

BOOK REVIEWS

Bukkyō to ekurichūru: Daijō kyōten no kigen to keisei 仏教とエクリチュール：大乘經典の起源と形成 (Toward a New Frame of Reference for Research on Mahayana Sutras in Light of the Linguistic Turn). By Shimoda Masahiro 下田正弘. Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2020. x + 332 + 27 pages. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-4-13-010415-9.

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This volume, written by one of Japan's leading scholars of Indian Buddhism, is an extremely ambitious attempt to reconsider the origin of Mahayana Buddhism by making use of the poststructuralist thought of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), Hayden White (1928–2018), Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000), and others. As Shimoda Masahiro notes, the greatest mystery concerning the origin of Mahayana Buddhism lies in the fact that although a number of Mahayana Buddhist texts were already in existence by the first century BCE to the first century CE, there is no evidence that communities of Mahayana Buddhists actually existed until much later. Hence the question: How can there be Mahayana Buddhist texts without Mahayana Buddhists? A number of theories have been set forth to explain this enigma. In this volume, Shimoda provides a new tantalizing solution by arguing that, contrary to the commonsense view that Mahayana texts were produced by existing Mahayana communities, the ideals set forth in Mahayana texts provided the impetus for the creation of Mahayana communities (p. iii). In other words, Mahayana texts preceded the creation of Mahayana Buddhist schools and not vice versa. How such a counterintuitive turn of events is possible is the topic of this highly original and thought-provoking book.

This volume consists of eight essays that were originally published between 2002 and 2019. They are grouped into three sections: (1) “Ekurichūru ron kara terasu bukkyō kenkyū” エクリチュール論から照らす仏教研究 (Buddhist Studies Illuminated from the [Perspective of] the Theory of *Écriture*), (2) “Bukkyō to seiten” 仏教と聖典 (Buddhism and Scriptures), and (3) “Bukkyō to media” 仏教とメディア (Buddhism and the Media). The first section, consisting of two chapters, provides a succinct introduction to Derrida's theory of texts (or, as Shimoda calls it, *écriture*) and explores the ways it can be applied to the study of Mahayana sutras. This is arguably

the most impressive—and certainly the most challenging—part of the volume. In the first chapter, Shimoda criticizes studies by earlier scholars that tried to recreate the history of Indian Buddhism by accepting uncritically the events described in Buddhist texts as actual fact. Based on his reading of Derrida and other thinkers, Shimoda notes that a text is a product of a complex interplay of signifiers and signified and that the discourse it develops is not necessarily a reflection of the actual state of affairs out there in the real world (so to speak) as traditional historians would claim. This clears the way for his argument that even if there are a large number of sutras describing monastics and laypeople practicing the Mahayana path to buddhahood, it is unwarranted to assume that such people actually existed.

In the following chapter and the four chapters that comprise section two of the volume, Shimoda considers the ways in which the understanding of Mahayana texts outlined above can explain the fundamental mystery of early Mahayana Buddhism noted above: the existence of a vast array of Mahayana texts coupled by the lack of any evidence indicating the existence of organized schools of Mahayana believers and practitioners. To explain this puzzle, Shimoda begins by focusing on the issue of orality and literacy that was first highlighted by Walter J. Ong (1912–2003) and argues that the origin of Mahayana Buddhism is to be found in the transition from reliance on orality to reliance on written texts in the transmission of Buddhism. It is well known that Buddhist sutras were first transmitted orally by Buddhist monks. Taking his cue from Richard Gombrich (who, in a paper published in 1988, theorized that “the rise of the Mahāyāna is due to the use of writing”),¹ Shimoda argues that when sutras were being transmitted orally, their authority had to be confirmed and ratified by the entire Buddhist community of monks and nuns. Sutras not accepted as authentic by the monastic organization were not deemed worthy of being transmitted. To this effect, Shimoda quotes (p. 168) the following passage from Gombrich: “Under these circumstances, any text that is critical of the current teachings or introduces something which is palpably new has no chance of survival. It is possible that hundreds or even thousands of monks, nuns and Buddhist lay followers had visions or other inspirations which put new teachings into their mind . . . but we shall never know. For without writing those texts could not be preserved.”²

However, with the transition to written texts, individuals within the Buddhist community were freed from such institutional constraints, enabling them to express, disseminate, and preserve whatever radically new visions of the way to liberation inspired them. It is this development that provided an opening in the discursive space that made possible the rise of Mahayana Buddhism. However, Shimoda emphasizes

¹ Gombrich 1988, p. 29.

² Gombrich 1988, p. 38.

that this did not lead monks influenced by the Mahayana sutras to actually form independent Buddhist communities distinct from the established monastic institutions. In fact, even though early Mahayana sutras are highly critical of the established Buddhist organizations, there is no record that any attempts were actually made to change these organizations (p. 106). The early Mahayana movement was entirely textual in nature.

In another passage, Shimoda also speculates as to who were involved in the production of early Mahayana sutras. Prefacing his words with the caveat that it is impossible to determine who exactly created these sutras from the sources available to us today, he suggests that they may have been created within the Buddhist monasteries by monks entrusted with ensuring the transmission of sutras. The rules in the Vinaya Piṭaka, Shimoda notes, evolved over time in response to changing circumstances; similarly, new texts were created and added to the Abhidharma Piṭaka as scholar-monks debated the finer points of Buddhist doctrine and sought to codify their thought into comprehensive scholastic systems. In Shimoda's view, something similar must have happened with the sutras: the monks responsible for reciting and transmitting the sutras began to reflect on the true meaning of the Buddha's teachings, leading them to produce new Mahayana sutras embodying their views (pp. 195–96).

The third section of the volume consists of three chapters, one on the question of orality and Buddhist texts, another analyzing the mediums through which the Buddhist texts and canon have been transmitted through the ages and the impact that new digital technologies are having on the study of Buddhism, and finally one with the tantalizing title “Shisō no konseki toshite no tekisuto” 思想の痕跡としてのテキスト (The Text as the Trace of Thought), originally published in a collection of essays entitled *Shisha to no taiwa* 死者との対話 (Communicating with the Dead).³ In the latter, which begins with a lyrical rumination on death and remembering, Shimoda reflects on the fact that one remembers the past through the “traces” of one's past experiences impressed in one's unconscious and argues that these traces can be understood as a kind of “text.” After musing on this point, in the second part of the chapter Shimoda provides a succinct summary of the central issues in the study of early Mahayana Buddhism in order to discuss the role that such “traces of thought” preserved in such “texts” play in religious discourse.

The above are just some of the numerous insights found in this volume. I must hasten to add that I have only been able to give the bare outline of the book under review. In actuality, Shimoda takes up a wide range of issues related to the origin of Mahayana Buddhism, and his arguments are much more intricate and nuanced than I have been able to present. This is a highly provocative book that should be read by

³ Shimoda 2014.

anyone interested not only in the rise of Mahayana Buddhism but also in the intellectual history of Buddhism as a whole.

REFERENCES

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Nihon bukkyō to rongi 日本仏教と論義 (Japanese Buddhism and Doctrinal Debate). Edited by Kusunoki Junshō 楠淳澄, Noro Sei 野呂靖, and Kameyama Takahiko 亀山隆彦. *Ryūkoku Daigaku Ajia bukkyō bunka kenkyū sōsho* 龍谷大学アジア仏教文化研究叢書 13. Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2020. vii + 581 + 34 pages. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-4-8318-6380-5.

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The past decade has seen a welcome rise in publications pertaining to the study of *rongi* 論義, or “debates,” in premodern Japan. Japanese scholars such as Nagamura Makoto, Minowa Kenryō, Takayama Yuki, Kusunoki Junshō, and others, have published an abundance of scholarship on the format and content of debates that were a central part of the Dharma Assemblies (*hōe* 法会), such as the Vimalakīrti Assembly (Yuima-e 維摩会) at Kōfukuji 興福寺, or debates held within Tendai 天台 Buddhism. In 2009, Minowa Kenryō published his *Nihon bukkyō no kyōri keisei* 日本仏教の教理形成, which was followed by Kusunoki Junshō’s edited volumes *Nanto gaku*, *Hokurei gaku no sekai* 南都学：北嶺学の世界 (2018) and *Nihon bukkyō to rongi* 日本仏教と論義, the topic of this short review. In general, these are works that approach debates and their doctrinal content as an integral part of ritual, transcending not only the rigid division between doctrine and ritual, but also the sharp academic rift between Buddhist studies and history.

Nihon bukkyō to rongi presents a wide range of chapters on debates in the context of the Hossō 法相, Kegon 華嚴, Tendai, and Shingon 真言 schools. This is both an obvious and most welcome selection as these schools provide the main players in the doctrinal opposition and occurring syntheses within Buddhist thought during the Heian 平安 (794–1185) and early Kamakura 鎌倉 (1185–1333) periods. For example, one of