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Visions of Sukhāvātī: Shan Tao's Commentary on the Kuan Wu-Liang-Shou-Fo.
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For many of us who work in the halls of academia, the period we spent researching and writing our doctoral dissertations holds particularly nostalgic appeal. As we go through our daily rounds of teaching, grading, committee work, professional work, and all the other tasks that beset us, we look back on those days with fondness, remembering how there was a time when we could devote all our energy to the single task of producing what would be our *magnum opus*, and had the luxury of focussing on this work with relatively few distractions.

But as we remember that time, we wonder what it would have been like to have that opportunity again, to be able to revisit our dissertation topic with the perspective and maturity of our later careers. Occasionally, a scholar takes the opportunity to do just that. For example, several years ago, the anthropologist David M. Schneider went back to his materials on kinship in Yap and applied a new theoretical sophistication to them that he had lacked during his period of fieldwork and writing, with the result that he was able to offer an interpretation much deeper and nuanced than had been possible in his younger days. (Schneider 1984).¹

Julian Pas now adds his name to the roster of those who take the initiative to dust off their doctoral dissertations and re-write them from the perspective of a seasoned academic. In 1973, Pas submitted his dissertation on Shan-tao (613-681) and his commentary on the *Kuan-wu-liang-shou-fo Ching* (“Sūtra on the Visualization of the Buddha of Infinite Life,” hereafter “Meditation Sūtra”) to the faculty of McMaster University. Now recently retired from the University of Saskatchewan after two and a half decades of teaching and research, he has gone back and polished his text, sharpened his analysis, and published his findings again, and the results are impressive.

The title of this long book is somewhat misleading, as it deals with many more topics than just the single commentary on the Meditation Sūtra. He begins with a consideration of the origins of Pure Land Buddhism beginning with its Indian roots. He evaluates the arguments of several French scholars to the effect that the buddha Amitābha derived from Iranian solar worship, as well as theories of Hindu origins. Ultimately, he rejects Iranian and Hindu influences as an explanation of the origin of Pure Land Buddhism, carefully demonstrating that all of the elements of Pure Land thought (a devotional stance, the conception of the buddha as a being of infinite life/light, and so on) may be found nascent in earlier Buddhist movements. While outside influences may have contributed some of the details of Pure Land thought and practice, the core ideas are all explainable in terms of Buddhist antecedents. He locates the earliest rise of a recognizable Pure Land movement in North India and Kashmir between the first and second centuries BCE, whence it traveled eastward through Central Asia and finally made its way to China.

Next, Pas turns his attention to the Meditation Sūtra itself, analyzing its origin, authorship, structure, and dissemination. After reviewing other scholarly theories, he hazards his own view that the text is of Indian or Central Asian authorship rather than Chinese, but that it contains many Chinese interpolations. He bases this view on an analysis of the parallelisms of the original text, which reveal a basic set of ten meditations on the Pure Land and its governing buddha, where meditations one through five concentrate on the “external splendors” (of the land and environment) and correspond to meditations six through ten on the “internal splendors” (of Amitābha and his bodhisattva helpers). The other six meditations that appear in the Chinese text, including the three meditations on the nine grades of rebirth, all appear to stem from later interpolations.

This section also helpfully places the sūtra in the context of a group of sūtras which also deal with the visualization of a particular buddha and his land, a group that Pas calls the *kuan*, or “contemplation” sūtras. Several are expositions of the Hīnayāna method of *buddhānusmṛti*, while others show more Mahāyāna tendencies (such as taking a Mahāyāna figure such as Samantabhadra as its object, or making use of iconographies of all buddhas of the ten directions). Pas suggests a North Indian origin for all of these texts, and shows that the Meditation Sūtra is the most developed and organized of the lot, and eventually became the most popular.

Because this group of sūtras deals with the contemplation of a number of buddhas and bodhisattvas, Pas next tackles the question of the origins of the Amita cult. (Pas prefers “Amita as a transliteration of the buddha’s Chinese name, rather than “Amitābha.”) While acknowledging that Pure Land practices lay claim to theoretical bases in Indian texts by Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, he is careful to argue that the cult of Amita is not a “school” per se, but a movement which came to China very early in the history of Chinese Buddhism, and gradually eclipsed all other Buddhist devotional cults, as attested by the shift in Buddhist sculpture and iconography towards an increase in depictions of Amita to the detriment of other figures. Thus, while the “school” had its origins in India or Central Asia, it was in China that Amita triumphed and made Pure Land practice synonymous with his own cult.

In chapter three, Pas moves on to recount the life of Shan-tao. Pas begins with a synopsis and evaluation of the primary sources for information on Shan-tao’s life, both texts and stone inscriptions. He then gives an account of Shan-tao’s life and monastic career, noting discrepancies as they occur between sources (as for instance the different understandings which the primary sources have of his relationship with Tao-ch’o). In this section, Pas is primarily interested in highlighting Shan-tao’s early affiliations with San-lun philosophy and sūtra study, which he eventually gave up because they did not suit his temperament. He was by nature more mystical and practical than philosophical, and greatly affected by

his experiences in meditation and by art, especially paintings of the Pure Land and the poetic flights of the Pure Land scriptures. He shows Shan-tao as an accomplished painter and poet himself, and offers evidence showing that the story of Shan-tao committing suicide to hasten his entry into the Pure Land was a later fabrication (Pas claims it was one of Shan-tao's disciples that did this).

In the course of relating Shan-tao's life, Pas begins his exposition and defense of the major thesis of the book: that Shan-tao is not to be understood as a forerunner of Jōdo Shinshū theology, preaching pure invocation of Amita Buddha's name and then relying on his "other-power" to take the practitioner to the Pure Land at death. Rather, Shan-tao in Pas' reading is a serious teacher of meditation who counselled his followers to strive in the practice of buddha-contemplation. This represented an opening up of meditative practice to include laypeople, but Pas claims that Shan-tao aimed his teaching at serious laypeople who had the time and inclination to put Shan-tao's methods to work.

Chapter four deals with Shan-tao's other writings, a topic that helps to advance Pas' argument by showing that an emphasis on serious contemplative practice constitutes a major motif in all of Shan-tao's thought. For instance, a work entitled "Meritorious Methods of the Samādhi [existing in] Contemplating the Sea of Characters of Buddha Amita" in English (T.1959, 47:22-30) is a meditation text aimed at serious practitioners, not common folk. In this work he stresses the importance of ethical purity as a preparation for the practice, and the practice itself is quite strenuous. The remainder of the texts Pas discusses are liturgical in nature, with occasional answers to doubts about Pure Land practice.

At last, then, Pas comes to the central concern of his book: a consideration of Shan-tao's commentary on the Meditation Sūtra itself. Here, Pas provides context for understanding Shan-tao's approach to the text by surveying previous Chinese commentaries upon the scripture by Chih-yi, Ching-ying Hui-yuan, and Chi-tsang. Through contrast with these predecessors, Pas demonstrates Shan-tao's uniquely practical approach to the text. Where other commentators focus on the sūtra's doctrinal content, drawing parallels with other categories of Chinese Buddhist doctrinal classification, Shan-tao takes the text fully at face value, and draws out its implications for concrete religious cultivation. His concern, in short, is to show how to put the meditations outlined in the sūtra into practice.

Beginning with chapter five, Pas switches to using Shan-tao's commentary on the Meditation Sūtra to draw out his thought on various topics, each of which gets a chapter: the human situation as opposed to the conditions of the Pure Land, the place and practice of meditation, the place of ethical action, the place of the oral invocation of Amita Buddha's name, and how one achieves rebirth in Sukhāvātī. Each chapter is richly textured, and the arguments are too complex and nuanced to be summarized in this already over-long review, and so I will briefly summarize a few main points in order to stimulate the reader's interest.

First, as mentioned above, Pas is interested in demonstrating that Shan-tao recommended and taught a rigorous, if somewhat simplified, method of meditation for serious practitioners. He did not, as many believe, recommend the sole practice of oral invocation, although he certainly did not discount the value of this practice for those in dire straits or at the end of their life with no other hope.

Second, ethics are indeed very important to Shan-tao; without the backdrop of an ethical life, the meditation on Amita will not be productive. This runs counter to the concept of “single-calling” that arose later in Japan and subsequently read back into Shan-tao’s thought. Shan-tao never thought that simply calling Amita’s name while giving up on personal ethical reform was sufficient, and he always stressed the importance of making and keeping vows to purify conduct.

Third, in accordance with the contents of the sūtra itself, Shan-tao never taught that attaining rebirth in the Pure Land was the single goal of practice. Rather, practicing the visualizations given in the sutra serves the purpose of attaining a vision of Amita Buddha *in this life*. Rebirth in Sukhāvātī after death comes as a natural concomitant of this achievement, but it is not the primary goal of Shan-tao’s meditative methods.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that, despite Shan-tao’s adoption into the patriarchy of the Jōdo Shinsū and Shinran’s assertions that only Shan-tao really understood the buddha-mind, the two men had very different conceptions regarding the procedures and goals of religious practice, and so Jōdo Shinshū-based scholarship on Shan-tao has to be weighed carefully against the textual evidence of Shan-tao’s own life and thought.

In the end, Shan-tao seemed to espouse a double standard of Pure Land practice, which he derived and supported from the teachings on the Nine Grades of Rebirth. His main practice was aimed at people who were willing to devote significant time and energy in keeping the precepts and working to attain a vision of Amita. Oral invocation was acceptable as a beginning point for this practice, and it was also good for those evil people who, coming to the moment of their death and realizing that only Hell awaits them, sincerely call upon Amita’s name for rescue. Such people would indeed attain rebirth in Sukhāvātī, and from there they were guaranteed never to return to the sea of birth-and-death, but it was still an inferior practice that led to an inferior rebirth in the Pure Land.

Pas ends with an assessment of Shan-tao’s significance for Chinese Buddhism and for the study of visualization exercises in the history of religious practice, an issue he explores by comparing Shan-tao’s mystical methods with those of an 18th century Jesuit priest who utilized Ignatian visualizations.

This is a rich and rewarding book, and a must-have for the bookshelf of all who seriously study Pure Land Buddhism. The problems that I had with it were mainly stylistic: there are too many sentences that elide into uncredited quota-

tions, and the final copy could have been better proofread (there are just enough misspellings to be distracting, and the mysterious phrase “welcome datacomp” appears on page 273). Pas draws many comparisons with Christian practice that are not always to the point and divert attention away from the main argument. However, such instances are quite rare, and I wholeheartedly recommend this book for graduate students and scholars.

References

¹ Schneider, David M. *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.