

On the Character of *Shaseki-shū*

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The purpose of this paper is to look at *Shaseki-shū*, which is supposed to be a collection of Buddhist tales written in the latter half of the Kamakura period (1185 A. D.~1333 A. D.), from a different standpoint than those taken in the preceding studies.

Dharma Master Muju, the author of *Shaseki-shū*, has been mistakenly regarded as a Japanese high priest of the Zen sect. It may be true that he learned the teachings of Zen but he also widely studied the teachings of many other Buddhist sects. As a result, while he acknowledged that each sect had something valuable in its teachings, he came to believe that the Zen sect and the Shingon sect provided the foundation for his basic position. He was free in spirit compared with the other priests of the period. He did not want to subject himself to any particular authority either in the secular world or in the religious world. In order to keep his spiritual freedom, he deliberately chose not to belong to any big temple but to live in a small and poor temple to the end of his life.

Although Dharma Master Muju referred to his personal history in *Shaseki-shū*, he would not touch upon his inner struggles or various incidents he must have suffered in the process of his spiritual growth. Therefore it would be a mistake to interpret *Shaseki-shū* as a confession of his inner world.

In *Shaseki-shū*, Muju criticizes people's ways of living, politics, or degradation of religious people in Japanese society at early medieval times. It is a book of social criticism.

In its introduction, Muju makes it clear that he is going to record

legendary tales or rumors which were widespread among people at that time, and thereby teach people to have proper faith in Buddhism. He started writing this book with this purpose in mind, but in the process of writing it, he was faced with the reality in which people lived a life in total opposition to Buddhist faith. As a result, he had no choice but to change his line to that of presenting the reality along with his critical observations. What he decided to do was to divide the whole work into ten books and to pose some religious issues and erroneous tendencies in the society of that time to provide each book with a theme. Then he recorded some tales which would be appropriate for the discussion of each theme. This is how *Shaseki-shū* came into being.

Therefore I believe it to be a mistake to consider this work as an extension of those collections of Buddhist tales which had existed earlier.