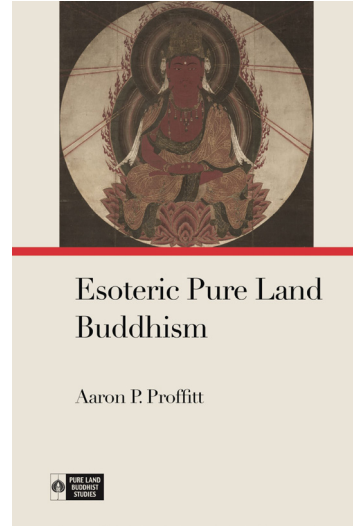


Book Review



Aaron P. Proffitt. *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023. 468 pp.

The historical interplay between tantric contemplative practices and the veneration of Buddha Amitābha has primarily directed scholarly discussions on Pure Land esoterica towards Indo-Tibetan and Chinese sources. This emphasis is understandable given the significant cross-pollination that occurred between these Mahāyāna strands, particularly in the refinement of their doctrines and ritual practices. However, it is important to acknowledge that the synthetic nature of Pure Land orientations extends beyond these regions. Proffitt's *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* offers the academic community a renewed perspective on established scholarship in this field, facilitated in part by his inclusion of an annotated English translation of the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* 祕密念佛抄 [Compendium on the Secret Contemplation of Buddha] by the distinguished scholar-monk Dōhan 道範 (1179–1252). This publication presents a timely opportunity for interested readers to engage with a fresh interpretative lens on the intersections of these important and often overlooked Buddhist traditions.

In his work, Proffitt undertakes the substantial task of providing a critical and highly informative overview of past attempts by west-

ern and eastern scholars at the categorization and historicization of Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhist traditions. His summary serves as a valuable foundation for his subsequent analysis of tantric elements woven into the fabric of Pure Land orientations in Japan. The author defines 'Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism' (*mikkyō jōdokyō* 密教淨土教) as approaches focused on achieving rebirth in a pure land through the utilization of various tantric ritual techniques and interpretations. He elucidates how during the Kamakura period (1195–1333), Pure Land Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism were not necessarily operating 'as distinct schools or sects but functioned as heterogeneous and mutually informative spheres of inquiry and specialization and at times as polemical discursive positions employed by Buddhists in specific contexts' (4). Hence, he steers the discussion towards the coexistence of Shingon 真言 and Shin 真, two prominent Japanese Buddhist traditions that were historically regarded as incompatible and mutually exclusive, while challenging the efficacy of terms such as 'Esoteric Buddhism' and 'Pure Land Buddhism' as meaningful designations for the diverse array of relational practices and doctrines encompassed under the broad rubric of Mahāyāna. While the continued use of these categorical labels may be to some degree unavoidable, Proffitt recognizes them as heuristic devices posited with the anticipation of their eventual deconstruction. It is crucial to acknowledge the inherent limitations of these categories, which risk oversimplifying, reifying, and, just as much, politicizing the traditions they purport to represent, rendering them as seemingly self-contained and autonomous entities within academic and partisan discourses.

Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism is sectioned into nine chapters inclusive of an appendix that contains an annotated English translation of all three fascicles of Dōhan's *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* based on Proffitt's Ph.D. dissertation.¹ This work presents a well-structured examination of the scholarly, social, and historical contexts that led

¹ Proffitt, 'Mysteries of Speech and Breath'. An English translation of the first fascicle of the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō* appeared in Halkias and Payne, eds., *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts*.

to the emergence of Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhist interpretations of Mahāyāna. The first chapter of the book examines how early Japanese and Western scholars of Buddhism construed Mahāyāna, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism as discrete areas of academic study despite the fact that throughout the evolution and historical progression of these traditions, their boundaries have remained permeable and subject to reciprocal influences. This artificial segregation of interconnected domains of religious knowledge has been perpetuated through a normative historiography. This historiography continues to shape and inform contemporary sectarian debates within the cultures of East Asian Buddhism and Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline at large.

In his second chapter, Proffitt shows the prevalence of the aspiration for rebirth in Sukhāvati 極樂淨土 (Jp. Gokuraku jōdo) across a variety of exoteric and esoteric Mahāyāna literary genres and among notable historical figures in China. Chapter Three demonstrates how the aspiration for Sukhāvati played a crucial role in the revitalization of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism in Kōyasan 高野山 during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, while the portrayal of the Buddhist master Kūkai 空海 (774–835) as a salvific figure akin to a bodhisattva was deeply rooted in Sukhāvati and Amitābha devotionism. Chapter Four centres on Dōhan's biography, looking into his formative years spent in Kōyasan and Kyoto. Proffitt shows that Pure Land contemplation played an important role at every stage of Dōhan's life and education. The following chapter provides a panoramic view of early medieval Japanese Buddhism in the context of Dōhan's writings within the broader framework of Kamakura Buddhism. Proffitt offers discerning readings of Dōhan's surviving works, looking into the impact and lasting influence of his contributions on Tendai 天台, Shingon, Zen 禪, and Pure Land in Japan. Chapter Six delivers a comprehensive thematic exposé of the contents of all three fascicles of the *Himitsu nenbutsu shō*. The author offers a nuanced understanding of the *himitsu nenbutsu* (Skt. *buddhānusmṛti*) as an exoteric and esoteric ritual technology that leads to spiritual attainment. His analysis highlights the multidimensional function of the *himitsu nenbutsu* for Buddhist soteriology, emphasizing its all-inclusive nature and importance for practitioners seeking

liberation. In the next chapter, the author posits assorted ontological and epistemological interpretations of Dōhan's views on Buddha Amitābha, while in Chapter Eight, the ordinary, deeper, extraordinary, and secret readings of *himitsu nenbutsu* are discussed. Chapter Nine focuses on varying attributes, perspectives, and interpretations of Sukhāvātī. The book concludes with a summary of its contents, advancing critical insights into Dōhan's works and highlighting promising areas of their broader significance for future exploration and research.

To conclude, Proffitt exhibits mastery of the subject matter. He draws upon an impressive array of primary and secondary sources to illustrate how esoteric varieties of Pure Land Buddhism evolved over time within the wider religious milieu of medieval Japan, integrating and absorbing elements from other Buddhist practices and responding to the changing social and spiritual needs of its adherents. The scholarly rigor of his undertaking is evident through the extensive citations and references found throughout the book, rendering his work an invaluable resource for anyone seeking to explore a sizable bibliography on Pure Land Buddhism and its East Asian interpretations. Some uninitiated readers may find certain sections to be challenging to navigate, especially the subtler aspects of tantric practices that require some basic experiential familiarity. Nevertheless, with a keen eye discerning between emic and etic perspectives, Proffitt provides his readers with a well-rounded, balanced, and insightful understanding of the secret interpretations of Pure Land Buddhism in Japanese contexts. *Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism* is a sophisticated study of Japanese Pure Land developments in Vajrayāna environments and an essential reading for religious studies scholars, practitioners, and all students of Buddhism.

References

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GEORGIOS T. HALKIAS
The University of Hong Kong

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