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Covell/Japanese Temple Buddhism

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Introduction

Snapshots of Buddhism in Today's Japan

A NEIGHBORHOOD TEMPLE, KANSAI AREA, FALL 1989

Shōshin and I sat on the floor in his room at the temple. Records were scattered all about, guitars leaned against the walls, and books cluttered the desktops. Coltrane played through old speakers as we sat working our way through a bottle of Japanese vodka (*shōchū*) and discussed Amida Buddha's vow to save sentient beings. We talked through the night. Shōshin earnestly strove to teach me about the truth of Amida's vow. In the morning, we made our way downstairs to have breakfast. Shōshin's young son greeted us loudly. Shōshin's father, the head priest of the temple, and mother were there as well, and his wife was finishing breakfast preparations in the kitchen. His wife's chores—caring for her children, helping Shōshin's mother manage the temple schedule, meeting with the laity, and cleaning—would keep her busy all day.

Shōshin, also a priest, helped his father with rituals held at the temple and taught children at the temple's Sunday school. He put his love of music to use by teaching the children different songs while instructing them in stories about Buddhism. He was also a full-time music teacher at a local junior high school, a job that allowed him to take days off when his ritual duties called. His father was often busy with a full schedule of memorial services. Weekends were an especially demanding time, as services had to be conducted for one family after another.

This is life as usual at most temples. The primary work of the priest is performing funeral and memorial services. Moreover, the priest does not live apart from the world, but is fully enmeshed in it. He is married, has children, eats meat, drinks alcohol, and usually has a full-time job outside the temple, such as teaching. This is not the Buddhism I came to expect through my studies at college and through my own reading. Like many others, I suppose I expected mountain temples, meditating priests, and beautiful works of art. At the same time, having lived in Japan and having talked with many people about Buddhism, I had also come to believe that contemporary Japanese Buddhism is no more than a corruption of "real" Buddhism, whatever that might be. Therefore, if I could not find meditating priests on mountaintops, I expected disaffected, business-oriented priests. Shōshin was neither. Certainly he was not sitting meditation with a shaved head in a mountain temple, but neither was he disaffected. As a

matter of fact, when I first met him, he was in the midst of deep soul-searching, seeking for Amida with all his might and reflecting on what his future as the son of a temple priest would be.

In this sense, it was Shōshin's dilemma that first inspired me to further investigate contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

A LARGE TEMPLE IN THE KANTŌ AREA, NEW YEAR'S 1999

The temple had been busy with preparations for more than two weeks leading up to the New Year festival. For three days I had sat on the floor of the main hall assembling protective talismans (*fuda*) with three high school girls who had been hired as part-time help for the New Year's rush. Intermittently, a priest would walk over from the fire ritual hall after performing that day's ceremony and bless the thousands of items packed in boxes stacked three rows deep all around us. Meanwhile, the head priest and managing priest set about arranging for extra priestly help. Area temples sent their priests to help on New Year's Eve and the days that followed.

The ritual celebrations began at midnight on New Year's Eve. Temple lay members, local community members, and others lined up to ring the temple bell following a short ceremony led by the head priest. Meanwhile, across the compound, in the hall dedicated to the fire ritual (*goma*), priests began a near round-the-clock series of fire rituals. For the next week, in a display of austere practice that taxed their physical strength, ten to twelve priests would work in shifts performing the fire ceremony on two daises.

The hall at midnight on New Year's Eve was packed with temple members, the faithful, members of the local community, and others. Many had to stand outside the hall for want of space. Nearly all in attendance had given money in exchange for a talisman that would be empowered during the ceremony. Behind them thousands of visitors poured in a steady stream through the temple grounds.

As those in attendance sat shoulder to shoulder in the crowded hall fidgeting uncomfortably in the traditional *seiza* sitting posture (sitting on one's heels, legs folded under oneself), the priests filed in. The lead priest was clad in magnificent embroidered silk robes. The other senior priests wore similarly impressive robes. The two priests assigned to perform the fire ritual wore the white robes of Japanese Buddhist ascetics. The ceremony began with the sharp sound of a conch shell (*horagai*) blown by a priest who stood on the far side of the hall. A second priest began to play a strong and steady rhythm on a large drum (*taiko*). When the other priests began chanting, the drumming increased in strength so that the hall itself felt as though it was vibrating with life. As the

ceremony progressed, flames began to leap from the center of the two daises, the fire stoked by the white-clad priests sitting before them. The room filled with the smell of burning wood and incense, and the sound of chanting and drumming. Those in attendance sat silently. When the ceremony ended, one of the two white-clad priests came forward to bless the audience. He repeated prayers in a loud voice while rubbing his prayer beads in palms pressed together to form a mudra (ritual hand gesture).

Anyone in attendance could not help but be impressed with the power and majesty of this performance. This ceremony and ones like it performed at temples of the Tendai sect across Japan communicate to all who attend the religious authority and otherworldliness of priests.¹

In this impressive ceremony, I had at last found the Buddhism of renunciation and austerity I had come to expect based on my readings. It was experiences such as this that led me to question further contemporary critiques of Japanese Buddhism as corrupt. If corruption meant lack of sincerity or commitment, here were priests utterly dedicated to the task at hand and sincerely working to bring benefit to the laity.

At the same time, having witnessed the events from behind the scenes, I was impressed by the rapid change that took place as the priests prepared for each successive ceremony. After completing the rite with a bow to each other and the lead priest, those filing out of the hall would immediately seek out a seat in the cramped changing room and light up a cigarette or sift through the bags of donated sweets set out for them. Most would sip tea or coffee and strike up conversation about the latest news or soccer score, or gossip. Some caught a quick nap, while others watched whatever variety show happened to be on the small TV set in one corner. This rapid shift from sacred to profane and from austerity to prosperity, which for some reveals the hypocrisy of a disengaged, businesslike priesthood, only served to demonstrate for me the humanness of the priests. As Robert Buswell makes clear in his insightful work on contemporary Buddhist practice in Korea, “Monks are, in short, perfectly ordinary people.”² They, like anyone else, are capable of pursuing seemingly contradictory goals simultaneously: in Japan, at least, they live as both world-renouncer and householder.

TEMPLE BUDDHISM IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN: ISSUES AND IMAGES

According to government statistics, ninety-five million (75 percent) of all Japanese are Buddhist. Fifty-six million of these are members of a recognized Buddhist religious organization, of which approximately forty-three million claim

membership in a sect or branch of Temple Buddhism (the others are members of Buddhist new religions).³ And yet, despite the fact that Temple Buddhism is the largest form of organized religion in contemporary Japan, scholars have all but ignored it.

Scholars of postwar Japanese religion have tended to focus their attention on the new religions (*shin shūkyō*), such as Reiyūkai, and the new new religions (*shin shin shūkyō*), such as Agonshū.⁴ These new religious movements exist alongside and in interaction with Temple Buddhism, and they form an integral part of the web of religious life in Japan. Their explosive growth in the postwar period attracted the attention of religious studies scholars and anthropologists. But just as Temple Buddhism cannot be understood apart from the rise of the new religions, they cannot be understood apart from Temple Buddhism. Nevertheless, most works on the new religions fail to discuss their relationship with Temple Buddhism, unless to dismiss Temple Buddhism as an antiquated and corrupt religion that no longer meets the needs of the people.

Buddhist Studies scholars, on the other hand, have focused largely on the medieval period. Sharing the same view of Temple Buddhism that plagues works on the new religions, Buddhist Studies scholars tend to locate “real” Buddhism—taken to emphasize monasticism, upholding of the precepts, and doctrinal debate—in the remote past. This study seeks to redress the lack of serious scholarly study on Temple Buddhism as lived today.

Funerals, families, ritual, salvation, money, married clergy, and community involvement are all aspects of Temple Buddhism in Japan today. Moreover, there are 157 sects, subjects, and branches; two hundred thousand priests; and more than seventy thousand temples (tables 1 and 2).⁵ Given this wide array of activities, people, and institutions, there is no easy way to frame the world of contemporary Temple Buddhism. This study will focus primarily on the institutions of Temple Buddhism and on the responses of Temple Buddhism at the institutional level to changes in contemporary Japanese society.

To what does the term “Temple Buddhism” refer? It refers to the Buddhism as lived by the members of those sects of Japanese Buddhism that were founded before the 1600s.⁶ The terms most frequently used to describe these sects are “established Buddhism” (*kisei bukkyō*) and “traditional Buddhism” (*dentō bukkyō*). Both terms are problematic. Many members of the sects of Temple Buddhism consider “established Buddhism” a derogatory term. They equate “established” with “old” or “ossified” or take the term as an indictment of unity with state interests. To some it is an indictment of their alleged corruption. Since this term is also used comparatively, placing the sects against the “newly arisen” (*shinkō*),

“new” (*shin*), or “new new” (*shin shin*) religions (*shūkyō*), it is also disliked by some members of these new religious groups because it places them in the rhetorically inferior position of being “new,” that is, less legitimate, or lacking the authority of established tradition. Members of the sects of Temple Buddhism often prefer the term “traditional Buddhism,” and it is seen frequently in their literature. However, this term, too, places the new religions in a rhetorically inferior position (i.e., they lack a time-tested tradition). Both sets of terms, “established” and “new” and “traditional” and “nontraditional,” assume that paradigm of corruption by which scholars and priests alike often view contemporary Japanese Buddhism. I have chosen, instead, the term “Temple Buddhism” to describe the type of Buddhism that is found in the tens of thousands of Buddhist temples scattered across Japan.

To be sure, Temple Buddhism includes a wide variety of sects and also considerable difference from sect to sect and from temple to temple, whether in doctrine, ritual, or priestly training. For example, the Tendai sect requires all priests (male or female) to attend a rigorous and grueling two-month retreat at the sect headquarters on Mt. Hiei, whereas the Nichiren sect requires an intensive thirty-five-day training retreat.⁷ Rituals can also vary significantly from sect to sect. The funeral of the Sōtō sect, for example, is generally a far grander affair than that of the Tendai sect. Local obligations also shape temple activities and generate difference. Rural temples, for example, are more likely than their urban counterparts to have a wide variety of confraternities (e.g., women’s groups, pilgrimage groups, chanting groups) that center on them as well as a wide variety of civic groups that avail themselves of the temple facilities (e.g., croquet clubs).

However, the sects of Temple Buddhism also share many things in common. Their doctrines and institutional structures have exerted influence on each other. The Tendai doctrine of original enlightenment, developed in the medieval period, for example, shaped nearly all later forms of Japanese Buddhism. Moreover, officiating at funerals and memorial services is the primary ritual role of priests today, as it has been for at least the last two centuries. Therefore, while rituals may vary in form, the priest’s role as ritual specialist is common to nearly all sects. Furthermore, legal codes from the early modern period onward forced similar structural changes on all sects. The early modern temple registration system, discussed in chapter 2, was instrumental in creating the *danka* member system (*danka seido*, temple lay membership system) as it exists today, as well as the priest’s position as caretaker of the dead. The postwar Religious Juridical Persons Law (*shūkyō hōjin hō*), though not as instrumental in shaping Temple Buddhism as the temple registration system, has been influential in constructing modern

temple management structures and sect administration. Moreover, the problems that the sects of Temple Buddhism face in the postwar period have similar roots. Postwar land reform, for instance, changed the economic base of temples across the country. Furthermore, the changing nature of religious affiliation in contemporary Japan cuts across sectarian lines. Finally, the sects of Temple Buddhism have responded similarly to contemporary problems. Most sects, for example, began some form of social engagement campaign in the 1960s or 1970s. And all sects have begun to study methods for improving priestly recruitment and for coming to terms with open clerical marriage, which, as we shall see in chapter 6, represents a significant problem for the sects of Temple Buddhism today.

The Tendai sect, which has more than three thousand temples and four thousand priests, will serve as a representative example, though I will draw on evidence from a variety of sources, including many surveys based on other sects. Despite its relatively small size, I will focus on the Tendai sect for several reasons.⁸ First, a growing body of scholarly work, especially that by sectarian scholars, exists on other sects, such as the Jōdo sect (one of the Pure Land sects) and the Sōtō sect (one of the Zen sects). This work consists of institutional histories, doctrinal and ritual studies, and essays on selected critical issues (funerals, discriminatory practices). The Sōtō sect, in particular, has drawn the attention of Western scholars⁹ because it is one of the largest sects and Zen has proven to have a peculiar allure for Westerners.¹⁰ By comparison, despite Tendai's pivotal role in the development of Japanese Buddhism in the medieval period and its still important role throughout the early modern and modern periods, there has been far less research conducted on Tendai overall, in Japanese or other languages, and almost none on modern Japanese Tendai.¹¹

Second, some sects have unusual situations that make them less useful as examples. Nichiren Shōshū, for example, throughout the postwar period (until a schism in 1991), was structurally bound to the powerful new religion, Sōka Gakkai. The Jōdo Shin sect also has a unique history. Jōdo Shin was the first sect to openly recognize clerical marriage, centuries before other sects. Furthermore, it promoted itself as a lay-focused sect from its beginning. It has, therefore, openly forsaken portraying itself as primarily a world-renouncing organization, something the other sects of Temple Buddhism still claim to be.

There are also personal reasons for selecting the Tendai sect. I have long been interested in the doctrines of the Tendai sect, and my earlier work reflects this interest.¹² Moreover, my first introduction to Japanese Buddhist Studies scholars and the world of Temple Buddhism as it is practiced today was through Tendai scholars. Finally, as time progressed, I underwent ordination in the Tendai

sect myself. For two years I was both participant and observer. I worked with a priest in the Kantō area helping him to perform funeral rituals and care for a temple left abandoned by its former priest. Like many other Buddhist scholars in Japan and the West, therefore, I have a personal interest in my topic.

Given the variety found within Temple Buddhism, the virtually complete absence of scholarly work on it, and the influence of the view that Temple Buddhism is corrupt, this study has one basic goal: to examine in depth the institutions and activities of contemporary Temple Buddhism in order to gain a more rounded understanding of contemporary Japanese religious practice and, thereby, to encourage others to begin their own research in this area.

In chapter 1, I seek to put to rest the “corruption” paradigm. As I will show, this model does not serve as a useful method for understanding Buddhism in Japan. It serves only to mask the varied and competing discourses that seek to define what Buddhism has been, is, and will be. I then seek to reexamine the many, often contradictory, facets of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. This examination reveals as a recurrent theme that Temple Buddhism at once renounces and confirms the world. Moreover, this apparently contradictory stance characterizes even the institutions and persons that seek to deny it. It is this conflict between a rhetoric of renunciation and the practices of clerical marriage and householding that characterizes much of contemporary Japanese Temple Buddhism and that serves as a constant basis of criticism. Unlike Shinran, the famous medieval Japanese monk who took a wife and proclaimed himself “neither monk nor layman,” many contemporary priests identify themselves as renunciates and clearly distinguish themselves from the laity despite living lives mostly identical to those of the laity. They are both world-renouncers and laymen.

Chapters 2 and 3 take the state of the temple lay membership as their subject: contemporary temple *danka*, the historical roots of the conflicting views of the temple held by the temple and the *danka*, and the steps the sects of Temple Buddhism are taking to rectify these. In particular, chapter 3 analyzes the ways in which the Tendai sect seeks to change popular images of “funeral Buddhism,” including efforts to redefine the roles of temple lay members in order to secure Tendai’s place in contemporary Japanese society.

Chapters 4 and 5 take the priesthood of Temple Buddhism as their subject, examining the history of various negative images of the priesthood and the Tendai sect’s efforts to create or re-create priestly roles that counter growing popular images of priests as funeral businessmen. Such efforts on the part of the Tendai sect, which are mirrored in other sects, bring to attention the manner in which sect leaders envision Buddhism and its place in contemporary society. Tendai

efforts are placed in the context of currents within contemporary Japanese religion, such as competition from new religions and mail-order-priest companies.

Priests' wives are the subject of chapter 6. The wives of priests play a major role in temple management, and some are now seeking to overcome sex discrimination and to gain recognition of their critical role. Clerical marriage is the most obvious threat to the rhetoric of renunciation pursued by the sects of Temple Buddhism. In response, the Tendai sect, for example, has developed a special temple wife ordination (*jiteifujin tokudo*) ceremony in order to place temple wives within the religious and administrative structures of the sect. The efforts by temple wives to seek recognition reveal fractures in the world of Temple Buddhism that allow us the opportunity better to understand Temple Buddhism today, its history, and postwar Japanese religion in practice. Chapters 2–6 (temple lay members, priests, and temple wives) thus serve to introduce efforts by the sects of Temple Buddhism to maintain relevance in postwar Japanese society. They also bring to light sectarian, scholarly, and popular assumptions regarding Temple Buddhism.

Taxes and death are the subjects of chapters 7 and 8, which address the fiscal necessities of running a temple today and the practices priests engage in to meet needs. These chapters include an examination of how economic realities shape ritual practices as well as how such mundane factors as taxes shape the debate over Temple Buddhism's contemporary role in Japanese society. The taxation of temples and the practice of granting posthumous precept names in exchange for donations provide examples.

Focusing on the apparently self-contradictory character of contemporary Temple Buddhism makes it easier to understand its modern history and contemporary development.¹³ By turning attention away from the corruption paradigm and the terminology of degeneration, I hope to overcome simplistic characterizations of old versus new, true versus corrupt, and philosophy (doctrine) versus practice. As many have already pointed out, it is imperative that we view religious practice as embedded and enmeshed within the social, economic, political, and other realms of quotidian life.¹⁴ I will do just this for Temple Buddhism, and, in so doing, will highlight conflict and comprise between rhetoric and practice, between lofty ideals and practical needs, and between world-renouncers and householders.