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Editors' Introduction: Traditional Buddhism in Contemporary Japan

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Traditional Buddhism in Contemporary Japan

This special issue focuses scholarly attention on various aspects of "traditional" Buddhism (*kisei bukkyō* 既成仏教 or *dentō bukkyō* 伝統仏教) in the contemporary period. The articles included here all seek to highlight and challenge certain assumptions about how contemporary Japanese Buddhist doctrine, practice, and teaching are understood. Implicit in this project is the idea that contemporary forms of Buddhism are not degenerations of a pure, original essence, but rather represent a varied and complex tradition in the midst of important challenges.

Though Buddhism in the Meiji period (1868–1912) has finally begun to receive the attention it deserves,[1] a survey of AAR and AAS panels, back issues of journals from various Buddhist universities in Japan, and, to a lesser extent, the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, shows that there is still a crucial lack of scholarship on contemporary Japanese Buddhism.[2] While a small number of works have addressed certain elements of traditional Buddhism in the contemporary period,[3] there remains an implicit assumption among scholars and the

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1. For an overview of issues relating to the study of Meiji Buddhism see the special issue of this journal dedicated to Meiji Zen (*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 25/1–2, 1998).

2. Richard Jaffe has also noted the lack of articles relating to Buddhism in the later volumes of the *Cambridge History of Japan* (Paper delivered at Yale University, April 2003).

3. See the following: Arai 1999; Bodiford 1994 and 1996; Covell forthcoming; Foulk 1988; Hardacre 1997; Hubbard and Swanson 1997; Ikeda et al., eds. 2000; Kawahashi 1995 and 2003; LaFleur 1992; Reader 1983, 1986, 1993, and 1995; Reader and Tanabe 1998; Swanson 1993.

general public that late twentieth-century Japanese Buddhism represents a moribund tradition, bereft of spiritual potency, whose only purpose is to offer formalized, over-priced mortuary services for an increasingly dissatisfied public in order to assure the continuity of the sects and to secure the lifestyle of temple priests. Along with the negative perception of "funerary Buddhism" (*sōshiki bukkyō* 葬式仏教) there is also a long-standing discourse of decline (*darakusetsu* 堕落説) within the field of Buddhist Studies itself. European philological biases toward "original" textual forms of Buddhism, which continue to influence how the field is defined in the West, were also imported into Japan at the turn of the century and formed the basis of sectarian scholarship. As some scholars have pointed out, research on "original forms" of Buddhism provides a "safe" or "neutral" field of study that can be approached critically without thereby challenging sectarian assumptions (Faure 1993, Foulk 1993). Though Western scholars are supposedly now well aware of the normative effects of such approaches, Griffith Foulk points to the topics addressed by the first five volumes of the Kuroda series—"history of schools, founders, patriarchs, and lineages"—as a prime example of how, despite sophisticated methodological stances, Western scholarship still mirrors sectarian interests (Foulk 1993, p. 108).[4]

This concentration on texts and tradition has kept the study of contemporary Buddhist practice largely off the map of religious studies discourse on Japan. Instead, scholarship of twentieth-century Japanese religion has "yielded to the new" in its focus on the so-called "new religions."[5] Not only has this meant the almost total neglect of traditional Buddhist sects, but it also fails to consider the more fundamental question of how and why "new religions" and "new new religions" must be differentiated from Buddhism.[6]

With Buddhologists focused on earlier historical periods and scholars of Japanese religions concentrating on new religions, work on contemporary Buddhist practices, such as mortuary ritual, ancestor rites, and festivals, has been carried out by anthropologists and ethnographers. While such scholarship is clearly essential, it has also contributed to the idea that Buddhist ritual and practice are better understood as examples of Japanese folk tradition and has therefore served

4. The first five books in the series published by the University of Hawai'i Press are: *Studies in Ch'an and Hua-Yen*, ed. by Robert M. Gimello and Peter N. Gregory (1983); *Dōgen Studies*, ed. by William R. LaFleur (1985); *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*, by John R. McRae (1984); *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. by Peter N. Gregory (1987); and *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. by Peter N. Gregory (1988).

5. This phrase was inspired by *Yielding to the New*, the title of Jamie Hubbard's study guide to his 1988 documentary, *The Yamaguchi Story*.

6. Though we do not discuss this in depth here, it is the opinion of the editors that those New Religions that claim to be Buddhist are better studied and interpreted as Buddhism. Hubbard has even suggested that the scholarly avoidance of doctrinal approaches to new religious movements may stem from a fear of then having to acknowledge how similar new religions and established traditions actually are (Hubbard 1998, pp. 87–88). See also Shimazono 1992 (Chapters 1 and 4), 2003, and 2004.

to reinforce the perception of contemporary Buddhist activity as a compromise of originally pure doctrine. Furthermore, folklore studies in Japan tend toward what Marilyn Ivy has described as "discourses of the vanishing" in that they are characterized by a focus on the loss of tradition and thinning of ritual under the onslaught of urbanization and modernization (Ivy 1995). This degeneration model is premised on ideas of a pure Japanese essence that existed in communal practices (either in a mythic past or as recently as the turn of the century), but became gradually rationalized and simplified as local communities dissipated and traditional ritual knowledge was lost. Despite the widespread recognition that Yanagita Kunio's work had as much to do with creating traditional essences as it did with preserving them, there still exists an implicit belief that the forms of religious practice we see in contemporary urban centers are somehow less pure, spiritually potent, and socially relevant than their rural precedents.

The contemporary struggle to define Buddhism and to justify its societal role is a fundamental concern within the Japanese Buddhist community. In February 2003, for example, the All Japan Buddhist Youth Association (Zen Nippon Bukkyō Seinen Kai) held its annual meeting. The association is made up of priests under the age of forty-five who are affiliated with the sects of traditional Buddhism, such as Tendai, Rinzai, Jōdo, and so on. The meeting focused, as have so many recent articles in Buddhist publications, on the fate of Buddhism in Japan today and delved into such questions as: Are conducting funerals and memorial services a "legitimate" Buddhist function? How are such memorial services best defined for contemporary society? Could priests be doing more to spread the Buddhist teachings? Should priests be involved in welfare issues, environmental debates, or terminal care? How best can young priests be trained in the Buddhist teachings and how should they integrate that training into their daily lives at local temples? These questions demonstrate an active, continuing, and often conflicted attempt on the part of the priesthood to define Buddhism both for themselves and the general public.

Efforts to define Buddhism in scholarship, in Buddhist communities, and for and amongst the general public, are also central to this issue. Each paper engages teachings, practices, texts, and material culture, often in trans-sectarian settings, in order to consider the manner in which Buddhists are shaping and transmitting their message for a variety of audiences. Toward this end, many of the papers focus on some form of teaching. Teaching can be understood as an act, as a text (doctrinal tracts, textbooks), as directed at a specific group (the training of clergy or active laity) or at a wide audience (popular writings and lectures on the proper moral life, or textual exegesis for the general public). We believe that an emphasis on teaching in both its written and embodied forms helps to overcome the artificial divide between doctrine and practice.

As Robert Sharf has argued, academic approaches create an unnecessary split between doctrine and practice so that Buddhologists tend to focus on doctrinal

history and "dismiss the new religious movements as degenerate popularizations utterly devoid of doctrinal sophistication or subtlety," while scholars of modern Japanese religion concentrate more on "external" social, economic, and political factors and tend to overlook "internal" doctrinal forces. "One result of this unfortunate division of labor is the noticeable lack of ethnographically textured and anthropologically sophisticated studies of the older Buddhist schools and practices as they survive in the modern period" (SHARF 1995, pp. 452–53). Luis Gomez has also pointed out that the long-standing primacy of doctrine in the academy leads to histories of Buddhism that ignore popular belief systems and local variations, and instead focus on models of decay or resurgence of some ideal form of the tradition (GOMEZ 1995, p. 203). His proposed solution calls for more ethnographical work to counter textual and elitist biases, as well as a stronger critical stance in regards to locating Buddhist studies within the academy. The present issue seeks to address precisely these calls for ethnographic approaches that are also attentive to doctrinal and historical forces.

Several of the articles in this issue consider the possibility of countering an over-emphasis on doctrine both through greater attention to practice and by suggesting new areas where "practice" occurs. Indeed, it is often in terms of practice, as much as in doctrine, that Buddhism is, and has long been, defined by Japanese Buddhists themselves. By considering new areas in which Buddhist teachings are produced, contested, and disseminated, the articles included here provide ethnographic and textual approaches that question rather than reify the doctrine/practice divide. In particular, they examine locales where parties representing a variety of interests—from ascetics to business consultants, from sectarian scholars to members of sewing groups—all take part in the contemporary Buddhist milieu. Exploring the ways in which Buddhist doctrines are molded and reshaped to meet different situations and audiences illustrates that doctrine is a contested rather than stable marker.[7]

Challenging the assumption that Japanese Buddhism is no longer a living religion, Stephen COVELL's paper examines the modern teachings of three Tendai practitioners renowned for their successful completion of a grueling seven-year ascetic practice, the *kaihōgyō*. Covell begins by illustrating that the teachings of these "living Buddhas" derive from reflection on their own physical practice more than from study of classical doctrine. This helps to explain why each of them tends to emphasize character building and self-improvement through greater individual effort. This focus on self-improvement, the tendency to exhort a return to "traditional" Japanese values and morality, and the charisma that each of these men has developed through rigorous practice mirrors in important ways the underlying principles of the new religions. These similarities are made all

7. Recent discussions of Japanese Buddhist doctrine include MCMULLIN 1989, HUBBARD 1992, MCMULLIN 1992, HUBBARD and SWANSON 1997, HUBBARD 1998, and STONE 1999.

the more interesting when one considers the vehemence with which at least two of these authors criticize new religions as politically motivated home wreckers.

George TANABE focuses on popular Buddhist orthodoxy through an analysis of the writings of Kino Kazuyoshi and Hiro Sachiya, lay professional teachers who, through their interpretations of traditional Buddhist teachings, exert a powerful influence over how Buddhism is popularly understood in Japan today. In his examination of how both writers combine doctrinal exegesis, rhetorical flourish, and good storytelling, Tanabe demonstrates that original enlightenment thought (*hongaku shisō*), an on-going topic among contemporary Buddhologists and Buddhist practitioners in the West and Japan, remains central to contemporary Japanese Buddhism. By focusing on writers who are concerned more with explicating difficult doctrinal concepts than they are with social reform or spiritual empowerment, Tanabe also offers an intriguing contrast to the Tendai practitioners whom Covell considers. Through these two articles we are able to appreciate the variety in popular writings and the role these writings play in popularizing traditional Buddhism and shaping contemporary understanding of Buddhist teachings.

Diane RIGGS provides a historical, doctrinal, and ethnographic study of *fukudenkai* 福田会, Buddhist robe sewing and study groups that cross lay/priest, gender, and sectarian boundaries. By analyzing the different types of participants—local women, ordained participants, and lay believers—she is able to trace a wide range of responses to the practice of sewing the robes, to the doctrinal texts and later teachings that underlie that practice, and to the teachings of Buddhism more generally. In her attention both to the physical act of creating different Buddhist robes and to the issue of commercially produced garments, she also brings to light the manner in which teaching and material culture are interwoven. Furthermore, through her multi-layered approach, Riggs shows that the robe, like many aspects of Buddhism, may be seen by different groups as a tool for meditation, a symbolic remnant, an object of faith, a source of merit, and/or a return to the true teachings of the Buddha.

Shifting the focus to sectarian intellectuals, Mark ROWE contends that scholars of Japanese Buddhism need to pay greater attention to the research organs of the various sects as important sites in the production and dissemination of Buddhist thought. In contrasting Sōtō Zen responses to the so called "funeral problem" at the sect's research institutions with the activities of a popular Tokyo temple, Rowe asserts that there are in fact a number of different Buddhisms in play. He further argues that the ethnographic turn of the research organs, evidenced in the recent four-year joint project on funeral issues, is having little or no effect on the way that young priests are being trained at places like Komazawa University, indicating deep-seated institutional disagreement over the sect's identity.

In order to situate our discussion of contemporary Buddhist forms within the broader context of Japanese religions, we have included an article by Helen

HARDACRE in which she argues that a lack of conceptual paradigms is preventing the fruitful study of Buddhism in the contemporary period. She explores the possibility of approaching Buddhist and other religious organizations as sharing many of the characteristics of civil society groups and in so doing offers a view of Buddhism as a "normal and unexceptional" element of Japanese society. She first offers an overview of the historical development of Japanese civil society and then makes use of the Lark Database (a computer index of articles relating to religion from over two hundred newspapers and magazines) to trace reactions to peace issues by Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and New Religion groups since the first Gulf War. The parallels that Hardacre identifies between religious organizations and civil society groups are further evidence that our studies must see Buddhist groups as firmly embedded in the societies in which they exist.

In a companion piece to Hardacre's article, Jonathan WATTS has written a brief introduction to Japanese Buddhist NGOs. He describes several seminal moments in the formation of these groups bringing to light the political (the boat people crisis in the 1980s), the natural (the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995), and the legal (the NPO law of 1998) forces that have shaped the development and nature of these groups. To show the range of current Buddhist NGO activity, Watts also provides outlines of ten different organizations representing a broad range of activities, affiliation, and scope.

In keeping with the *JJRS* tradition of presenting work by Japanese scholars and as part of our desire to expand upon the areas in which scholars have traditionally sought Buddhism, we had initially planned to include an article on the training of priests at sectarian universities. After searching unsuccessfully for several months for such an article, we decided to take matters into our own hands. By inviting professors from several sectarian universities in the Tokyo area to take part in a round-table discussion (*zadankai* 座談会) on the current state of their schools, we were able to generate a broad-based discussion on a variety of topics that would have been difficult to address in a single article. Universities such as Komazawa, Taishō, and Risshō are facing serious choices over how to balance their roles as education arms of their respective sects, while at the same time providing for the needs of the overwhelming number of their students who have little or no interest in Buddhism.[8]

The round-table discussion centered on such topics as: What is the role of a university education in the training of a priest? Can priests be trained in a non-sectarian environment? What should a Buddhist-studies curriculum look like? What is the relationship between a sectarian university and the headquarters of

8. According to a recent survey of ten sectarian universities, at seven of the schools less than 10 percent of the student body came from temple families, and in the eight schools with an enrollment of over one thousand, Ōtani University had the highest percentage of students from temple families at 16 percent (*Jimon Kōryu* 8, 2003, pp. 42–43).

the sect? Can Buddhist ideals be worked into the general, non-sectarian curriculum? The responses to these questions demonstrated the extent to which "Buddhism" is continually defined and renegotiated within the sect, the university, and Japanese society.

In the review section, KUMAMOTO Einin provides a critical "review" of three current works relating to the question of women and Buddhism in contemporary Japan. As Kumamoto points out, however, in an added introduction written specifically for this issue, he is less concerned with providing an overview of the contents of the books than he is with outlining what he sees as a prevalent discourse among a certain group of Buddhists about what their tradition represents in contemporary Japanese society. Kumamoto is particularly critical of Sōtō priest Minami Jikisai's work *The Zen Priest Speaks* and other works, and argues that Minami's stance on the issue of temple families (*jizoku* 寺族), generated as it is by his belief in the primacy of renunciation (*shukke* 出家), is far removed from the realities of today's temples. Kumamoto's observations challenge us to reconsider how we define the Buddhist priesthood and serve to further our understanding of the current debate over gender roles within traditional Buddhism.

Readers may notice that the Sōtō School gets more attention in this issue than other sects.[9] The papers by Mark Rowe and Diane Riggs both focus on aspects of Sōtō, as does Kumamoto Einin's review article. This can be attributed to a combination of the personal interests of the writers themselves, the vast amount of literature produced by the sect, and the serendipity inherent in all fieldwork. We anticipate that as more scholars begin to conduct research on contemporary Buddhism this imbalance will be redressed and we would also argue that the issues raised in those articles, as well as in the *zadankai*, transcend sectarian boundaries and point to fruitful avenues of study of other traditional Buddhist groups. It is our hope that this special issue will serve to encourage further work on all aspects of contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

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9. This was also a concern in the *JJRS* special issue on Meiji Zen. See JAFFE and MOHR 1998.

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