISBN 9781611808902.**

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Charles B. Jones' *Pure Land: History, Tradition, and Practice* is an excellent reminder that viewing the whole forest is every bit as important as investigating its individual trees. Not a textbook yet functioning in a somewhat similar role, this synoptic book serves as a wonderful resource for undergraduate teaching with its informal engagement of the reader. *Pure Land* is something of an extended introduction, expanding on the topics that a tree-level view would rehearse quickly in order to move forward. And because Pure Land Buddhism seems almost self-explanatory in its simplicity, it can be tempting to gallop beyond the signposts to the real project, having duly name-checked Amitābha. Fortunately, Jones offers the instructor—taking the book, as I do, to serve primarily as an undergraduate resource—the background by which any number of other standard-issue Buddhist topics may be engaged, and not simply in contrast to the alleged devotionism of the tradition. In this way, Jones presents Pure Land Buddhism not as an outlier in an otherwise philosophically oriented, Indo-centric milieu, but rather one of the many ways that Buddhism developed.

Jones divides the book into two relatively independent sections, “History and Development” and “Themes and Practices,” with the former taking up much of the book. While this imbalance reflects the necessity to explain briefly in the first section what becomes further elaborated in the second, it also reflects his concern to historicize Pure Land Buddhism, as he did successfully in his importantly revisionist *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Practice*. The hegemony, as it were, of Japanese Buddhism in marking the boundaries

of the Pure Land tradition as a distinct tradition is well challenged by this historicizing emphasis. The first section traces the movement of the tradition from its nebulous origins in India to its long development in China to its independent status as a tradition in Japan, thus foregrounding the continuity within changed geographical and temporal contexts. This section has twelve subsections compared to only five subsections in the second. Perhaps owing to Jones' specialty in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, there is greater weight given there, with historical developments traced to the present whereas the narrative of Japanese development ends centuries earlier. Again, this is a strength rather than a weakness, for the influence of the Japanese tradition in telling the story of Pure Land Buddhism is no secret. And this emphasis on development within China could lend itself to survey courses that cover Daoism and/or (Neo-)Confucianism, for although Jones does not wade into the deep waters of mutual influence among these traditions, his discussion of the Buddhist case provides the space for an instructor to do so.

The aspect of continuity, noted above, is a critical feature for specialists of other forms of Buddhism, for the relatively thin scriptural basis for Pure Land Buddhism—the three foundational sūtras—suggests an outlier position that Jones acknowledges immediately in the preface and that underlies the book. In *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism*, he addresses the perception of this position quite directly. Here Jones marshals a host of relevant sources, such as the *Vimalakīrti* and *Lotus*, to indicate that the *themes* central to the Pure Land tradition were present even if the practices were not. Through this first section, Jones calls attention to this thematic continuity, tracing its relationship to other themes up to present day East Asia. In particular, his discussion of the importance of *buddhānasmṛti*—translated as “contemplation” and when paired with *samādhi* becomes *nianfo* in China—grounds the origins of Pure Land Buddhism, however distinctly it developed, as Jones traces, in the most important elements of early Indian Mahāyāna, ones that arguably developed into tantric practices. Though a brief book at just over two hundred pages, it packs much into its survey, and could be paired well with other volumes, particular *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts*, in order to emphasize this thematic continuity and to disprove, from even a textual perspective, that outlier status.

Nevertheless, Jones does acknowledge that Pure Land Buddhism is a unique tradition to the extent that its primary practice—but not

its exclusive practice—is the ubiquitous contemplation/recitation of Amitābha’s name: “Whatever other practices a person may engage in, if he or she does not practice ‘Buddha-contemplation’ or ‘Buddha-recitation’...with the intention of gaining entry into Amitābha’s Land of Bliss, then it is not Pure Land practice”(p. 165). This statement introduces the second portion of the book, “Themes and Practices,” and Jones then reminds the reader of the earlier discussion in the first portion, noted above, that the development of the practice in China derived not from verbal recitation as such, but rather from contemplation or visualization. Over the course of the next few pages, Jones then leads the reader into the blurred lines of contemplation, visualization, and recitation in the early Chinese context, emphasizing fluidity of practice dependent on context. Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, it is well known, was—or became—a collection of many things, and several centuries passed before it cohered, if ever it did. This was very much the case in China too, with eminent scholars evaluating and debating the relative merits of specific scriptures or practices, determining the creation and development of particular traditions. Where the Indian case is too ambiguous and the Japanese case too overdetermined, the Chinese case allows for a relatively straightforward narrative of development, with Amitābha’s name remaining central to that tale. Again, Jones’ position as a China specialist proves valuable.

Much earlier, in the first section, shortly after discussing the vows made by the would-be Amitābha, the monk-Bodhisattva Dharmākara (who, in typical Indian Buddhist fashion, was a king who renounced his kingdom for robes) that grounds the tradition, Jones pauses to make a similarly important declaration upon which that section depends—and on which controversies surrounding the authenticity and efficacy of the tradition depend: “So to be clear, when we talk about the ‘Pure Land tradition’ as found throughout East Asia, we refer to the belief that ordinary people of limited time and ability can achieve rebirth in this pure land because Amitābha brings it about. The vows that he fulfilled in his ascent to buddhahood gave him the power to meet anyone—anyone at all—on their deathbed and bring them to the Pure Land” (p. 12). Over the course of the next hundred and forty pages, approximately, Jones situates this belief and these vows within the context of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism, focused largely on the religious elites who developed the tradition while acknowledging that the primary audience of the tradition is the “non-elite, non-virtuoso

practitioners” (p. 13). While some might lament the lack of focus on the “masses,” as it were, this perspective allows the reader to consider the extent to which those religious elites may have had ordinary “non-elite” concerns in mind—in addition, of course, to concerns for political and economic patronage. These elements, which are often the focus of academic work, are largely absent, for Jones appears to be interested primarily in addressing how the religious elites integrated or elevated Amitābha-centric practice. The problematic distinction between elite and non-elite concerns or practices has pervaded the study of Buddhism, of course, and its artificiality has been addressed in recent decades; nevertheless, it may be that Jones’ attention to the former suggests the extent to which the study of Pure Land Buddhism has suffered from an exaggerated emphasis on the latter.

Perhaps in regard to this distinction, I would call attention to one element where Jones’ book could have done more. This is not a criticism as such, for the brevity of the book is necessary in many respects, but the topic of death could have been given greater consideration. Jones does discuss the importance of the deathbed ritual and death in general in the Japanese context, but its importance with respect to the Indian context, given the centrality of the topic of rebirth in the narrative of Dharmākara, seems to demand more. And in the Chinese context the pervasive concern regarding death and the afterlife in the development of Buddhism has been well documented by Stephen Teiser, for example, and it is also well documented that Buddhists and Daoists competed, so to speak, to prove the superior efficacy of their practices regarding death and the afterlife.¹ Death was not a concern for the non-elite alone; given the primacy of death in the narrative of the Buddha’s own going forth, more attention to death would not seem unwarranted or excessive. In the stages of the path literature of Tibet, inherited from late Indian Buddhism, death looms very large as catalyst, much as it does for Pure Land Buddhism.

More to the point, it may be that the relative outlier status of Pure Land Buddhism in certain Euro-American academic and other contexts relates to death. It is well documented that the magic/superstition of the religious elements of Buddhism were subordinated to its

1. For example, Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) and *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994).

philosophical and scientific insights, generating a Buddhist modernism suitable for the heirs of the Enlightenment. But the transmission of Buddhism to the West occurred when death as a pervasive reality was becoming undone, even as world wars and genocide ascended. Death became, to a certain extent, a human effort rather than a natural fact, and the rapid ascent of biomedicine has made death—almost always shoved into the psychological corners—seem distant, vague. Pharmaceuticals, in tandem, have made physical suffering a status marker of sorts: why undergo *this* pain when *that* pain-reliever can alleviate it completely? The fighting of wars has been outsourced to a smaller subsection of the American population, and private armies have made the cost of war a corporate enterprise. Indeed, the embodied facts of the first aspect of the First Noble Truth have become, for a small segment of the developed world, all but unknown, or something of a dirty little secret to hide. And yet, the Covid pandemic has altered that reality for very many people, making death and chronic physical suffering very real and very apparent. Even before this, however, Buddhist practitioners in the West have become proponents of working in hospice settings, engaging again with the reality of death and with care more generally. Hence, the focus on death and rituals to mitigate its effects by taking rebirth in Amitābha's care in the Pure Land tradition deserves greater attention.

Has the banality of death made it easy to ignore, despite—or because of—its ubiquity? Whatever the case may be, perhaps the pandemic will mark a turning point in the study of Buddhism, bringing its focus on death to the fore. If the study of Buddhism over the last century has been oriented primarily towards the aspect of wisdom, in whatever philosophical register, resulting in neglect of its care/compassion aspect, such a turning point would be significant, and the relevance of Pure Land Buddhism would become clear. In unpacking the historical development and thematic continuity of this tradition, with *Pure Land: History, Tradition, and Practice* Jones has offered to a wide audience the opportunity to investigate the potential for such a turning point.

