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James C. Dobbins/Letters of the Nun Eshinni

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Preface

This work consists of a translation and examination of a collection of letters written by a little-known Buddhist nun named Eshinni (1182–1268?) in medieval Japan. Though obscure, these letters and their author have greater significance than what might appear on the surface. The nun in question was the wife of Shinran (1173–1262), a renowned figure in the history of Japanese Buddhism. And the letters themselves, though old, came to light only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Because of Eshinni's connection to Shinran and the new information that her letters impart, they have captured the attention of modern scholars of Shinran and members of his school of Buddhism.

I originally read the letters almost twenty-five years ago while doing research on my first book, *Jōdo Shinsū*, a historical study of the development of Shinran's school. Though unpretentious in style and content, the letters struck me as a graphic account of the everyday life of a Buddhist woman in thirteenth-century Japan. I subsequently set about translating them and planning this book. Over the years, work on it has proceeded in fits and starts amid professional responsibilities and other projects. Sometimes I was able to concentrate on it exclusively. Other times I had to shelve it for long periods. During the decade and a half of its development, the work has undergone two or three transformations that reflect my own evolving views on Eshinni, Shinran, his school, Pure Land Buddhism, and medieval Japan. It has emerged as a very different book from what I originally imagined.

In structure the book is composed of two parts. Part I, "Eshinni's Letters," contains two chapters, the first of which is an introduction and digest of information on Eshinni, her letters, and their impact. It is meant to provide sufficient background for understanding the content of the letters. Chapter 2 is an English translation of the letters themselves. I have sought to create a translation that is both philologically sound and faithful to the spirit of the text. Appended to each letter are an opening statement giving its context and interlinear notes describing its layout, appearance, and structure. My hope is that readers will come away from

the letters with a vivid image of the woman who wrote them and the medieval world that spawned them.

Part II, “Eshinni’s World,” consists of chapters 3, 4, and 5, each on a somewhat different and discrete topic. The focus of this segment of the book is not on the letters per se but on various aspects of medieval Pure Land Buddhism, predominantly Shinran’s school, known as Shin Buddhism. Readers themselves may find the letters interesting or perhaps quaint, but fairly innocuous. In this section I deploy them for a more radical purpose: to critique the way medieval Shin Buddhism is commonly portrayed. My basic assumption, which is a virtual truism in historical analyses of religion, is that a disjunction or gap existed between high doctrine and lived religion. Current depictions of religion in Eshinni’s time are mostly idealized representations based on doctrine rather than accounts of what people actually did. In these three chapters I attempt to move beyond this doctrinal ideal to the everyday conditions and assumptions of medieval Pure Land believers. Methodologically, I use Eshinni’s letters as a starting point for discussion or as corroborating evidence for my analyses. That is, I take casual references in the letters as faint hints that, when combined with other historical information, suggest a very different picture of medieval Shin Buddhism from that commonly assumed. I draw heavily from social history and material culture as well to argue against current views. Such an approach may seem unusual when compared to existing scholarship on Japanese Buddhist doctrine. But it offers eye-opening conclusions for those willing to consider evidence beyond the domain of doctrine.

Specifically, in chapter 3 I seek to analyze Pure Land Buddhism, including Shinran’s teachings, in the context of medieval living conditions. My premise is that medieval circumstances paved the way for the popularization of Pure Land Buddhism. In particular, the Pure Land teaching of a resplendent otherworldly paradise captured the imagination of the medieval Japanese because it contrasted so profoundly their own life of uncertainty and harshness. Though interpreters of Shinran nowadays tend to emphasize his affirmation of life in this world—relying heavily on the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of nondualism—it is my contention that the primary element making Shinran’s ideas, and Pure Land Buddhism as a whole, a compelling creed in medieval times was the dualistic tension between this world and the Pure Land paradise.

Chapter 4 examines the status of women and nunhood in medieval

Japan and explores the various depictions and perceptions of women, both overt and subliminal, in Pure Land Buddhism. My research for this chapter fortuitously coincided with the efflorescence of women's history among Japanese and American scholars and with an emerging interest in women in Buddhism. I have benefited greatly from the advice and work of others here. Among the points made in this chapter are that the idealized image of the cloistered nun in Buddhism did not match the actual lifestyle of most Buddhist nuns in medieval Japan and that the majority more closely resembled Eshinni, remaining fully engaged in worldly affairs while devoted to spiritual matters. I also conclude that the long-established Pure Land doctrine that women cannot attain birth in the Pure Land as women was largely disregarded and that women subconsciously assumed they could, no matter what orthodox doctrine asserted.

Finally, chapter 5 seeks to identify what has been filtered out of the medieval religious worldview of Eshinni and Shinran in our modern-day account of Shin Buddhism. My claim is that the attempt to recast Shin Buddhism as a universal creed for modern religious seekers, consistent with scientific consciousness and shorn of mythic dimensions, has resulted in a somewhat expurgated portrayal of the Buddhism of Eshinni's day. That is, modernists have obscured many aspects of medieval religion such as revelatory dreams, encounters with miraculous beings, cultic sites, and karmically linked relationships that were part and parcel of Shinran's and Eshinni's experience. I attempt here a partial reconstruction of that mythically conceived, medieval religious worldview. This analysis of Shin Buddhism parallels trends in recent scholarship to unravel what in our understanding of Buddhism are modern interpolations and modifications. This chapter, as well as the others, thus represents a revisionist critique of current depictions of Shinran and his teachings.

People familiar with my first book will recognize this critique as directly applicable to it, for segments of *Jōdo Shinshū* indeed reflect this modern "pasteurization" of premodern religion. It is not that I have changed my mind about what I wrote then, but that the story, I have concluded, is more complicated than described there. Readers should thus regard this work as an elaboration of the first one rather than as a repudiation of it. In fact, the Eshinni book makes best sense if *Jōdo Shinshū* is generally understood first.

The ideas found in the last three chapters are, I hope, a contribution

to the scholarship on Pure Land Buddhism. Each of the three chapters can be read as a self-contained essay, but they have greater depth and meaning when read together, and certainly when read against the backdrop of the letters. I realize, though, that, as with all scholarship, what I say here has a limited shelf life, so to speak. The translation of Eshinni's letters, however, may be of more enduring value. When the assertions of part II are long refuted or forgotten, I hope that the letters themselves will continue to engender insights and reflections in those who chance to read them.