

of pan-Asian Buddhism in general. On the other hand, his “continuing identity” within Japan was focused in his *tama* or *tamashii*, meaning something like “spirit”—a term which Carr correctly distinguishes from the more wooden *reikon* which may be found in Buddhist contexts (cf. pp. 78–79). Thus, the position of Shōtoku as a revered guide and guardian of the Japanese people in general could come to be established. This did not deny the Buddhist luggage and messages which the cult carried forward, but it became self-defining and self-authenticating through its own perceived spiritual power.

Plotting the Prince is an inspiring guide through the highways and byways of an iconography and hagiography that developed their own dynamics. Some readers might be assisted by a slightly more pedestrianized sequence from history to legend to unbridled hagiography, and by an earlier location of the relative significance of the tenth century narrative *Shōtoku Taishi denryaku* (“The Chronological Legend of Prince Shōtoku”) and the *Shōtoku Taishi eden* (“Illustrated Legends of Prince Shōtoku”), which is not really explained until the beginning of part 2. Others however, will enjoy the rather more thematic presentation, be happily dazzled by an astonishing array of varied detail, and allow themselves to be guided into sheer appreciation, both visual and intellectual, by a skilled art specialist.

Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan. Topics in Contemporary Buddhism. By John K. Nelson. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013. 320 pages. Paper \$33.00.

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It is a pressing matter for all religions throughout the world that the modern way of life, as a result of rapid changes in society, draws the attention of ordinary people away from religiousness and spirituality. It is even more so in Japan, one of the most advanced countries in the world. So what can a religion like Buddhism, or rather the religious organizations of Buddhism, do in response? This book does not give a direct answer to that question. However, it does give plenty of examples of what could be done in order to stop Buddhism from disappearing completely from the everyday lives of Japanese people and their communities.

Although religions are hardly ever in a state of ideal unity, Japanese Buddhism is in an exceptionally bad situation in this regard, being marked by extreme factionalism. With so many differing ideas and different leaders its disunity is unsurprising, especially given its present condition of possible collapse. It is against such a backdrop that John K. Nelson focuses on a number of remarkable individuals, who, through their arduous, inventive, and pro-active work, promote the best features of Buddhism to make it more attractive to modern people. These revolutionary Buddhist clergy members seek to restore people's faith in Japanese Buddhism, not through separate sects but through a universal way of thinking, according to which a religion or religious organization ought to exist for the purpose of caring for the spiritual life of others.

This book is the product of a tremendous effort, making use of many interviews and extensive research into the background of Japanese Buddhism and its many individual branches. The title "Experimental Buddhism" is reflected throughout, and, in the course of the six chapters following the introduction, the author presents a wide variety of examples that illustrate innovation and activism. Closing out the work is an appendix listing all the temples that Nelson visited, endnotes to each chapter, an index of keywords, and a rather long list of works cited. In the introduction the author briefly introduces the subject matter and explains his point of view and methodology. His declared intention is to examine the effect of modern society on the religion and work of the Buddhist clergy of various denominations.

The first main chapter echoes the introduction, starting with a discussion of how regard for Buddhist temples and religious life in Japan began to shift in the 1960s. The reader is given a quick insight into the state of Japanese Buddhism at that time and through the next five decades. The key trend is that the general populace and the Buddhist religious institutions have been drawing farther and farther apart. Or to put it another way, as one sees in the subsequent chapters, the old, traditional Buddhist ideas are becoming ever more alien to modern people.

The next chapter, titled "Japanese Versions of Buddhism," first gives a useful summary of the history of Japanese Buddhism, tracing the origins of its present form today. Highlighted here is the contemporary state of the organizations and their clergy. Numerous examples are given showing how Japanese Buddhism survived through the centuries by constantly adapting and becoming a "useful Buddhism," as the author puts it. He then presents what he sees to be the main problems. First, there is the image of funerary Buddhism, which was the mark of Japanese Buddhist temples especially

during the Edo period (1600–1868). As a product of this, the people came to perceive Buddhism as a greedy organization that does not genuinely care for parishioners' spiritual well-being, but simply performs ceremonies and funerals for financial gain. Another problem arises due to changes in social and familial structures during a time when family members were becoming increasingly removed from one another, resulting in changes in the relationship between parishioners and temples.

An intriguing part of this chapter is a section titled “Listening to the Troubles of Priests.” We are given a glimpse of how priests are perceived within society and how they, themselves, feel about the conflicting pressures between society and their own organizations, leaving them with nowhere to turn. After surveying the opinions of grassroots participants in the organizations, the author turns his attention to the leaders to ascertain the way in which “the top” of the hierarchy views the problem. This aspect of the enquiry is also useful in showing how these denominations work. The author gives examples from long interview sessions with senior officials of the Tendai, Sōtō Zen, and Pure Land denominations. At the end of the chapter, the author identifies issues for survival that require attention—issues such as how the public perception might be changed, or how contributions by priests might be better promoted in order to inspire people.

Chapter 3 is about social welfare and devout Buddhist priest activists. It begins with a short description of perceptions of Buddhist priests in earlier times and the sorts of activities they traditionally performed for the welfare of the people. This is, in effect, a brief history of Buddhist activists in Japan, referring to monks such as Gyōki and Kūya, the so-called “bodhisattva-monks,” who helped people in their time. After this is a discussion of our own modern times. Here, the author asks whether monks' and priests' activities today are “socially engaged” Buddhism or “Buddhist-inspired activism.” As to the first, the author argues that if there is such a thing as socially engaged Buddhism, then this presupposes a socially disengaged Buddhism; and, with that we are again taken back in time to India, where adaptation to local cultures shaped the relationship of Buddhism with society.

In the last section of this chapter, “From Late Modernity, New Directions,” the emphasis is on the tools and methodologies Japanese Buddhism needs in order to update and create appropriate new modes of interaction. Ideas touched on include drawing freely from existing texts, making use of new means of communication, and the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Such NGOs started in the early 1980s with Buddhists caring for refugees in Thailand and Cambodia, and then continued with the provision of assistance in their own country of Japan, following the Great

Hanshin earthquake of 1995. The author also illustrates what Buddhist organizations and their priests do for society when he highlights at some length the 11 March 2011 Fukushima disaster, giving examples of how priests converted temples into shelters and offered emotional and spiritual care through collective memorial services (for which priests also made use of modern means of social communication such as Twitter). But this disaster also produced casualties among the Buddhist sects themselves, for many temples were destroyed, and many priests and their family members went missing or were found dead.

Chapter 4 is probably the most valuable in this book, depicting the stories of four different priests who, in their own ways, are trying to be innovative in benefiting both temple and community. These are presented as four alternative modes of experimental Buddhism. We are given information about the priests' backgrounds and learn what led them to be activists in their own denominations or temples.

The first example is the story of Reverend Akita Mitsuhiro of the Pure Land denomination, who created an environment at his temple in Osaka where he is not solely dependent on the parishioners' offerings. He opened a kindergarten, which not only provides income sufficient for maintaining the temple but also creates a "Buddhism of relationships" which does not rely solely on traditional family ties.

The second is Reverend Takahashi Takushi's story. Takahashi is a Rinzai Zen priest in the city of Matsumoto who volunteers in hospitals and hospices. He also established a cancer screening program in the Ukraine after the Chernobyl catastrophe and created the "Asame Gakuen," where various performances are given and discussions are held. Takahashi introduced a salary system in his temple as an alternative to the so-called "greedy" practices of other temples.

The third example is that of Reverend Hashimoto Junshin, who, with a temple in a shopping arcade in Nara called "Everybody's Temple" (Minna no Tera), tries to connect with people who are less comfortable with Buddhism. In his temple there are no barriers of time, culture, or physical space.

The fourth and last example introduces the Reverend Kiyoshi Fumihiko who, like the priests already mentioned, takes an original approach to his role as a Buddhist priest. During the time since he was ordained, he has started an NPO in Osaka—which became a nationwide health and hospice care service for the elderly and dying (Nakai Share House)—and opened a quite untraditional Buddhist drinking establishment called Vows Bar, which is intended as a place of sanctuary and conversation where people can talk freely with priests.

After reading these stories one may conclude that all of the priests mentioned agree on the fact that Buddhism in Japan is at a turning point and needs to be changed.

Chapter 5 deals with alternatives and innovations in Buddhist religious practice, highlighting the many new forms of expression that have arisen as a result of globalization, economic change, and technology—though often at the expense of tradition and stability. Some examples of innovation mentioned are online services for prayers, memorial rituals, and amulets. The Internet is forcing priests to adapt in order to attract attention. The author also mentions religious restructuring and the characteristics thereof as identified by James Spickard. Other pressing problems are the increase in general education, competing versions of religious “truth,” and skeptical attitudes towards religion in general. The author states that these are contributing factors in the emergence of an experimental approach to any religion. Besides the use of the Internet, Nelson mentions how new factors are shaping the use of the house altar (*butsudan*). The contemporary house altar no longer observes the guidelines of the separate Buddhist denominations. Rather, the companies who make them seek to provide harmony with modern Japanese housing interiors. To provide a background to this, the notion of ancestor veneration in East Asian and Japanese society is explained here, and the concept of *kuyō* is introduced and defined by the author as “ritual offerings from descendants for the purpose of calming down and controlling the spirit of the deceased” (p. 155).

Nelson presents the story of Yagiken Butsudan’s introduction of a new style and the advertising campaigns it undertook to promote it. He starts with a television commercial aired in 1997 and shows how by 2005 the *butsudan* came to be presented as a “place where one can meet loved ones who have passed away” (p. 157). At the end of the chapter, some other innovations are mentioned, for example pet memorials, which have become more important recently—again as the result of social changes. Nelson discusses how attitudes toward animals have changed in that “it is a sign of status . . . to own and display a purebred pet that may cost well over 100,000 yen” (p. 162). Statistics presented show that around 120 out of nine hundred pet cemeteries are run by Buddhist temples. Other innovations are Buddhist performances in which priests find a connection with people through music and concerts, etc., which the author highlights by mentioning the *shōmyō* chanting tradition in the Kegon and then the Tendai and Shingon denominations. He also mentions the UNESCO-affiliated “Great Music Experience” of May 1994, which was held in one of the oldest temples in

Nara, namely Tōdaiji. This event was broadcasted simultaneously to fifty-five countries, giving a perfect example of “how music and performance have advanced Buddhist concepts and values” (p. 166).

In the above ways, both the past and the present are taken into account. In the sixth and last chapter the author gives his thoughts on the future of Buddhism in Japan. As he points out, however, “Buddhism” is not a singular entity, and since there are many denominations it is difficult to predict even the near future. Quoting Shimazono Susumu, a former professor at the University of Tokyo, Nelson sums up the areas where religion is expected to play a role and condenses twelve points advanced by Shimazono into three groups. First, “religions should address suffering in society” (p. 190); then, “religious leaders should be actively involved in finding solutions to public problems and concerns” (pp. 190–91); and third, “religion should support education as well as foster appreciation for Japan’s cultural heritage” (p. 191).

After reading about these expectations we are further introduced to the stories of two young priests, who became known by the public via modern means of communication such as Facebook and Twitter. We are first introduced to Reverend Miura Akari, “chanteuse of the dharma.” She is a priest who uses her musical education to give better sermons at her temple and despite her young age she “understands the vital role a temple can play in this [rural community] setting, and wants to make ‘her’ temple a place where individuals can come to enrich their lives . . .” (p. 195). In the other story, we learn about Reverend Kawakami Takafumi and how he tries to make the Rinzai branch of the Zen sect more popular among both Japanese and Western people. Having received a Western education at Arizona State University, he has been exposed to the way in which people think about Zen and meditation in America. He uses his experience to foster the sect in Japan by focusing on the *Dhammapada*, a text which is otherwise little known in Japanese Buddhism, and by establishing his own original meditation practice.

The author finally returns to his general reflections on religious decline and the related matters first touched on in chapter 1, namely the characteristics of contemporary Japanese society and the problems Buddhist denominations face because of them. He also reports on cross-denominational collaborations among priests/monks, such as “Freestyle Monks” or “Bōzu Be Ambitious!” (BBA), which are intended to increase learning from each other’s problems and to repair the general image and effectiveness of Buddhism in Japan. The last subchapter is a forecast, and

Nelson predicts that “the weather” is going to be cloudy and stormy, but with intermittent clear skies. To sum this chapter up, and indeed as a concluding remark in relation to the book as a whole, the author himself may be directly quoted:

If ordinary Buddhist temples in Japan are to survive well into the twenty-first century, their fate rests in part with the dispositions of individual priests charting a course toward more socially relevant and activist forms of their traditions. . . . [But] despite a shrinking institutional presence for Buddhism in Japan, we can look forward to new types of practices and beliefs that engage rather than withdraw from the expansive complexities of the twenty-first century and beyond. (pp. 212–16)