

Book Reviews

Fabio Rambelli

Vegetal Buddhas – Ideological Effects of Japanese Buddhist Doctrines on the Salvation of Inanimate Beings

Italian School of East Asian Studies Occasional Papers 9. Kyoto 2001.

While a number of studies treat the Mahayana Buddhist notion of Buddha nature (*bussbō* 佛性) of human beings and animals, the author of this book under review investigates the less known perception of the Buddha nature of plants and rocks. To my knowledge, this is the first book-length treatment of this topic in a Western language. In the introduction the author clarifies subject and method of his study (in distinction to mainstream Japanese and Western scholarship) as follows: 1. Buddhist doctrinal teachings in connection with social and ideological issues, 2. folk religious ideas and practices in connection with doctrinal foundations, and 3. the context of the contemporary discourse on nature and ecology.

Accordingly, the first chapter treats “Buddhist doctrines of the nonsentient” in history, the second chapter (“The discourse of the nonsentient and its cultural ramifications”) presents examples of folk religious (or Shintō) practices, and the third chapter (“Ideological effects”) focuses on contemporary issues such as the Japanese concept of nature and the problem of ecology. In his introduction, the author presents also his interpretative concepts for different kinds of discourse on the environment, namely *ecosophia* (derived from a proposition by Felix Guattari) referring to doctrinal denials of Buddha nature for nonsentient beings, *ecognosis* signifying Tendai and Shingon teachings of the Buddha nature of nonsentient beings, and *ecopietas* meaning widespread folk religious beliefs in the “sacredness of the natural world and material objects.” (3)

The first chapter begins with the distinction that scriptures such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* declare inanimate beings as “devoid of the Buddha-nature,” whereas Buddhist discourse in China develops the idea that “nonsentient beings” or “plants become buddhas.” (8) Particularly Tiantai Buddhism fostered this development, which subsequently was taken up by Tendai in Japan. Hence, the author examines a number of Tendai texts which treat the issue of nonsentient beings endowed with Buddha nature. One implication of such a discourse would be the following: “If nonsentients became buddhas, the cosmic order ... would also undergo an irreparable change. One day, when everyone and everything had reached the state of buddha, the cosmic hierarchy of beings lying at the foundations of social control in medieval Japan would dissolve into an egalitarian society ...” (21) From here, also the important ethical question arises, as it is formulated in the *Kankō ruijū*: “If plants are endowed with a mind, does the action of cutting them constitute a karmic sin like that of killing living beings?” (26) In the second part of this chapter the author widens the focus from Tendai discourse to Shingon

Buddhism, Shinran, Dōgen, and Nichiren. Eventually, the observation of funerary stones for trees and “memorial stūpas for plants” (*sōmoku kuyōtō* 草木供養塔) in Yamagata prefecture leads to the next chapter since it “raises the question of the relations between Buddhist elite discourse and popular practices ...” (40)

In the second chapter the author discusses “non-philosophical and extradoctrinal texts about the divine nature of trees and their wondrous powers.” (41) The findings lead the author to challenge traditional scholarship, which assumes that the Buddhist teaching of plants becoming buddhas derives from indigenous (“Shintō”) beliefs in sacred trees. Instead, he argues, this teaching “constituted a radical departure from pre-Buddhist ideas and practices. The chaotic world in which plants speak, described in the [*Hitachi*] *Fudoki*, turned out to be the absolute and unconditioned Reality of enlightenment, in which plants spoke the absolute Dharma.” (51) Buddhism “actually gave importance to trees as sacred entities” by sacralizing Buddhist (wooden) statues and places and by changing *kami* into buddhas through the idea of *bonji suiijaku*. (57) The “appropriation of trees as emblems of local deities signified the control of Buddhist institutions over the sacred.” (Ibid.) The author concludes this chapter by stating, “the Buddhist discourse on the salvation of plants did not aim to sanction nature’s soteriologic power. Its main goal was a very different one, with a political and ideological character.” (67)

In the third chapter, the author argues that “the attribution of absolute value to the whole of reality, and especially to the nonsentient, transformed everything into a sacred dimension and served to create a Buddhist ideology of domination that justified the *kenmitsu* institutions’ control over the territory.” (67) Referring to authors such as Umehara Takeshi and David Shaner (who claims the existence of a Japanese “ecocentrism” versus Western “homocentrism”), Rambelli states that the “notion of a love for nature that is unique to the Japanese is often a conceptual reference point for attitudes of nationalism and cultural chauvinism.” (70) Particularly he criticizes such kind of *nibonjin-ron* (ideological discourse that the Japanese are a unique people) as “reversed Orientalism.” He further points out the Japanese noun *shizen* 自然 was coined only in the Meiji period due to the encounter with the West. (72 f) Returning to medieval Japan, the author demonstrates that Buddhist prohibitions to fell trees were issued in times of increased wood cutting and building, in other words, when temple forests were threatened by villagers and wood cutters. By declaring trees as sacred and the temple lands as Buddha land (*bukkokudo* 佛國土) or as sacred land (*kekkaï* 結界), Buddhist institutions fought economic transformations of the time.

Another stereotype criticized by the author is that the Buddhist doctrine of trees endowed with Buddha nature derives from Japanese animism. Based on textual evidence he argues that these documents were “written in order to respond to certain contemporary problems of a social and ideological character.” (85) However, since temples in medieval times also permitted sinful activities such as hunting, fishing, agriculture and felling trees under the condition that the perpetrators had to atone by offering part of their harvest to the Buddha (i.e. to the

temple), they effectively controlled the use of land and other resources. The author concludes that “the idea of plants’ salvation did not stem from environmental attitudes, but was primarily part of a larger ideological discourse aimed at legitimizing the place of Buddhist institutions in medieval Japanese society. Even though aesthetic and ecological concerns were not completely absent, they were essentially part of an ideological project aimed at accumulating for temples and their leading lineages what Pierre Bourdieu has called ‘symbolic capital.’” (94)

While this book’s main thrust of argument seems to be convincing, the author’s choice of interpretative labels for Buddhist discourse on the environment, especially that of *ecosophia* (doctrinal denials of Buddha nature for nonsentient beings), are not really understandable for the present reviewer, they appear to be rather arbitrary. Leaving this minor criticism aside, the book’s major contribution is that it challenges traditional and widespread perceptions of “nature” in Japan. Even if one does not agree with the author in part or in the whole, it can be assumed that this study will trigger a new and lively discussion on the topic.

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Payne, Richard K. And Kenneth K. Tanaka.

Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitabha.

Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 17. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. 304 pages.

This work consists of nine essays on aspects of Pure Land Buddhism in Asia; it was produced by a group of well-known Western scholars originally in relation to a 1995 conference at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, California. The book is another entry in the Kuroda Institute’s very useful series on East Asian Buddhism. As is usual for a conference volume, the topics are somewhat eclectic despite the general theme.

Matthew Kapstein’s essay discusses how Pure Land imagination and practice had a strong, generalized, nonsectarian presence throughout Tibetan Buddhism. Daniel Getz’s essay studies the Song period Chinese monastic figure Shengcheng, who was in later generations identified with a Pure Land lineage but who in his own time displayed no clear sectarian affiliation. Jacqueline Stone’s essay examines the elaboration of Japanese Heian period nenbutsu practices specially associated with the deathbed and the related debates over the karmic logic of those practices. James Stanford’s essay deals with the Japanese Shingon priest Kakuban, whose schismatic notions about esoteric “secret nenbutsu” Pure Land teachings came to constitute one of perhaps six different strains of Japanese Pure Land thought. Hank Glassman’s essay analyses the Japanese cult of Chūjōhime, a mythic figure whose story was closely associated with Amitābha but which acquired a strong independent cultic identity as a special source of women’s salvation. Fabio Rambelli’s essay discusses the energetic, interactive fluidity of medieval Japanese interpretations of